Don’t Rush Expedited Home Studies for Kinship Care

From the moment it is evident that a child is not safe in his or her own home and needs to be removed, time is precious. Often the preferred option, from both a legal and clinical perspective, is kinship care. Almost every state gives priority to relatives when making placement decisions. So, to minimize disruption to the child, such placements may be mandated to be expedited.

Mississippi regulations (Code of Rules 18-006-106) state: “The department shall maintain an expedited process for licensing screened relative, fictive kin caregivers, and court-ordered nonrelative placements to enable a child to be placed quickly upon entering foster care.”

New York Title 18, 443.7(b) states: “Before placing a foster child with a potential caretaker or eligible relative on an emergency basis the authorized agency must: … (2) perform a home study of the potential caretaker’s or eligible relative’s home and family on an expedited basis which assesses the potential caretaker’s or eligible relative’s home to ensure that there is no apparent risk to the health and safety of the child; (3) perform a home study of the potential caretaker’s or eligible relative’s home and family on an expedited basis which assesses the potential caretaker’s or eligible relative’s family, focusing on the following factors: (i) the family’s relationship with the child and the child’s parent(s) or stepparent(s); (ii) the care provided to other children in the home by the potential caretaker or eligible relative; (iii) the potential caretaker’s or eligible relative’s knowledge of the circumstances and conditions that led to the need for the child’s foster care placement; (iv) the past role of the potential caretaker or eligible relative in helping and/or protecting the child from and/or preventing occurrences of abuse or maltreatment of the child; and (v) the present ability of the potential caretaker or eligible relative to protect the child placed in its home from abuse or maltreatment and the potential caretaker’s or eligible relative’s ability to understand the need to protect the child from abuse or maltreatment…”

Of course, it is commendable to place a child in the right home as quickly as possible. But there is a difference between having a streamlined placement process and a rushed one. The former is a picture of a coordinated team effort at its finest. The latter risks rushing into disaster and creating or exacerbating unnecessary problems. We all know the story of the tortoise and the hare. The impatient hare challenges a slower, measured, methodical tortoise to a race. Easily distracted throughout the race, the hare crosses the finish line after the tortoise. The lesson is clear. The steady resolve and progress of the tortoise wins the day.

Undoubtedly, when the child welfare system slows down too much, that can also result in tragedy. A recent Los...
The report also shows us that the interactions professionals have with our young people make a critical difference. Young people become increasingly aware of and attuned to their social status during adolescence. The way they are treated—particularly by officials who have power over them and their families—can do immense good or cause enduring harm. Maximizing the promise of adolescence means extending that care to the families of young people and helping to maintain or strengthen those relationships, which can also be pivotal in a young person’s trajectory.

The promise we continue to make and break is that the child welfare system can work for older youth, when it was never designed for them. It’s an insufficient substitute for the promise a parent makes and that every young person needs—to love them, cheer them on when they succeed, support them when they fail, and stand by them for life.

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