



COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

Commission on Youth

Virginia's Adoption Home Study Process

December 6, 2016

Will Egen

Study Mandate



- During the 2016 General Assembly Session, Delegate Christopher Peace introduced House Joint Resolution 103. The resolution directed the Commission on Youth to study the adoption home study process.
- The House Committee on Rules reviewed this legislation and it was laid on the table. The House Committee on Rules requested the Commission on Youth to study the provisions set forth in the legislation and to report findings and recommendations prior to the 2017 General Assembly session.



HJ103 directed VCOY to specifically look at:

- (i) the current mutual family assessment home study format and curriculum;
- (ii) the process by which home studies are completed by staff of local departments of social services and licensed private child-placing agencies; and
- (iii) the potential benefits of implementation of a uniform home study format established by the Department of Social Services for all home studies completed in the Commonwealth.

Study Activities



- Research and review federal law
- Review and analyze Virginia laws, policies, and procedures
- Conduct extensive background and literature reviews
 - Review role and benefits of the home study process
 - National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
 - Child Welfare Information Gateway – Children’s Bureau – U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
 - Other states’ implementation of uniform home study format, e.g. Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE)
 - Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)
 - Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (AAICPC)
 - Best practices implementing home studies
 - Other states’ statutes, regulations, studies, and activities

Study Activities (cont...)



- **Convene an advisory group of stakeholders**
 - Virginia Department of Social Services
 - Local Departments of Social Services
 - Secretary of Health and Human Resources
 - Virginia League of Social Service Executives
 - Virginia's Court Improvement Program – Supreme Court of Virginia
 - Private child-placing agencies
 - Adoptive parents
 - County/City attorneys
 - Juvenile court judges
 - Guardians ad litem and parents' counsel
 - Virginia's Court Appointed Special Advocates
 - Advocacy organizations
- **Develop recommendations**
- **Solicit feedback to recommendations**



Advisory Group Meeting

September 7, 2016

- I. Study Overview
- II. Mutual Family Assessments – Improving Permanency for Children in the Child Welfare System
- III. Advisory Group Discussion – Discussion on Home Study Process



Advisory Group Membership

Tammy Allison

Parent Representative

Carl Ayers

Virginia Department of Social Services

Lori Battin

Virginia's Court Improvement Program –
Supreme Court of Virginia

Kara Brooks

CSA Coordinator – Hanover County

The Honorable Richard B. Campbell

Virginia Juvenile and Domestic Relations
District Court

Allison Gilbreath

Voices for Virginia's Children

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Secretary of Health and Human Resources

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Court Appointed Special Advocate Program

Cathy Pemberton

Virginia League of Social Service Executives

Rebecca Ricardo

Private child-placing agency – C2Adopt

Abigail Schreiner

Private child-placing agency - Hope Tree Family Services

Frank G. Uvanni

Attorney Advocate - Uvanni & Associates, P.C.

The Honorable Patricia L. West

Former Juvenile and Circuit Court Judge



Purpose of a home study

- i. educate and prepare the adoptive family for adoption;
- ii. gather information about the prospective parents that will help a social worker match the family with a child whose needs they can meet; and
- iii. evaluate the fitness of the adoptive family.

State laws on the home study process typically include

- Indication of who must be included as a part of the home study
- Indication of the person or entity conducting the home study
- Listing of the qualifications for adoptive parents
- Enumeration of the elements of a home study (interview, references, health records, background checks)
- Timeline for completion of a home study and update requirements
- Post-placement study requirements

Identified Issues (cont...)



National trends - Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE)



- SAFE is mandated by the Public Agency/Ministry
- SAFE is in use by one or more adoption/foster care agency



Children exiting foster care by exit reason

Location	Exit Reason	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Virginia	Adoption	770	812	694	753	700
		24%	27%	25%	28%	26%
	Emancipation	829	743	691	580	518
		26%	25%	25%	21%	20%
	Living with other relatives	621	463	479	541	581
		19%	16%	17%	20%	22%
Reunited with parent or primary caretaker	910	888	808	760	780	
	28%	30%	29%	28%	30%	
United States	Adoption	52,340	50,195	51,225	50,287	49,693
		21%	20%	21%	21%	21%
	Emancipation	27,854	25,717	23,395	23,346	22,392
		11%	10%	10%	10%	9%
	Living with other relatives	20,423	20,042	19,661	19,380	15,774
		8%	8%	8%	8%	7%
Reunited with parent or primary caretaker	128,913	126,943	122,193	121,359	121,241	
	51%	52%	51%	51%	51%	



Relevant *Code of Virginia* Section

- Adoption
 - Home study; meeting required; exception
§ 63.2-1231

Relevant *Virginia Administrative Code* Sections

- Resource, Foster and Adoptive Family Home Approval Standards
 - Home Study Requirements
22 VAC 40-211-40
 - Approval Period and Documentation of Approval
22 VAC 40-211-50
- Standards for Licensed Child-Placing Agencies (LCPA)
 - Home Study Requirements
22 VAC 40-131-180



Home Study Process and Elements

- A minimum of three face-to-face interviews. At least one of the interviews shall be conducted in the home of the applicant. At least one interview with all individuals who reside in the home.
- A minimum of three references.
- Licensee/local departments of social services (LDSS) shall obtain information regarding prior applications submitted to another agency.
- Demographic and financial information of the applicant.
- Include narrative documentation that pulls together information from the interviews, references, observations, and other available.
- Background check results.
- Provider approval period is for 36 months.

Virginia's Home Study Approach



Mutual Family Assessment

- During VDSS Child Welfare Transformation in 2009, the home study process for approving foster and adoptive families was improved by using a more inclusive process referred to as the mutual family assessment.
- As a result of this process, the final decision to approve the home reflects the family's perceived ability and willingness to foster or adopt as well as the agency's assessment of the family.
- "A process that includes both a study of the physical home as well as the prospective provider(s). It is mutual in that while the LDSS maintains final authority on the decision to approve or not approve. [The] assessment is done with families rather than to families."



Mutual Family Assessment

(Local Agency Letterhead)

RESOURCE FAMILY ASSESSMENT

PARENTS

Father:
DOB:
SSN#:
Race:

Mother:
DOB:
SSN#:
Race:

CHILDREN IN THE HOME Name, Gender, DOB, Race

ADDRESS Street Address
City, State, Zip

SCHOOLS SERVED Elementary
Middle
High
Private Schools (if applicable)

TELEPHONE NUMBERS Home:
Father's Work:
Father's Cell Phone:
Mother's Work:
Mother's Cell Phone:

E-MAIL ADDRESS Father's E-mail Address:
Mother's E-mail Address:

Addendum: Mutual Family Assessment

Family Name _____

Date of last approval _____

Reason for addendum:

- Part of a scheduled renewal
OR
- An update to the assessment prior to renewal
Please check which of the following apply, and describe in the narrative:
 - Change in family or home (e.g., household composition, marital status, health or finances)
 - Failure to comply with requirements
 - Follow-up to an allegation or finding of abuse/neglect
 - Addition of child-specific or matching information (for adoption)
 - Other: Please specify below

Worker completing addendum: _____
Signature and Date

Director or Designee approving addendum: _____
Signature and Date

ADDENDUM
(type narrative below—the family name automatically repeats on each page)



Foster and Adoptive Parents Training Curriculum

- Training in regulations: 22 VAC 40-211-60
- Many of Virginia's LDSS and LCPA's use Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE). This curriculum utilizes the following core competencies:
 - Protecting and nurturing children
 - Meeting children's developmental needs and addressing developmental delays
 - Supporting relationships between children and their families
 - Connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime
 - Working as a member of a professional team
- Traditions of Caring (TOC) and Collaborating Model of Practice
 - Specialty designed curriculum for use with kinship foster and adoptive families



Uniformity

- Not all local departments of social services use the mutual family assessment report format developed by the Virginia Department of Social Services.
- Private providers have flexibility to create and revise their home study format. These providers must follow state regulations. The current approach allows for certain agencies to have a competitive advantage.

Reciprocity

- Lack of ownership and portability of a home study is a potential barrier to placing resource families where the need is greatest and to growing the pool of providers.
- Many private providers recoup the costs of completing a home study when a family accepts a foster care placement with an agency. Mandated reciprocity would impact this arrangement.



Impact on the court system

- Multiple levels of potential court appeals exist in a termination of parental rights proceeding.
- Appeals from Juvenile and Domestic Relations (JDR) Courts are heard on appeal as a right in Circuit Court de novo.
- An aggrieved party may further appeal the case as a right to the Court of Appeals. This appeal, however, is based on the record in the Circuit Court proceeding.
- “Two bites at the apple” slows down the court system and diminishes the important role the JDR judge plays in the foster care-to-adoption timeline in a termination of parental rights proceeding.
- Possible Solution: Assess the feasibility of making JDR a court of record for termination of parental rights.

Improving the Home Study Process



Investment in Improving the Process

- Beginning in 2010, the Federal Government changed the funding stream for basic maintenance payments in Adoption Assistance Payments.
- The change resulted in Adoption Savings, which must be re-invested to promote adoption and permanency for children in foster care.
- As a result of the Title IV-E Adoption Savings, the Division of Family Services is spending the funds by providing services to eliminate barriers to achieving permanency for foster care youth.
- \$1.5 million in Mutual Family Assessment regional home study specialists and post-adoption support services funded by Title IV-E Adoption Savings.



Investment in Improving the Process

- \$1.5 million in State General Funds specifically targeted at pilot programs designed to increase the number of children adopted from foster care.
- \$1.9 million through the Adoption Through Collaborative Partnership (ATCP) Grants.



Plans for Adoption Savings Funds

- Federal law requires at least 30% of the Adoption Savings funds to be spent on post-adoption services.
- Hire a minimum of three specialists per region to assist the LDSS by completing the foster care and adoption home study process, which includes, written reports and home visits.
- Additional measures will be built in to add incentives for home studies completed prior to the 60-day timeframe by the Adoption Through Collaborative Partnership (ATCP) contractors and subsequent foster care and adoption placements by the LDSS.
- Contractual services will be provided to adoptive families and adoption professionals such as educational resources, clinical services and support to ensure permanency for adoptive youth and families.



Improvements to Mutual Family Assessment

- Currently updating Foster and Adoptive Family guidance to provide clarity on uniformity and reciprocity of home studies.
- Modified the Adoption Through Collaborative Partnership (ATCP) contract. Contractors will be required to complete an addendum or amended study for the purpose of completing a child-specific home study for adoption.
- The Consortium for Resource and Foster Family Training (CRAFFT) coordinators have increased their supportive role in assisting LDSS by providing PRIDE/Traditions of Caring (TOC) training for foster/adoptive/kinship parents.
- Implementation of generic mutual family assessment and subsequent completion of addendum or amended study for the purpose of a child-specific home study for adoption.



Findings & Recommendations



Finding #1 – The Mutual Family Assessment template is the preferred format for use in approving provider families. Local departments of social services that choose to use another format for their narrative report must clearly address each of the categories identified in the preferred template.

- *(Option 1): Introduce a bill to mandate the Mutual Family Assessment home study and addendum developed by the Virginia Department of Social Services as a uniform home study format for statewide use **among local departments of social services**. Provide flexibility to allow the Virginia Department of Social Services to update this format in the future when necessary.*
- *(Option 2): Introduce a bill to mandate the Mutual Family Assessment home study and addendum developed by the Virginia Department of Social Services as a uniform home study format for statewide use **among local departments of social services and licensed child placing agencies**. Provide flexibility to allow the Virginia Department of Social Services to update this format in the future when necessary.*



Finding #2 – There is no statewide database of current foster families, and agencies are unable to verify if an applicant has previously applied to be a resource family.

- *Support the Virginia Department of Social Services in its acquisition and implementation of a new comprehensive child welfare computer system. Ensure the ability of a case worker to make an intake query to see if applicant family has previously applied to be an adoptive, foster, resource, respite family at another agency.*



Finding #3 – Parents have two rights of appeal in certain domestic relations cases including termination of parental rights.

- *Request the Virginia Bar Association's Virginia Family Law Coalition study the implications of the removal of the right to appeal, to Circuit Court from Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, certain cases involving termination of parental rights. Relevant Code of Virginia Section: (§ 16.1-296(D)).*

As part of this study, look to the concept of having Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Courts become courts of record for matters involving child custody and termination of parental rights. This could be accomplished by requiring court reporters be present in these specific proceedings with appeals going directly to the Virginia Court of Appeals.



Finding #4 – Foster care-to-adoption is vital in promoting the goal of permanency.

- *Support a messaging campaign at the Virginia Department of Social Services that promotes adoption through foster care.*



Finding #5 – Barriers during the adoption placement timeframe include the home study approval process and matching families with youth.

- *Request the Virginia Department of Social Services to investigate the feasibility of implementing a reciprocity process for sharing home studies that will allow local departments of social services and licensed child placing agencies to give access to completed home studies to applicant families and encourage acceptance amongst agencies. The Virginia Department of Social Services shall report findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth prior to the 2018 General Assembly Session.*



Finding #6 – Adoption savings funds are being used to assist local departments of social services in completing the foster care and adoption home study process.

- *Support the Virginia Department of Social Services efforts related to the hiring of regional home study specialists whose role is to assist local departments of social services by completing the foster care and adoption home study process.*