



Ally-IL

Fostering Interconnected Youth

Illinois DCFS: Promoting Healthy Transitions in
Child Welfare Cases

Illinois Department of
DCFS
Children & Family Services

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The Child Welfare Ecosystem

Ecosystems are complex products of nature that exist in careful balance. Through billions of years of evolution, living creatures learn to live symbiotically; forming close relationships across species that are mutually beneficial. The living parts of these systems depend on one another for food, shelter, pollination, reproduction and decomposition. Removing any one plant, bug, fungus or animal can have intense negative effects throughout the system, causing catastrophic disruptions. For example, of the 100 crops that generate most of our food supply, 35% are pollinated by honeybees.¹ If honeybees suddenly disappeared, many crops would be unable to reproduce, harming all herbivores, including humans. Certain biofuels would also be put at risk due to bees' contributions to producing canola. And our clothing supply chain would suffer, as bees help pollinate cotton plants.

The sudden loss of one species is a loss for the entire ecosystem. However, if the honeybee population decreased slowly over time, the rest of the ecosystem would be able to adapt to make up for the absence of a primary pollinator. Other bird and bat species might be able to contribute to more of the pollination process, or plants might adapt to having fewer available pollinators. Even the loss of a keystone species, which is a species that is vital to the balance and diversity of a given ecosystem, can be mitigated if the environment is given enough time to adapt.

1

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. "Fact Sheet: The Economic Challenge Posed by Declining Pollinator Populations." Briefing Room, National Archives and Records Administration, 20 June 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/20/fact-sheet-economic-challenge-posed-declining-pollinator-populations/>.



In child welfare, each case forms its own small ecosystem. The individuals involved help and depend on each other, all with the goal of finding the best outcomes for children and families. Caseworkers act as a keystone species; a caseworker is crucial to the success of the system as a whole despite being only one person. Child welfare case activity is designed to be a time limited intervention. The goal is that by the end of the case management process, the child and family are prepared to be independently successful and no longer require the resources provided by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). However, removing a key support abruptly, like a caseworker, can contribute to unintended adverse impacts and cause ripple effects, making it challenging for both the child and other dependent support systems to adapt.

Just as honeybees are impacted by the fragile ecosystem they rely on, studies have shown

that children who have experienced multiple placements, prolonged stays in foster care and disruptions in their caregiving relationships can be more vulnerable to the negative impacts of case closure.² For these children, case closure represents the loss of a stable and supportive relationship with the caseworker and supervisor, who acted as a critical part of the children's formal support system. By providing families with extended services and support with a gradual reduction in case support, Illinois DCFS can avoid the negative impacts of case closure.

Extended access to resources and connections better equips the children and families in Illinois DCFS care to achieve their goals. To this end, Illinois DCFS has developed an innovative strategy to provide children and families extended access to resources and support teams as children transition out of care that does not add additional workload onto a caseworker, allowing the ecosystem to adapt and thrive.

2 sbrown@casey.org. "Placement Stability Impacts - Casey Family Programs." Casey Family Programs, 3 Oct. 2018, www.casey.org/placement-stability-impacts.

Current State

Case closure should be marked as a positive indication that a family has overcome the circumstances that led them to the attention of Illinois DCFS in the first place, ending with the family confident that they are ready to live independent of the agency-provided support system. Research shows that supportive aftercare (aka continuity of care services) provided to families following reunification and a return to a healthy state of regularity, are extremely beneficial in easing the transition out of care. Many child welfare cases already require these types of services; but, in cases where reunification is not the outcome formal support systems can often end without a transition period. In these instances, case closure can be difficult for the child and/or the family. If a child has had few positive adult supports in his or her life it can be extremely difficult when their caseworker and case supervisor are no longer regularly present. According to social policy studies, strong social connections and concrete support for families in need of resources and stability (e.g., social services, financial support, etc.) are key factors in lowering the risk of child abuse and neglect.³

3 Center for the Study of Social Policy. ABOUT STRENGTHENING FAMILIESTM AND THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

Case Study: Youth in Extended Care

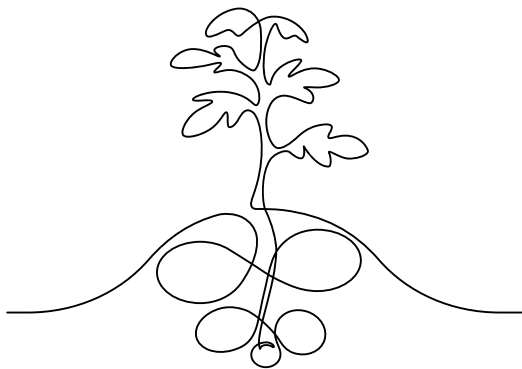
The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 gave states more funding and greater flexibility to provide support to children transitioning from foster care to independent living. The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Children (Midwest Study) was designed to learn how young people fare as they age out of foster care. The Midwest Study presented “a unique opportunity to compare the outcomes of young people from one state (Illinois) that allows youth in care to remain in care until their 21st birthday to the outcomes of young people from two other states (Iowa and Wisconsin) in which youth in care generally age out when they are 18 years old”.⁴

The study found that youth in care that opt to stay in an adjusted form of care from ages 18-21 instead of opting out entirely at age 18 have better outcomes. This adjusted care allows children to maintain support from the foster care system and provides them with opportunities to practice independence. For each additional year in foster care, children have increased probability of completing high school and are 10% more likely to attend college. These children also have a decreased likelihood of being arrested, becoming homeless, or impregnating/becoming pregnant before the age of 21.⁵

4 Courtney, Mark, et al. “Improved Outcomes at Age 21 for Youth in Extended Foster Care – Chapin Hall.” Improved Outcomes at Age 21 for Youth in Extended Foster Care – Chapin Hall, 1 Jan. 2018, www.chapinhall.org/research/improved-outcomes-at-age-21-for-youth-in-extended-foster-care.

5 Courtney, Mark, et al. “Improved Outcomes at Age 21 for Youth in Extended Foster Care – Chapin Hall.” Improved Outcomes at Age 21 for Youth in Extended Foster Care – Chapin Hall, 1 Jan. 2018, www.chapinhall.org/research/improved-outcomes-at-age-21-for-youth-in-extended-foster-care.

For each additional year in foster care beyond age 18, youth experience:



High School Graduation Rates

College Attendance

Teen Pregnancy

Likelihood of Arrest

Homelessness

These programs aim to promote interdependent children as opposed to independent children. Interdependent children understand what resources are available to them in their community, how to access those resources and remain well-connected to what they need:



Interdependence honors a need for, and supports engagement with, trusted adults... To argue for total independence is to push for less connectedness; to attain interdependence, our ideology means a shift from self-sufficiency to self-efficacy. In this way, youth are supported in developing the knowledge and skills to identify what is needed to meet their goals and to develop the resolve to complete those steps.⁶



By promoting interdependence, child welfare agencies can create better outcomes for children and families. With touch-back services that keep children connected to their supports from their time in care, children can adapt and prepare to be completely separated from the system, making them better equipped for finding new forms of support over time. Of course, extended care cannot be a solution in all child welfare cases.

Interdependence does not negate the necessity for children and families to separate from the system. Case connectedness is not intended to be a perpetual state, but rather it is intended to slowly ramp down services only as long as it takes for families to ramp up their own skills and secure the linkages they need to be successful on their own. This case study shows us that providing resources beyond case closure can help inform interdependent children and families who know where to go for the necessary concrete supports. Illinois DCFS has chosen to address this issue through a new communication and collaboration tool that can provide light-touch reach-back support while reducing burden on caseworkers.

⁶ Hokanson, Kim, et al. "Not Independent Enough": Exploring the Tension Between Independence and Interdependence Among Former Youth in Foster Care Who Are Emerging Adults." *Child Welfare*, vol. 97, no. 12, Sept. 2019, pp. 141–57, www.researchgate.net/publication/340037274_Exploring_the_Tension_Between_Independence_and_Interdependence_among_Former_Youth_in_Foster_Care_who_are_Emerging_Adults.

Illinois DCFS Proposed Future State

Illinois DCFS recognized the importance of children being interdependent and remaining connected to formal supports following case closure. Among other areas of focus, the department recognized that it required a tool that could improve communication across cases and promote relationship building among case participants. To address these needs, the department piloted **Ally-IL**, an innovative communication tool that facilitates easy and efficient virtual connections. Ally-IL not only improves communication and collaboration for everyone involved in a case, but also creates an opportunity to establish a lifeline for children, families, case managers and others actively participating and following case closure.

Ally-IL is an innovative approach implementing Microsoft Teams to improve communication and collaboration for everyone involved in a case. This communication platform, available by app via phone, tablet or computer, allows selected individuals to communicate easily and securely once it is set up by the case manager. The case manager is also able to create channels (groups within a Team organized by topic) and chats (messages between two individuals or in larger groups) to facilitate conversation in the team.

Instead of a series of phone calls, a caseworker can communicate with the entire team with one chat message and receive replies from anyone in the chat. Ally Team members can send photos, documents and ask questions to the entire group or in smaller chats. Ally-IL allows children and families to connect virtually with their professional and personal supports, promoting the development of stronger relationships among members of a case team and more case involvement. Ally-IL also acts as a record-keeper, allowing team members to review information and provide caseworkers and supervisors with a record of conversations.

Ally-IL enables all individuals involved in a case to communicate securely, easily and quickly by creating channels and chats to facilitate conversation among “Alliances.” An Alliance is defined as any participant from a children’s Ally Team, such as a birth parent, foster parent, teacher, adult supports, assigned caseworkers and their supervisors, as well as the children when age and/or developmentally appropriate. Instead of a series of phone calls, a caseworker can communicate with the entire Alliance with one chat message and receive replies from anyone in the chat.

As part of the statewide Ally-IL rollout, Illinois DCFS will include a post-case closure “active lifeline” period of six months. Following the close of a case, the Ally Team will remain open in the event an Alliance member needs to contact the group.



The Ally-IL lifeline period is not extended care or appropriate to manage crisis, emergencies or reports of abuse or neglect.

If there is an emergency, or if a case needs to be reopened, established practices to contact the Abuse/Neglect Hotline or emergency services will be utilized. Ally-IL promotes interdependence by encouraging children and families to lean on their supports through available channels and connections. This may mean asking a question of a supervisor or caseworker in the post-case closure period, reaching out to the Alliance for advice or recommendations or perhaps simply sharing a photo or video of the children to retain positive connections.

The Ally-IL Lifeline provides better communication opportunities to Alliance members than just exchanging phone numbers following case closure. Ally-IL is secure, saves a communication history and provides access to all Alliance members at once. Ally-IL allows official communication channels to remain open after the case, encouraging children and families to be interdependent and seek out known supports when needed.

In Illinois, permanency cases end when an Aftercare Service Plan has been written and accepted. These plans detail how the caseworker will remain involved for the six months following case closure to ensure the child is properly integrating back into the home, is safe and receiving quality care. However, intact cases do not include aftercare services. By keeping

the Ally-IL lifeline open, an extra layer of support for intact families trying to regain a sense of regularity is provided while families in permanency also maintain easy access to communication with the Alliance for the duration of their aftercare.

To maintain the positive experience of using the Ally Team while reducing administrative overhead for the caseworker and supervisor, Illinois DCFS has included a future-state automation recommendation to effectively manage replies in the Ally Team without direct caseworker intervention. When a case ends, an automatic message containing helpful resources such as where to find resources for employment, family counseling or other necessities will be posted to the general channel. Additionally, following the six-month retention period, the Team will be automatically deleted.

The Ally-IL Lifeline is designed to temporarily extend linkages, provide support from the Team, provide a sense of community and access to resources. It is not an extension of the case, but rather is designed to keep connections viable and set up children and families for success.



Stronger Relationships Post Case-Closure

Illinois DCFS hired Deloitte to assist in assessing and analyzing outcomes from the caseworkers and supervisors using Ally-IL across the state. One primary area of analysis was communication within Ally-IL and how that impacts or mirrors the real-life relationships during the life of the case. Ally-IL provides data on how often Alliance members reach out, their engagement in the chat, how quickly caseworkers respond and other kinds of interactions. From these communication touch points, we can combine data points to form small, logical conclusions. We combine several of those conclusions to understand collective trends, until we have eventually proved or disproved an overarching theory.



This series of logical conclusions is called an Objective and Key Results (OKR) goal-setting framework. The assessment team developed three overarching objectives: 1) Alliance members’ experience in the case, 2) how efficiently informed Alliance members are during the case and 3) the quality of connections formed through the life of the case.

The final objective is children and intact families leave the program with strong formal linkages and strong informal connections. The objective is supported by Ally-IL data collected during the case and following case closure during the Active Lifeline period. It differentiates between “Members” who are DCFS staff and “Guests” who are non-DCFS staff. The OKR branch below shows just one of several Targets connected to this objective and should provide a sense of how we measured relationships with Ally-IL.



Informed

Youth and the Alliance are efficiently informed from start to end of the case.



Experience

Youth and the Alliance have a positive experience during the lifecycle of the case.



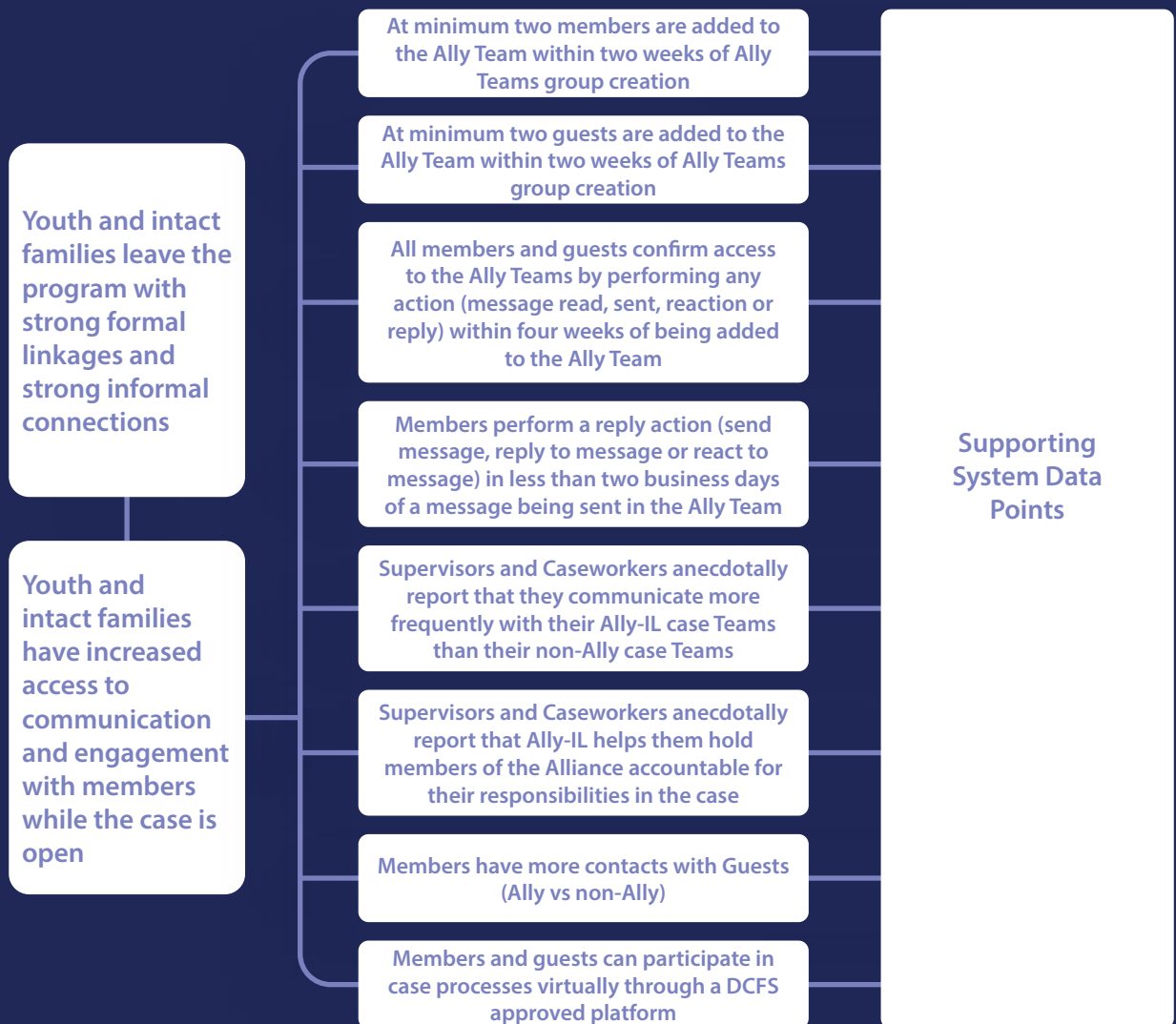
Linked & Connected

Youth and intact families leave the program with strong formal linkages and strong informal connections.

The OKR branch below shows just one of several targets connected to this objective and should provide a sense of how we measured relationships with Ally-IL.

As seen in the below objective statement, there are two important types of connections that improve outcomes for children and their families during the lifecycle of an Illinois DCFS case and beyond: **formal** and **informal**.

Formal connections are with a child’s caseworkers, supervisors, service providers, therapists and foster parents (when applicable). These are connections that exist because of a child’s formal involvement with DCFS. Informal connections are with birth parents and siblings, teachers, mentors and other positive supports. These connections would exist without any involvement with DCFS. According to social policy studies, strong social connections and concrete support in times of need (social services, financial support, etc.) are key factors that lower the risk of child abuse and neglect.⁷ This shows that both formal and informal supports are crucial to protect against maltreatment and improve outcomes over time. By preserving this communication channel, the department is creating space for formal and informal relationships to continue to thrive. As Ally-IL is rolled out across the state, Illinois DCFS will be able to collect additional data on Ally-IL usage to inform insights about the benefits of the six-month lifeline period.



7 Center for the Study of Social Policy. ABOUT STRENGTHENING FAMILIESTM AND THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Ally-IL helps build trust across Alliance members by bringing professional and personal supports together in one place. Foster parents and birth parents can build a trusting relationship with the assistance of the caseworker and on their own, share photos or videos of the children and ask for quick updates. By keeping the lines of communication open and flowing after case closure, the importance of ongoing linkages within the team to the sustained success for the children and family is understood.

Typically at the end of a case, Alliance members lose easy access to communication with professional supports. As learned from anecdotal evidence from the Ally-IL pilot, caseworkers frequently share their personal contact information with caregivers following case closure in the event that any questions or problems arise. With the six-month extension of the Ally Lifeline, the entire Alliance is preserved. As detailed above, there are automated measures in place to provide helpful responses

to the Ally Team during the six-month retention period. It also ensures that if Alliance members reach out to a caseworker or supervisor after case closure, there is a record of that conversation through a formal channel. Finally, keeping the Ally Team open allows for continued data collection, providing Illinois DCFS with actionable information regarding the strength of the Alliance as a whole and the impact to overall outcomes.



Conclusion

Child welfare and Illinois DCFS cases are complex, fragile ecosystems that support children and families at vulnerable times, requiring a delicate balance of interdependence and independence. Ally-IL enables and maintains a safe, controlled environment that is initially organized by the case manager who gradually steps away as their Alliance becomes stronger, positively reinforcing that children and families do not have to function alone once their case officially “closes.” Ally-IL eases children and intact families into a state of independence, resulting in better long-term outcomes and increasing the probability that they will achieve their long-term goals. By incorporating Ally-IL as part of standard case management strategy, case managers can help improve case communications, increase a sense of community among alliances and help grow interdependent children set up for success for years to come.



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About Illinois DCFS

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to reports received by the Child Abuse Hotline at childabuse.illinois.gov (non-emergency situations) or 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. In the event a child must be removed from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible (less than 4% of the time), DCFS is committed to pursuing guardianship and fictive kin as primary options.



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