



QIC•AG

**IMPLEMENTING THE VERMONT
PERMANENCY SURVEY
LESSONS LEARNED
IN VERMONT**

OVERVIEW OF THE QIC-AG

The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) is a 5-year project working with eight sites, each of which is either implementing an evidence-based intervention or developing and testing a promising practice, which if proven effective, can be replicated or adapted in other child welfare jurisdictions. Effective interventions are expected to achieve long-term, stable permanence in adoptive and guardianship homes for waiting children as well as children and families whose adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

The QIC-AG is funded through a 5-year cooperative agreement between the Children's Bureau, Spaulding for Children, and its three university partners: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVENTION

The Vermont QIC-AG project developed the Vermont Permanency Survey to learn about the experiences of families both pre- and post-permanence. Vermont conducted an in-depth analysis of adoptive and guardianship families in their state so that they could identify and understand the strengths of families who reported they were doing well and spot signals of those who might be at risk of discontinuity. The Vermont team also wanted to understand the landscape of the services available and how well families could connect to them.

The Vermont Permanency Survey consisted of validated measures and questions identified by the Vermont site team that fell into the following categories:

- » Family well-being: to better understand the factors that can impact the family's safety, permanence, and stability.
- » Child well-being: to identify and understand the strengths and challenges of children and youth who are adopted or being cared for through guardianship.
- » Caregiver well-being: to identify and understand the strengths and experiences of caregivers who have adopted or assumed guardianship of a child.

- » Community services: to identify and rate the level of helpfulness of the preparation services families used prior to adoption or guardianship and family support services available after achieving permanence.

The project's target population includes all Vermont families who receive an adoption or guardianship assistance agreement subsidy from the state. In addition, families who adopted through an intercountry or private domestic process and who either self-identified or had been identified by a local private adoption agency were eligible to participate in the survey.

Data from the survey is being analyzed by district and the project results are being distributed across the Vermont system of care through district meetings.

SNAPSHOT OF LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. COLLABORATE WITH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS TO BRING ABOUT SYSTEM CHANGE**
- 2. DEVELOP AN INITIAL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN TO GUIDE ALL ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT**
- 3. PREPARE FOR COMPLEX DATA MANAGEMENT WITH ROBUST TECHNOLOGY TOOLS**
- 4. DON'T HESITATE TO OFFER SERVICES. MANY FAMILIES WON'T NEED HELP BUT MAY APPRECIATE THE CONNECTION**



LESSON 1: COLLABORATE WITH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

Providing support to families calls for a complex network of government entities, private agencies, and individual professional providers. Each component has policies, procedures, and priorities that can make system-wide coordination clumsy and wholesale change difficult. Vermont was fortunate that those connections were already in place through the System of Care (SOC) delivery service areas. The site team leveraged that network to gain a full view of the post-permanency landscape and make valid systemic recommendations.

Families were at the center of what grew to be a broad collaboration. The project started with group conversation among adoptive and guardianship parents to shape the project to their needs and encourage family engagement. The next key collaboration was with the Stakeholder Advisory Team (SAT), a team established prior to the QIC-AG project to address cross-system assessment and placement challenges. The SAT was charged with identifying unmet, cross-cutting needs of children and families within the community. Parents, as the consumers of post-permanency resources, had mandated seats on the SAT. It also had representatives from the state-wide SOC agencies (a consortium of human service, health, education, and mental health advocates) private child welfare agencies and post-permanency service providers. Throughout the development and implementation of the survey, the SAT met quarterly to review the project progress and provide feedback. That input was valuable to the Implementation Team, made up of the Vermont Department of Children and Families (DCF) staff, adoption agency partner Lund, and experts from the University of Vermont, as they determined how to best deliver the survey to Vermont families.

The survey findings have already informed practice changes that were highlighted in new trainings for professionals within DCF. Also, in partnership with the University of Vermont, a capacity-building project to develop universal post-permanency supports is underway. In addition, final data from the survey will be analyzed for each DCF district and then presented at local meetings. Ultimately, the data will inform

discussions about collaboration, coordination, and improved service delivery among the various agencies that serve Vermont's post-permanency population.

LESSON 2: DEVELOP AN INITIAL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN TO GUIDE ALL ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT

Implementing an intervention well requires discipline and a framework, as there are many moving parts. These parts can be managed by careful planning, which includes the completion of an Initial Design and Implementation Plan (IDIP). An IDIP is a tool that allows a project team to strategically plan for successful implementation of an initiative and to ensure that the initiative has intervention validity and implementation integrity. Vermont developed their IDIP and followed it throughout the survey intervention.

Developing the IDIP in the planning phase took months of meetings and discussions with the stakeholder team and the project team. They invested time to explore and document: WHAT is being implemented; HOW the system will be prepared to support the intervention; and WHO is going to do the work. The result (after more than a dozen iterations) was a detailed roadmap to address every component that was necessary to implement a statewide survey.

The level of detail in the plan provided even more value when there was turnover in the Site Implementation Manager (SIM) position. The IDIP allowed the newly hired SIM to quickly become familiar with the processes in place to operationalize each core component and to prepare for the next steps.

LESSON 3: PREPARE FOR COMPLEX DATA MANAGEMENT WITH ROBUST TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

On the surface, a survey may seem like a straightforward project of questions and answers. In practice, however, a successful survey must be supported by many logistical and process factors. The Vermont implementation team had to make strategic decisions about methods to deliver the survey to 1,500 families, the follow-up plan to generate more

responses, and parameters to collect data. With 28-pages of questions, a survey of this scope required a comprehensive data management system, a tool for online completion, and administrative support for activities to keep the data current and integrated with the overall implementation plan.

The implementation required the team to develop proficiency on several technology platforms. They created Excel spreadsheets with complex formula functions to house information about the families. The cornerstone of the data management was the REDCap software, a secure web application for building and managing online surveys and databases. REDCap was chosen because it is a free, and available solution. The UVM researchers collaborating on the project had previous experience with REDCap. However, other team members needed training in how to tailor it for the survey and to analyze data. Becoming adept with the online survey platform will have a lasting impact because the site established a capacity-building project, using REDCap for future outreach to post-permanency families.

LESSON 4: DON'T HESITATE TO OFFER SERVICES. MANY FAMILIES WON'T NEED HELP BUT MAY APPRECIATE THE CONNECTION

The years of progress made to move children from foster care to permanent adoptive or guardianship homes, means that now in many locales post-permanency families outnumber foster care placements. Looking at volume, providers could be reluctant to offer services to what could be a flood of families. The Vermont team was concerned that the outreach initiated by their survey would generate more requests for services than the system could meet. The results were both surprising and encouraging.

The survey provided an opportunity for participants to note if they wished to be contacted for follow up. Consistently 18-19 percent of the families asked to be contacted. Very few requested post-permanency services. Most requests were for information or referrals. Less than 1% of the families followed-through with a post-permanency service provider.

Another unexpected survey outcome was discovering that the assumption that families do not want to be connected to the state agency after permanence did not always bear out. The team heard from families that appreciated the state's effort to get back in touch. Some said they had felt "abandoned by their agencies and alone" after finalization. Even though families received information in parent preparation meetings about expectations and resources after finalization, as time passed they sometimes forgot. This is potentially problematic because research shows that the risk of discontinuity increases as the child grows older as the child grows older and the time since finalization increases. Adoptive parents and guardians could be well served with periodic reminders about resources that they may need and support that is available within the community. The strategies used to reach families for the survey will continue to be used to inform families of available services and supports.



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