



## VIRGINIA COMMISSION ON YOUTH

### Virginia's Home Study Adoption Process – Advisory Group Meeting

Twin Hickory Library  
5001 Twin Hickory Road  
Glen Allen, Virginia

September 7, 2016  
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

#### Meeting Notes

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#### **Advisory Group Members:**

Tammy Allison, Carl Ayers, Lori Battin, Kara Brooks, Richard B. Campbell, Allison Gilbreath, Sandra Karison, Melissa O'Neill, Cathy Pemberton, Rebecca Ricardo, Abigail Schreiner, Frank G. Uvanni, Patricia West

#### **Not Attending:**

Cate Hawks, Janet Vestal Kelly, Pam Kestner, Christopher Peace

#### **Virginia Department of Social Services' Staff:**

Traci Jones, Bragail Williams-Brown, Em Parente

#### **Virginia Commission on Youth Staff:**

Amy Atkinson, Will Egen, Leah Mills, Amanda Muncy

#### **Welcome and Introductions**

*Amy Atkinson*

*Virginia Commission on Youth*

Ms. Atkinson welcomed the Advisory Group members and guests and requested that the members introduce themselves.

Ms. Atkinson stated that 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, including the current mutual family assessment home study format and curriculum and the process by which home studies are completed by staff of local departments of social services and licensed private child-placing agencies. She stated that the Commission was to assess the potential benefits of implementing a uniform home study format established by the Department of Social Services for all home studies completed in the Commonwealth. Ms. Atkinson stated that the House Committee on Rules reviewed this legislation and 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.

Ms. Atkinson reviewed the meeting handouts. She informed the Advisory Group that following this meeting, the Commission would compile draft recommendations. The draft recommendations, once reviewed by the Advisory Group, would then be presented to the Commission on Youth at the Commission's October 20 meeting. A public comment period would follow and the Commission would vote on the draft recommendations at the December 6 Commission on Youth meeting.

### **Mutual Family Assessments – Improving Permanency for Children in the Child Welfare System**

*Carl E. Ayers, MSW, Director, Division of Family Services  
Virginia Department of Social Services*

Ms. Atkinson introduced Mr. Ayers and thanked him for attending and his leadership within the Department. Mr. Ayers outlined data on foster care and foster parent adoptions in Virginia. He also discussed previous workgroup efforts and recommendations on uniformity and reciprocity of home studies. Mr. Ayers outlined the PRIDE (Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education) curriculum and its core competencies. He then discussed the federal changes in the funding stream for adoption assistance and Virginia's reinvestment of IV-E Adoption savings to provide services to eliminate barriers to achieving permanency for foster care youth. The Department is hiring specialists for each region to assist local departments of social services (LDSS) in completing foster care and adoption home study processes. Mr. Ayers then presented on steps being taken to improve the mutual family assessment (MFA) process. One such effort is the implementation of a generic MFA and subsequent completion of an addendum or amended study for the purpose of a child specific home study for adoption. Mr. Ayers noted that the Commission's study was not about endorsing one particular home assessment format but rather enabling the system to safely and expeditiously connect children and families.

The handouts from the presentation can be located on the Virginia Commission on Youth's website under the September 7 meeting tab.

### **Advisory Group Discussion**

*Discussion on Home Study Process*

The Advisory Group reviewed the worksheet and handouts prepared by Commission staff including:

- The current mutual family assessment home study format and curriculum;
- The process by which home studies are completed by staff of local departments of social services and licensed private child-placing agencies; and
- 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.

The Advisory Group contemplated whether modifications needed to be made to Virginia's current mutual family assessment home study format and curriculum. The Advisory Group then discussed how Virginia's home study process could best support permanency for Virginia's youth. The members deliberated on the advantages and barriers of implementing a portable uniform home study format. Mr. Egen reviewed the various adoption home study approaches and formats utilized by other states.

After much discussion, several recommendations emerged. The recommendations discussed by the Advisory Group are outlined below.

- Introduce legislation 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. The Department would also have flexibility to update this format in the future when necessary.
- Introduce legislation 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 and licensed child placing agencies.

- Support the Virginia Department of Social Services in its acquisition and implementation of a computer system. Also, 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.
- Request the Virginia Bar Association's Virginia Family Law Coalition study the implication 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.

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

- Support a messaging campaign at the Virginia Department of Social Services that promotes adoption through foster care.
- 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 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.
- Support the Virginia Department of Social Services efforts related to the hiring of regional home study specialists whose role is to assist local departments by completing the foster care and adoption home study process.

Ms. Atkinson thanked everyone for their participation and stated that staff would send the Advisory Group participants the draft recommendations for additional feedback. The draft recommendations would then be shared with the Commission on Youth at their meeting scheduled for October 20, 2016 at 1:00 p.m. in House Room C at the General Assembly Building. Ms. Atkinson stated that all meetings are open to the public. Public comment submitted to the Commission on Youth would then be received at the Commission's meeting scheduled for December 6 at 10:00 a.m. in House Room C of the General Assembly Building. The Commission would then vote on the proposed recommendations at the December 6 meeting. Ms. Atkinson thanked everyone for their involvement. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 12:25 p.m.