

Department of Children and Families Reunification Process

By: Jessica Callahan, Associate Analyst
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Issue

What is the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) process to reunify a child in foster care with his or her parents?

Summary

The law requires DCF to make a reasonable effort to reunify parents and children unless a court has (1) approved a permanency plan (see below) with a different goal or (2) determined that reunification efforts are not required. DCF or any other party may, at any time, file a motion with the court for such a determination. The court may determine that reunification efforts by DCF are not required if the court finds clear and convincing evidence that the parent has subjected the child to certain aggravated circumstances (e.g., the child has been abandoned or the parent was convicted of certain crimes) ([CGS § 17a-111b](#)).

Reunification Efforts

DCF has established that reunification is the department's primary goal, which is achieved when a multidisciplinary team of professionals, including the department and the attorneys involved, agree that the family has achieved a level of progress where the child can be safely returned to his or her home. According to DCF, of the approximately 13,000 families the department comes in contact with each year, 91% remain together.

By law, if a child is removed from the home, the Juvenile Court must hold a hearing within 10 days after the removal to allow the parents to contest the actions. The parents and the child must be

appointed separate attorneys. If the court approves the child remaining in DCF care, it must order specific steps for the parents to complete to achieve reunification. DCF then refers the parents to community providers to address the underlying concerns. These providers (1) work with the parents who must comply and demonstrate progress in addressing the conditions that prompted the removal and (2) report back to both DCF and the court ([CGS § 46b-129](#)).

Depending on the child's age and capacity and the specific circumstances of the case, independent professionals may meet and work with the child privately to assess his or her level of trauma and determine a support plan that will assist in reunification. According to DCF, these private sessions can also provide the opportunity for a child to disclose abuse or share information on other conditions in the home without fear of retaliation by the parents. An administrative case review occurs within 45 days after a child enters DCF care. Another review occurs six months after the initial review to evaluate case goals and the services provided that may lead to reunification ([DCF Policy 5-2](#)).

Permanency Planning

DCF's Child and Family Permanency Team (CF-PT) is responsible for permanency planning for the child. The team consists of the child's social worker and the social worker's supervisor ([DCF Policy 21-2-2](#)). According to DCF, at a CF-PT meeting all parties come together to determine (1) the level of compliance and progress of the parents and (2) any additional support needed to facilitate reunification.

The permanency plan's goals may include:

1. reunification;
2. transfer of guardianship;
3. termination of parental rights and adoption; or
4. for a youth, another planned permanent living arrangement ordered by the court if the commissioner has documented a compelling reason why it would not be in the best interest of the youth for the permanency plan to include the other three goals ([CGS § 17a-11\(f\)\(2\)](#)).

At a hearing on a motion to review the permanency plan, the court must (1) review the child's or youth's status and the progress being made to implement the permanency plan and (2) determine a timeframe for achieving the plan and whether reasonable efforts have been made towards such achievement ([CGS § 17a-11\(f\)\(3\)](#)).

The law requires (1) DCF to develop a child's permanency plan within nine months after the child's placement in DCF custody and (2) DCF and the court to review the plan within nine months after the court approves it. The law also specifies timeframes within which DCF must proceed with terminating parental rights ([CGS § 46b-129\(k\)](#)).

Any parent, or child aged 14 or older, who disagrees with the permanency plan may (1) request an administrative or court hearing to contest the plan or (2) file a motion to the court for a hearing to prove they have achieved the progress necessary for reunification and therefore for commitment to be revoked. If the court finds that termination of admission was not made in accordance with the applicable regulations, the court may order the continuation of services and specify a time for the determination of a new case service or permanency plan. However, the court must uphold reunification if, after a hearing, it is satisfied that the termination of admission was made in accordance with the applicable regulations ([CGS § 17a-11\(i\)](#)).

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