Filling the Due Process Donut Hole: Abuse and Neglect Cases Between Disposition and Permanency

Josh Gupta-Kagan
ABSTRACT

A state child protection agency removes a child from his mother and convinces a family court judge to rule that the child’s mother neglected him and to place the child in foster care. The judge orders the agency to work with the mother to remedy the conditions that led her to neglect him with the plan of reunifying the child with her. One year later the family returns to family court. The social worker files a report asserting that the mother has not cooperated with the agency’s efforts to help her and remains incapable of taking care of the child. At the court hearing, the mother says that she now can take care of her child, but the social worker has never liked her and has not given her a fair chance, nor has the worker given her credit for the progress she has made. She says she tried to work with the social worker, but the worker only referred her to other agencies that did not provide useful help.

How does the family court decide what happens next? A series of factual disputes exist that are distinct from the ruling that the court has already issued regarding the mother’s past neglectful conduct. These factual disputes are tied to legal questions – what will the child's "permanency plan" be, that is, will the judge order the agency to continue efforts to reunify the child with his mother or will the judge order the agency to work to have the child adopted by another family. This case is thus ripe for time tested adversarial adjudication through an evidentiary hearing. Yet in most states do not require permanency hearings to be based on evidence, and appeals of permanency hearing decisions are not permitted or do not occur. Federal law -- which shapes much state law practice -- provides vague and insufficient guidance to courts which must make decisions in thousands of cases like this.

This article argues that this due process donut hole -- the absence of procedural safeguards at child abuse and neglect permanency hearings, the hearings held regularly between an initial abuse or neglect adjudication and disposition and a later termination of parental rights or other permanency trial -- must be filled. Constitutionally, the rights at stake -- those of parents and children to maintain family integrity -- are fundamental, the risk of error from sloppy procedures great, and the state interest in avoiding stricter procedures small. From a policy perspective, ensuring better permanency hearing decision-making will help avoid children drifting through foster care for years. Providing a right to appeal permanency hearing decisions will both improve trial court decision-making and help clarify difficult questions of law that will not be resolved through other appeals. Alternative methods of providing due process checks -- especially early termination of parental rights trials -- would create significant other problems, including the unnecessary termination of parental rights for tens of thousands of children. State courts and state and federal policy makers should work to ensure permanency hearing decisions are made via evidentiary hearings and that parties may appeal adverse rulings.

---

1 Adjunct Professor, Georgetown University Law Center, Senior Attorney, Children’s Law Center, Washington, D.C., J.D. New York University School of Law. The opinions in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of his employers. The author would like to thank Sarah Bosken and Daniel Needham for research assistance, and Peter Edelman, Martin Guggenheim, Erik Pitchal, and Vivek Sankaran for their comments on drafts.
The government’s child protection agency removes a child from his mother and convinces a family court judge to rule that the child’s mother had neglected him. The family court judge orders the child into foster care and orders the agency to work with the mother to remedy the conditions that led her to neglect him with the plan of reunifying the child with her. One year later the family returns to family court. The social worker files a report asserting that the mother has not cooperated with the agency’s efforts to help her and remains incapable of taking care of the child. The child has been in foster care for one year, and the social worker believes the child needs a legally permanent home. The social worker recommends that the Court change the child’s plan to adoption by a new family.

At the court hearing, the mother says that she now can take care of her child, but the social worker has never liked her and has not given her a fair chance, nor has the worker given her credit for the progress she has made. She knows she still has some problems but she says they are less severe than they were when her child was removed and she could help solve them if only the social worker helped her, rather than tried to take her child away. She says she tried to work with the social worker, but the worker only referred her to other agencies that did not provide useful help.

How does the family court decide what happens next? A series of factual disputes exist – whether and to what extent the mother has remedied the conditions of neglect, whether the social worker has followed the court’s order to help her, whether the social worker is biased against her – that are distinct from the ruling that the court has already issued regarding the mother’s past neglectful conduct. These factual disputes are tied to legal questions – has the state agency made “reasonable efforts” to reunify the child,\(^2\) has the parent been sufficiently rehabilitated to be entitled to the return of her child,\(^3\) and is reunification so unlikely that the state agency should work to

\(^2\) See infra note 23 and accompanying text.

\(^3\) See infra note 168 and accompanying text.
change the child’s custody arrangements permanently. These disputes appear tailor-made for a neutral fact-finder to adjudicate based on time-tested rules of adversarial litigation.

A due process donut hole exists in the middle of abuse and neglect cases. The beginnings and ends of abuse and neglect cases have traditional due process protections. At the beginning, the government must prove that a parent is unfit in a contested trial. At the end, the government, or a petitioner for adoption, guardianship or some other form of permanent custody must prove their case in a trial. But what happens in the middle is quite a different story. In tens (and perhaps hundreds) of thousands of child abuse and neglect cases judges decide to change children’s permanency plan based solely on the representations of parties, social workers, and attorneys – not actual evidence – and without parties able to appeal the judge’s decision. Parties who want a permanency plan that is different from what the judge orders will have no choice but to wait to challenge the plan. They can wait until the next hearing – but will face the same procedures as in the first hearing. They can wait until a termination of parental rights or some other permanent custody case is filed, and then litigate whether the parent is able to care for the child. But by then, much time will have passed, new facts may emerge regarding the parent’s ability to raise the child – facts which have been shaped by the permanency plan decision itself – and the child may have developed strong new bonds with potential permanent caretakers, adding emotional and legal difficulties.

Abuse and neglect cases involve constantly changing facts. They “are unlike civil cases, which typically involve only facts gone by . . . . The ultimate parties in interest are the [children] themselves. And for them, their lives are ongoing events.” A child’s need to return to his parent

---

6 I describe what occurs in tens of thousands of abuse and neglect cases, but many states provide more procedural protections. Many require evidentiary hearings for permanency plan decisions and many permit appeals. A detailed 51-state survey is included *infra* in Part I.b.2.
7 *In re Pet. of S.M.*, No. 08-FS-1093, Slip Op at 18 (D.C. 2009). The D.C. Court of Appeals stated this language in a different context – ordering a “fresh assessment of the present situation” in the remand of an adoption case involving
may ebb or flow. His parent's fitness may improve, regress, or remain the same. Federal law – followed in all states which wish to receive federal funds to support foster care – requires regular permanency hearings so family courts can make decisions based on evolving factual situations. These decisions – and the lack of greater procedural protections around them – are the focus of this article. These decisions are important because they can set the course of children’s life for years, if not their entire childhood. They are also designed to create the real-life facts that will lead to achieving the permanency plan chosen, thus they shape the “ongoing events” that will become the factual basis of later termination of parental rights or other permanency trials.

The absence of greater procedural protections in hundreds of thousands of abuse and neglect cases that reach this middle stage leads to poor decisions in abuse and neglect cases, creates unnecessary harm to children even when incorrect decisions are reversed later in a case, and, at least in some cases, violates the due process rights of parents and arguably of children. The federal government (which created the legal structure that states follow to obtain foster care funding), state legislatures that write laws governing abuse and neglect cases, and state courts adjudicating abuse and neglect cases should change child abuse and neglect laws to address these problems.

Part I of this article will outline existing due process protections in abuse and neglect cases, particularly those protections that exist between an initial adjudication of abuse or neglect and a final decree permanently affecting a child’s relationship with his or her parent, including those protections required by federal law and states’ implementation of those protections. Part II will explain the argument that due process requires more meaningful procedures. Part III will explain the policy argument – beyond the due process considerations of Part II – that support meaningful trial court procedures and appellate rights. Part IV will also discuss why alternative means of filling this due process donut hole fail to satisfy policy concerns.

children in foster care. ld. But its fundamental point – that facts in foster care cases change as quickly as children do, and trial court decisions need to take account of these changing facts – applies to other procedural postures.
I. Due process protections in abuse and neglect cases

a. The beginning and ends of cases

Lawyers unfamiliar with abuse and neglect law would feel comfortable walking into trials held at the beginnings and ends of abuse or neglect cases. They would see bench trials that have the due process hallmarks of most civil litigation. A case typically begins with the government formally charging a parent with abusing or neglecting his or her child and asking a judge to put the child in the government’s custody so it can protect the child from further abuse or neglect. In constitutional terms, the government must prove that the parent is unfit to justify changing custody. The government – like any other party seeking to prove a case that it files – puts on witnesses and introduces evidence. Opposing parties cross-examine the government’s witnesses, challenge its evidence, and can put on their own case. The judge considers the evidence presented, his or her state’s substantive law, and relevant constitutional law, and then enters a ruling, which parties may appeal.

A ruling that parents have abused or neglected their children justifies a temporary remedy – typically, placing a child in foster care – but a second trial is necessary to permanently alter a child’s custodial arrangements, such as a termination of parental rights trial, adoption trial, or some other form of permanent custody trial (what I will call a “permanency trial”). Here too, abuse and neglect cases follow normal procedures. Parties seeking to terminate a parent’s rights must prove their case by clear and convincing evidence. That case includes proving not merely a single act of parental unfitness, but that the parent has not ameliorated his or her unfitness and, therefore, a

---

8 See, e.g. D.C. Code § 16-2316(a).
9 See, e.g. D.C. Code § 16-2305 (governing abuse and neglect petitions)
11 See, e.g. D.C. Code § 16-2316(b) (evidentiary standards for “factfinding hearings”).
12 Those other forms are discussed in notes 276-285 and accompanying text.
permanent deprivation is required. Parties have the opportunity to challenge each other’s evidence and present their own. States treat such trials very seriously; even without a constitutional mandate to provide counsel, the vast majority of states now do so. Judges consider the evidence and the law and make their ruling, which parties may appeal.

b. The donut hole in between

In most states, those same lawyers who felt at home in a neglect or permanency trial would be confused if they observed a hearing in between the initial abuse and neglect trial and a permanency trial. They would see permanency hearings featuring discussion of facts not proven at any trial. In about 30 states, parties would not be required to call individuals to the witness stand and would, instead, assert facts, including many loaded with hearsay, from counsel tables and through written reports not subject to cross-examination. Disputes regarding the facts might exist, but that would not necessarily trigger adversarial fact finding. Purported experts might interpret purported facts a certain way, and multiple purported experts might offer conflicting opinions. The judge would then make decisions about “plans” and “efforts” in the case and order parties to work towards the plan that the judge has set. The judge speaks as if the plan she has set is the final plan for the child, yet the parties cannot appeal this ruling. These permanency hearings may even refer to prior permanency hearings held in previous years, with no change other than the passage of time.

---

14 Id. at 760 & n.10.
16 By one count, 39 states now provide a right to counsel in all TPR proceedings, and six other states have enacted laws providing a right to counsel in some TPR proceedings. Those numbers reflect an increase from when Lassiter was decided; then, 33 states provided for a right to counsel in TPR proceedings. Russell Engler, Shaping a Context-Based Civil Gideon From the Dynamics of Social Change, 15 TEMPLE POLITICAL AND CIVIL RIGHTS L. REV. 697, 701 & n.29 (2006). By another more recent count, 44 states provide an absolute statutory right to counsel in TPR proceedings and six provide counsel in some TPR proceedings. Vivek Sankaran, A National Survey on a Parent’s Right o Counsel in Termination of Parental Rights and Dependency Cases, http://www.law.umich.edu/centersandprograms/cel/specialprojects/Documents/National%20Survey%20on%20a%20Parent's%20Right%20to%20Counsel.pdf (last visited 29 June 2010).
17 See infra Part I.b.2.i.
Those lawyers might have the same reaction that, as one commentator has described, many children and adults who are the subjects of abuse and neglect cases have: “This is a courtroom?”

1. Federal statutory “procedural safeguards” between disposition and permanency

These permanency hearings are creatures of statute. Federal law requires, as a condition of federal funding, all states to comply with certain minimal procedures in abuse and neglect cases. Foster care agencies must complete a “case plan” which describes the child’s foster care placement and how the agency will work with the child and parents to facilitate reunification – or, if the agency is working towards another permanent custody or adoption with someone else, how the agency will work to do so. State courts must hold a “permanency hearing” after the child has lived in foster care for 14 months, and every year thereafter. At this hearing, the judge must determine the child’s “permanency plan” – that is, whether the plan of the case is for the child to return to his or her parent, to be adopted, to live in the permanent custody of someone else, or to grow up in foster care. This determination includes deciding “whether, and if applicable when, the child will be returned to the parent,” including, in appropriate cases, an order that a child should be returned to the parent immediately.

When the child is not returned to the parent immediately, the judge selects a permanency plan at a permanency hearing, and this plan mandates what work the state agency must do. The state must make “reasonable efforts” to bring to fruition the result identified in the permanency

---

18 Professor Erik Pitchal, describing the several years he spent practicing in Brooklyn Family Court, wrote: “More than one youngster, eyes bulging at the wonder of it all, blurted out, ‘This is the courtroom?’ Whether from watching Judge Judy on television or from their own mind’s eye of fantastical construction, they had a far different expectation for what a courtroom would look like. Even the older adolescents were surprised–often at the dingy, disrespectful nature of the physical space. What they could not know was that many adults had the same reaction–to the physical space, to be sure, but more critically, to what happened there on a daily basis.” Erik Pitchal, Children’s Right to Counsel in Dependency Cases, 15 TEMPLE POLITICAL AND CIVIL RIGHTS L. REV. 663, 684 (2006).
19 42 U.S.C. § 675(1); see also 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(16).
20 42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(C)(i). The first permanency hearing must occur within 12 months of the child’s “entry into foster care,” id., which is defined as the earlier of a judicial finding that the child was abused or neglected or 60 days after the child was removed from the child’s parent or other caregiver. § 675(5)(F). Therefore, under no circumstances can a child remain in foster care for longer than 12 months plus 60 days without a permanency hearing.
21 § 675(5)(C)(i).
22 Id.
plan. As a default, states must make reasonable efforts to reunify foster children with the parents or guardians from whom they were removed. When a judge sets a different permanency plan, states must make reasonable efforts to “complete whatever steps are necessary to finalize” that permanency plan in a “timely manner.”

States’ federal funding depends on their obtaining a judicial finding that they complied with federal reasonable efforts requirements – whether they be reasonable efforts to reunify children or to implement and finalize another permanency plan – on the same schedule on which permanency plans are held. Such findings are required within 14 months of the child’s removal and placement in foster care and every year after that. If a judge does not find that a state has made the required reasonable efforts, the state cannot obtain federal funds for that child until a judge has found that the agency has at a later point made the required efforts.

Federal law does require some “procedural safeguards” at these permanency hearings, but is short on detail regarding what “safeguards” are required: “[P]rocedural safeguards shall be applied with respect to parental rights pertaining to the removal of the child from the home of his parents, to a change in the child’s placement, and to any determination affecting visitation privileges of parents.” Federal law provides slightly more detail in requiring that children should be “consult[ed], in an age appropriate manner” regarding their permanency plan. Federal regulations provide no further guidance on the “procedural safeguards” that should exist at permanency hearings or regarding reasonable efforts findings.

---

24 671(a)(15)(C).
25 45 C.F.R. § 1356.21(b)(2)(i) requires such findings within 12 months of the date the child is considered to have “entered” foster care, which is defined as up to 60 days after the child’s removal. 45 C.F.R. § 1355.20.
26 § 1356.21(b)(2)(ii).
27 § 675(5)(C)(ii).
28 § 675(5)(C)(iii).
29 See 45 C.F.R. §§ 1355 & 1356.
The legislative history behind these provisions is similarly short on detail regarding the envisioned procedures. The “procedural safeguards” requirement was born in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980.\textsuperscript{30} Congress expressed concern that “many children, because of the inadequacies of current review procedures, and lack of family reunification services, become ‘lost’ in foster care, and continue to remain in care unnecessarily at great cost to the government, themselves and their families.”\textsuperscript{31} Congress thus required states to hold dispositional hearings when a child has been in foster care for 18 months and, for each such child “assess the appropriateness of their placement,” “determine whether the child should be returned to his or her home; whether the child requires continued placement . . . whether the child should be placed with a legal guardian; whether proceedings should be initiated to terminate parents’ custody rights so the child can be free for adoption; or whether a child should be placed in permanent long-term foster care placement because the child cannot or should not be returned home or placed in an adoptive home.”\textsuperscript{32}

Congress, through the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997,\textsuperscript{33} shortened the timeline before these “procedural safeguards” are applied from 18 to 12 months. The House committee which drafted the bill explained “that 18 months is a very long time in the life of a young child” and faster hearings are required to prevent “unnecessarily prolonged stays in foster care.”\textsuperscript{34} The committee emphasized its expectation that the decisions at this first permanency hearing will be “final permanency decisions,”\textsuperscript{35} a point underscored by Congress’s decision to change the name of the hearings from “dispositional hearings” to “permanency hearings.”\textsuperscript{36} Congress’s intention was for permanency hearings to speed actual permanency; a judge would set a permanency plan and that

\textsuperscript{31} House Report No. 96-136 at 50 (1979).
\textsuperscript{32} Id., Pub. L. 96-272, § 101(a).
\textsuperscript{33} Pub. L. 105-89, § 302 (1997).
\textsuperscript{34} House Report No. 105-77 (1997).
\textsuperscript{35} Id.
\textsuperscript{36} Pub. L. 105-89, § 302 (1997).
permanency plan would be realized in relatively short order – a goal that has not been achieved.\textsuperscript{37} Congress did not, however, provide any new guidance as to the “procedural safeguards” that should occur at these permanency hearings.

While the statutory text and legislative history do not illuminate what procedures are envisioned, they do help shed light on what permanency hearings are designed to accomplish. These hearings call upon judges to make both legal and factual conclusions that are distinct from the finding of abuse or neglect that justified the child’s entry into foster care. A judge must decide, first, whether the child can go home or if he needs to remain in foster care, and, if the latter, whether the location in which the agency has placed the child is appropriate. That is, the judge decides where the child will live in the immediate future – something that cannot be done at the time a judge orders a child to be placed for the first time. Second, when the child will remain in foster care, the judge should decide what permanent custody arrangement the child should have in the future – whether he should return to the family from whom he was removed or whether a different permanency plan should be followed. This determination is based as much on developments since the child’s entry into foster care as it is based on the underlying adjudication of parental unfitness. It stands to reason that both of these determinations would be informed by analyzing the adequacy of the foster care agency’s case plan and the parent’s compliance (or lack thereof) with the case plan– although the federal law does not so state, at least not explicitly. Indeed, an illustrative state law provides that when a judge decides whether a child should return home to her parent at a permanency hearing, “the court shall view the failure of the parent to substantially comply with the terms and conditions of the case service plan . . . as evidence that return of the child to his or her parent would cause a substantial risk of harm to the child’s life, physical health, or mental well-being.”\textsuperscript{38} Moreover, following the ASFA amendments, these hearings are supposed to be “final” determinations of these

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{Infra} Part I.b.3.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Mich. Comp. L. Serv. § 712A.19a(5).
\end{itemize}
issues, as the foster care agency is expected to work to achieve promptly the identified permanency plan. Timeliness is crucial – especially, as ASFA’s legislative history indicates, in cases involving children. Third, the judge should decide whether the foster care agency has made reasonable efforts to achieve the previously set permanency plan.

2. State laws governing procedures between disposition and permanency

Eric Washington, the Chief Judge of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals (the District’s highest court), was formerly a trial judge in the District of Columbia Superior Court and described the procedures for permanency plan changes in this way:

Thinking back to my time as a trial judge, I remember a social worker or somebody coming in and arguing that the individual who had been adjudicated neglectful or stipulated to neglect had once again failed to do something they had been ordered to do by the court and therefore they were recommending that the goal should be changed. I was never sure if there was a requirement or a notice that was given that at this hearing we are going to be discussing a change in goal.40

Chief Judge Washington’s confusion is understandable. The District’s permanency hearing statute requires the foster care agency to submit a report at least 10 days in advance of a permanency hearing, but does not explicitly require a statement of the agency’s recommended plans.41 The statute is silent regarding any advance notice of plan change requests from other parties, such as the child’s guardian ad litem,42 or a foster parent who may have been made a party or be granted the right to attend and be heard at a permanency hearing.43

41 In re S.M., Oral Argument, Recording on file with author, quote near 11:43:10 in the recording. This case and the context of the quote are discussed further in Part II.a. Chief Judge Washington used the term “goal” to refer to a child’s permanency plan.
42 D.C. Code § 16-2304(b)(5). By representing the child’s best interests and not the child him or herself, the guardian ad litem may request a plan change contrary to the child’s wishes.
Chief Judge Washington’s confusion could reasonably extend to how trial court judges are supposed to adjudicate contested permanency plan decisions. The District’s permanency hearing statute is silent as to the substantive standard to be applied, which party bears the burden of proof, and how the court is to adjudicate contested facts. The District statute detailing when evidentiary hearings are required and what rules of evidence shall be applied in such hearings refers to trials on a neglect petition and the dispositional hearings that shortly follow adjudications of neglect, but does not refer to permanency hearings.44

One element of District of Columbia permanency hearing procedures is clear: A trial court’s permanency plan decision, no matter what procedural, substantive, or evidentiary objections a party may make, is not an appealable order.45

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges – a membership organization of courts handling abuse, neglect, juvenile delinquency and other cases which provides “technical assistance” to judges nationwide46 – has issued guidance for permanency hearings that echoes the law in the District of Columbia. The Council urges judges to make detailed, written findings of fact and conclusions of law, including whether the state agency has made reasonable efforts to help the family reunify, and what the child’s permanency plan will be.47 And the Council has admonished members that permanency hearing findings should be “more specific, final and definitive than at a review hearing.”48

But the Council’s description of permanency hearing lacks any reference to

According to one recent compilation, the District is one of 54 states and other American territories that provide a best interest representative to the child, some of which also provide a lawyer for children in all cases or provide discretion for judges to appoint such lawyers. Representing Children Worldwide, U.S. Summary Chart, http://www.law.yale.edu/RCW/rcw/summary.htm (last visited 24 Mar. 2010).

43 D.C. Code § 16-2304(b)(4).
44 D.C. Code § 16-2316(b).
examination of witnesses, documentary evidence, or other trial-type procedures, nor does the
Council specify what detailed factual findings would justify a particular permanency plan ruling.\textsuperscript{49} Instead, the Council writes that state agencies should propose their recommended permanency plans to all parties in advance of hearings and other parties should “submit a report” if they disagree with the state’s proposal. Such reports “should set out facts to support” the party’s position.\textsuperscript{50} The Council’s guidance includes no discussion as to how courts are to determine which party’s view of the facts is accurate.\textsuperscript{51} Nor does the Council suggest how to respond to delayed or incomplete agency reports – which a recent study of New York City Family Court cases found were the biggest causes of delayed permanency hearings.\textsuperscript{52}

The Council’s guidance also includes no suggestion that permanency hearing rulings are subject to appeal. Its guidance speaks of “adoption and termination [of parental rights] appeals,” but not appeals of permanency hearing decisions.\textsuperscript{53}

Although significant state-by-state variation exists, the law of the District of Columbia and the recommendations summarized by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges are illustrative. This section will next summarize trial and appellate court permanency hearing procedures throughout the United States.

In addition to the federally-required permanency hearings, many states require “review of disposition” hearings, and that these review hearings often overlap with permanency hearing requirements.\textsuperscript{54} I do not survey the variety of practice regarding different states’ review hearing laws

\textsuperscript{49} Adoption and Permanency Guidelines, supra at 17-23 (permanency hearing chapter lacking such discussion).
\textsuperscript{50} Id. at 19.
\textsuperscript{51} Id.
\textsuperscript{52} Children’s Rights, The Long Road Home: A Study of Children Stranded in New York City Foster Care, at 192-94. (2009), http://www.childrensrights.org/wp-content/uploads//2009/11/2009-11-02_long_road_home_full_report_final.pdf. Fifty-five percent of cases studied included at least one delayed permanency hearing, id. at 192, and in these cases, reports were untimely 48 percent of the time and incomplete 20 percent of the time. Id. at 194.
\textsuperscript{53} Id. at 38.
\textsuperscript{54} See, e.g., D.C. Code § 16-2323(a)-(b) (requiring review hearings every six months to determine the “continuing necessity” of placement, level of compliance with a case plan, and a date when the child’s permanency plan will be
and practice, as they are not rooted in federal statutory law and are thus less easily generalizable. To the extent review hearings under a particular state’s law have an impact similar to permanency hearings, arguments made in this article apply with full force.

i. Trial court procedures

Like the federal law that requires permanency hearings and like the District of Columbia laws referred to by Chief Judge Washington, many states’ laws provide little guidance regarding how trial courts should decide a child’s permanency plan or whether the state agency has made reasonable efforts to achieving the child’s existing plan.

States with statutes similar to the District of Columbia’s – that is, statutes that require permanency hearings to be held but do not provide guidance regarding when, if ever, such hearings should hear contested evidence – include: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, achieved); Mich. Comp. L. Serv. § 712A.19 (requiring review hearings to occur as frequently as every 91 days to determine necessity of continued foster care and level of compliance with case plan).


56 Alaska Stat. § 47.10.080(f) & (j) (requiring notice and an opportunity to be heard but providing no guidance regarding resolving factual disputes); Owen M. v. State, 120 P.3d 201 (Alaska 2005) (upholding permanency plan decision made without evidentiary hearing).


62 Idaho Code § 16-1622.


65 22 Maine Rev. Stat § 4038-B.

66 119 Mass. Gen. L. § 29B. Massachusetts court rules provide that the agency must submit a report to the court in advance of a permanency hearing and that the case worker who wrote that report “shall be available for cross-examination by each of the parties.” Mass. Trial Ct. Uniform Rules on Permanency Hearings 6.F. The rules, however, are silent regarding a party’s ability to put on any evidence of his own.

67 Minn. Stat. § 260C.201(Subd.11-11a).

68 Miss. Code Ann. § 43-21-613(3).
Missouri,\textsuperscript{69} Montana,\textsuperscript{70} Nebraska,\textsuperscript{71} Nevada,\textsuperscript{72} New Hampshire,\textsuperscript{73} New Jersey,\textsuperscript{74} North Dakota,\textsuperscript{75} Pennsylvania,\textsuperscript{76} Rhode Island,\textsuperscript{77} South Dakota,\textsuperscript{78} Texas,\textsuperscript{79} Washington,\textsuperscript{80} West Virginia,\textsuperscript{81} Wisconsin,\textsuperscript{82} and Wyoming.\textsuperscript{83} Arizona’s statute refers to some sort of evidence being heard at permanency hearings – and not merely reports from parties – but without much detail regarding what evidence would be admissible or under what procedures.\textsuperscript{84}

Some states have, by statute or case law, provided clearer guidance regarding the procedures at permanency hearings. New Mexico law, for instance, provides that all parties at a permanency hearing have a right to present evidence and call and cross-examine witnesses, but that the rules of evidence do not generally apply (permitting witnesses to testify to hearsay and other evidence that

\textsuperscript{69} Mo. Rev. Stat. § 210.720.
\textsuperscript{70} Mont. Code Ann. § 41-3-445.
\textsuperscript{72} Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 62E.170. The court may “[r]equire a written report from the child’s protective services officer, welfare worker or other guardian of the child which includes, but is not limited to, an evaluation of the progress of the child and recommendations for further supervision, treatment or rehabilitation.” Id.
\textsuperscript{73} N.H. Rev. Stat. § 169-C:24-b
\textsuperscript{74} N.J. Stat. § 30:4C-61.2. New Jersey’s statute requires the Court to “consider[] and evaluat[e] information” provided by all parties, but makes no mention of whether such information is to be provided through evidentiary means, or tested by cross examination. N.J. Stat. § 30:4C-61.2(c). In addition, the statutory list of “information” to be considered relates to proposed permanency plans and services for children and families and does not include any reference to a parent’s continuing (or not) unfitness or a parent’s compliance (or not) with the state agency’s case plan.
\textsuperscript{75} N.D. Cent. Code §§ 27-20-02(15) & 27-20-36(2)(b)-(3).
\textsuperscript{76} 42 Pa. Code § 6351(e)-(f.2). The Pennsylvania statute refers to receiving evidence regarding “aggravated circumstances,” § 6351(e)(2), and evidence of drug or alcohol abuse by a parent, § 6352(f2), but not to other evidence regarding a parent’s fitness or any other factual dispute which may exist. The absence of any such references to evidence is all the more striking given the specific references to evidence of substance abuse and aggravated circumstances.
\textsuperscript{77} R.I. Gen. Laws § 40-11-12.1. Rhode Island law instructs courts to permit each party an opportunity to present “a report, oral or written, containing recommendations as to the best interest of the child,” but makes no reference to evidentiary standards. § 40-11-12.1(c).
\textsuperscript{78} S.D. Cod. Laws § 26-8A-21.2.
\textsuperscript{79} Tex. Fam. Code §§ 263.301 – 263.307. The Texas statute permits parties to submit reports, but does not refer to evidence or testimony to establish or challenge facts asserted in such reports. § 263.307.
\textsuperscript{80} Rev. Code. Wash. § 13.34.145.
\textsuperscript{81} Under West Virginia law, an evidentiary hearing may be held when a party requests a change in disposition. W.V. Code §§ 49-6-6. But West Virginia law does not provide for evidentiary hearings regarding permanency plans. W.V. Code §§ 49-6-5a & 49-6-8.
\textsuperscript{82} Wis. Stat. § 48.38(5m). This statute permits individuals to “be heard at the hearing” but does not suggest that “being heard” means the opportunity to put on or challenge evidence or, indeed, anything other than an opportunity to state one’s position.
\textsuperscript{83} Wyo. Stat. § 14-3-431.
\textsuperscript{84} Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 8-862(G) (“Evidence considered by the court in making a decision pursuant to this section also shall include any substantiated allegations of abuse or neglect committed in another jurisdiction.”).
would be inadmissible in other hearings).\textsuperscript{85} States with similar law include California,\textsuperscript{86} Connecticut,\textsuperscript{87} Illinois,\textsuperscript{88} Iowa,\textsuperscript{89} Kentucky,\textsuperscript{90} Louisiana,\textsuperscript{91} Maryland,\textsuperscript{92} Michigan,\textsuperscript{93} New York,\textsuperscript{94} North Carolina,\textsuperscript{95} Ohio,\textsuperscript{96} Oklahoma,\textsuperscript{97} Oregon,\textsuperscript{98} South Carolina,\textsuperscript{99} Tennessee,\textsuperscript{100} Utah,\textsuperscript{101} Vermont,\textsuperscript{102} and Virginia.\textsuperscript{103}

One state, Georgia, requires evidentiary hearings only in certain circumstances, such as when an agency proposes ceasing reunification efforts and moving towards an alternative permanency plan.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{85} N.M. Code §32A-4-25.1(B), (I).
\textsuperscript{86} Cal. Wel. & Inst. Code §§ 366.22 & 366.25 (referring in multiple locations to evidence at permanency hearings).
\textsuperscript{87} Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46b-129(k)(1).
\textsuperscript{88} 705 Ill. Comp. Rev. Stat. §§ 405/2-28(2)(H)(7) & 405/2-28.1
\textsuperscript{89} Iowa Code § 232.104(1)(c) provides that permanency hearings must be held in “substantial conformity” with Iowa Code § 232.99(2), which provides evidentiary standards.
\textsuperscript{90} Kent. Rev. Stat. § 610.125(4)- (5).
\textsuperscript{91} La. Children’s Code Art. 702 & 709.
\textsuperscript{92} Maryland’s statute contains no guidance, Md. Ann. Code § 3-823, but Maryland cases reflect the requirement for evidentiary hearings to be held. See, e.g., In re Ashley E., 854 A.2d 893 (Md. 2004) (describing evidentiary procedures and rules applied at a permanency hearing).
\textsuperscript{94} N.Y. Fam. Ct. Act §§ 1089(d) & 1046(c) (providing rules of evidence for permanency hearings).
\textsuperscript{95} N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-907(b) – (c) (referring to the court’s consideration of any relevant and credible evidence and requiring written findings of fact).
\textsuperscript{96} Ohio Rev. Code § 2151.471(F). The Ohio statute instructs the court to “summon every interested party to appear at the review hearing and give them an opportunity to testify and to present other evidence,” but no standard of evidence is given.
\textsuperscript{97} 10A Okl. Stat. § 1-4-811(A)(4); see also In re B.T.W., 195 P.3d 896, 905-07 (Okl. 2008) (summarizing testimony taken).
\textsuperscript{98} Or. Rev. Stat. § 419B.476(1).
\textsuperscript{99} S.C. Code § 63-7-1700(C)-(D); Ex Parte Morris, 624 S.E.2d 649, 653 (S.C. 2006) (requiring family court to hold an evidentiary hearing when requested by a party, starting “the permanency planning process set forth in Section [63-7-1700] and related statutes involves the long-term custody of a child, the potential termination of parental rights, and the possible adoption of the child in the future. Decisions regarding matters of such import must be made after careful, deliberate consideration of admissible evidence and sworn testimony presented by interested parties and witnesses at an evidentiary hearing.”)
\textsuperscript{100} Tenn. Code §§ 37-2-409(b)(5) & 37-2-403(a)(4)(A).
\textsuperscript{101} Utah Code § 78A-6-314(3).
\textsuperscript{102} 33 Vt. Stat. § 5321(f).
The standards (or lack thereof) summarized above govern all decisions made at permanency hearings, including both permanency plan decisions and decisions whether administrative agencies have made reasonable efforts to achieve a child’s existing permanency plan. It is not surprising, therefore, that state courts’ implementation of federal “reasonable efforts” requirements has faced criticism as substance-free rubber stamp decisions by state judges – a significant problem given the importance of reasonable efforts in the federal statutory scheme and the unavailability of federal remedies to enforce states’ reasonable efforts obligations. In the absence of a federal definition of the term or adequate federal funding for prevention or reunification services, “judicial findings of reasonable efforts are often made by judges by rote.” One study of 463 New York City cases involving children who had been in foster care for at least two years – and thus lacked legal permanency for a significant period of time – revealed that judges found that the government had made reasonable efforts to reach permanency in 457 cases. When such decisions cannot be appealed until the end of a case – when an adoption decree or termination of parental rights decision is entered – appellate judges face strong incentives to avoid close examination of reasonable efforts decisions. Overturning a permanency decision based on the lack of reasonable efforts earlier in the case could “upset stability for a child who has been previously neglected or abused. In such circumstances, courts may find it easier to rule that reasonable efforts need only mean meager or pro-forma efforts.” Even when the reasonableness of a state’s efforts to reunify a family is questionable, when that question is only raised at the end of a case – for instance, when an adoption

---

105 See notes 25-26 and accompanying text.
is on appeal and a child has finally left foster care to a permanent family – reviewing courts feel pressure to avoid “punish[ing] the child for the alleged wrongs of the bureaucracy.”

A significant and unsurprising overlap exists between those states that do not provide parents an absolute right to counsel in abuse and neglect cases and those whose statutes do not require judges to base permanency hearing decisions on evidence. Professor Vivek Sankaran counts 12 states that do not provide an absolute right to counsel, 10 of which appear in the above list of states that provide no guidance regarding hearing competing evidence at permanency hearings. Of the 39 states and the District of Columbia who do provide an absolute right to counsel, 20 provide no guidance regarding evidence at permanency hearings. In percentage terms, 83 percent of states that do not provide an absolute right to counsel also do not require evidence at permanency hearings. In contrast, 51 percent of states that provide an absolute right to counsel do not require evidence at permanency hearings. A full exploration of the right to counsel throughout a dependency case is beyond the scope of this article – except to note the correlation between the right to counsel and the right to put on and challenge evidence, and thus between states that have disregarded “[i]nformed opinion [which] has clearly come to hold that an indigent parent is entitled to the assistance of appointed counsel . . . in dependency and neglect proceedings” and those which do not see the value in basing permanency hearing decisions on evidence.

ii. Appealing permanency hearing orders


111 Those states are Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, and Wisconsin. The two states which do not provide an absolute right to counsel but require some evidence to be heard at permanency hearings are Oregon and Vermont. Compare Sankaran, supra note 16 and supra notes 59, 61, 62, 63, 67, 68, 69, 72, 74, 82, 98, & 102.

112 Sankaran, supra note 16.

113 This section counts 31 states and the District of Columbia in this category. Ten of those are listed in note 111.

A significant split exists between states regarding the ability to appeal permanency hearing orders. At least twelve states plus the District of Columbia explicitly bar such appeals, three states bar them with narrow exceptions, thirteen explicitly permit them in at least some cases, and at least one state court has noted conflicting opinions within that jurisdiction. The remaining twenty-one states do not have clear case law on point – an absence of clear authority which itself suggests that few, if any, parties or attorneys in those states have even tried to appeal permanency hearing orders. Taken together, this breakdown of state laws on the ability to appeal permanency hearing orders suggests that the majority of states have either concluded that no right to appeal exists or have not addressed the questions – it is my hope that these states, in particular, consider the arguments in this article.

Among states that do not permit parties to appeal permanency hearing orders, the most frequent analysis is that such decisions are not final orders, thus appellate courts lack jurisdiction over appeals of these orders.115 The policy concern animating this approach is that taking the time to appeal such plans makes little sense when trial courts face strict federal law timelines for moving towards permanency. An Arizona appellate court worried that permitting such appeals “would undermine the primary purpose of ASFA and [conforming Arizona law]: expediting the process of finding permanent placement for children.”116 That court did not discuss the reality that we have already seen – that even with ASFA timelines, a significant number of children remain in foster care for an extended period of time without a permanent legal change of status.

States that, like Arizona, have held that permanency plan orders are not appealable include: Alaska,117 Colorado,118 the District of Columbia,119 Illinois,120 Indiana,121 Iowa,122 Kansas,123

117 Nicole H. v. State, 2006 WL 895084, (Alaska 2006) (“Because permanency hearings commonly resolve interlocutory issues, orders resulting from such hearings typically cannot be appealed as a matter of right”).
Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Nebraska, Texas. Utah generally does not permit appeals of permanency plan decisions, but does when a plan is changed from reunification with a parent to long-term foster care.

Some states do not follow this general rule and permit some immediate appeals. Maryland, for instance, permits appeals from trial court orders changing permanency plans (but not from orders maintaining a permanency plan), and permanency plan appeals can simultaneously challenge reasonable efforts findings. Other states similarly permit parties to appeal permanency plan decisions, including Alabama, Connecticut (where one court has noted that the extension of time in foster care inherent in many permanency plan decisions renders such decisions appealable), Louisiana, Massachusetts, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wyoming.
Some states permit appeals of permanency plan hearings by leave of appellate courts rather than by right, including New York\textsuperscript{144} and New Jersey.\textsuperscript{145} California has established narrow procedures for appealing permanency plan decisions.\textsuperscript{146}

North Carolina has issued conflicting opinions regarding the ability to appeal permanency plan decisions but not others.\textsuperscript{147}

The remaining 21 states do not have clear law on the subject. Some states have permitted appeals of orders extending state custody of a child over a parent’s objection, but are silent regarding appeals of permanency plan decisions.\textsuperscript{148} In other states, courts have issued non-precedential unpublished decisions considering permanency plan appeals without addressing why such orders could be appealed.\textsuperscript{149}

3. Permanency hearing orders are often relevant for extended and indefinite periods of time

These “procedural safeguards” in between adjudication and permanency are of great importance because of two realities of abuse and neglect cases. First, in tens of thousands of cases,

\textsuperscript{138} Or. Rev. Stat. § 419B.476(7); \textit{In re A.V.}, 182 P.3d 866 (Or. 2008).
\textsuperscript{139} 10A Okl. Stat. § 1-5-101 (permitting appeal of “any order”); \textit{In re B.T.W.}, 195 P.3d 896 (Okl. 2008) (considering appeal of order setting plan of reunification and issuing visitation orders to effectuate that plan).
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{See In re C.M.}, 882 A.2d 507 (Pa. Sup. Ct. 2005) (describing change in law to permit all permanency plan appeals, whether of a permanency plan change or denial of a requested change).
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Ex Parte Morris}, 624 S.E.2d 649 (S.C. 2006) (considering permanency hearing appeal).
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{H.P. v. State}, 93 P.3d 982, 989 (Wyo. 2004). The Wyoming Supreme Court held that the permanency plan change ended reunification efforts and that this change “certainly affects Mother’s substantial rights” and was thus appealable.
\textsuperscript{148} \textit{See, e.g.}, \textit{In re B.B.}, 777 N.W.2d 350 (N.D. Ct. App. 2010) (considering appeal of permanency hearing order continuing child’s placement in foster care).
\textsuperscript{149} \textit{E.g., In re C.G.}, 2009 WL 170062 (Vt. 2009) (unpublished decision).
children remain in state custody but permanency trials often never occur, thus making permanency
plan decisions serve the same purpose as permanency trials – but without the due process
protections. Second, even when permanency trials do occur, they often occur years after
permanency plan decisions have shaped the course of a child’s life.

Permanency trials are unnecessary when the child grows up in foster care – with no adoption
or other permanent alteration of the parent’s custodial rights at issue, there is no need for a
permanency trial. But growing up in foster care can have the same effect as such a trial – a
permanent end of the parent’s custodial rights – and therefore permanency plan decisions can have
similar effects to permanency trials, but without the due process protections. When a court changes
a child’s permanency plan to “another planned permanent living arrangement” – the federal term
that means remaining in foster care until a child reaches the age of majority – the court is ordering
the foster care agency to work to help the child live in foster care until he reaches the age of
majority, when questions of the care, custody and control of children are moot. If that plan is
achieved, the parents will have been permanently deprived of their right to the custody of the child.

The Utah Supreme Court recognized the implications of setting a permanency plan of long-
term foster care, holding that it “effectuates a permanent change in the child’s status” and was thus
appealable. That court acknowledged that the child’s situation might change and that a new
permanency plan – whether reunification with the child’s mother, or adoption by another person –
could occur and the permanency plan changed at a later permanency hearing. But “considering the
very real possibility that the relationship between the mother and [child] may not substantially
change, this order must be considered final for matters of appealability; otherwise, the mother may

151 In the Interest of K.F., 201 P.3d 985, 996 (Utah 2009).
never have an opportunity to appeal this order.” The Utah court, however, is an outlier, as the next sub-section discusses.

The same result occurs when a court changes a child’s permanency plan to adoption or guardianship, but no adoption or guardianship ever occurs. If the foster care agency fails to make reasonable efforts to, for instance, find an adoptive family or, despite making such reasonable efforts, fails to find an adoptive family, then there may be no permanency trial, and thus no moment for the parents to assert their due process rights. The same is true if no potential permanent guardian is found by the government or, even if found, chooses to not file for guardianship.

A significant number of foster children nationally fall into these two situations – and thus effectively have permanent custody decisions made via permanency hearings, not permanency trials. According to federal data, 14 percent of all foster children – more than 67,000 children and youth – have a permanency plan of “emancipation” or “long-term foster care.” Many more children have a permanency plan of adoption – but a plan of adoption is no guarantee that the child will be adopted any time soon. In 2008, the most recent year data is available, more than 111,000 children had a plan of adoption, but only about 54,000 children were, in fact, adopted. The remainder waited in foster care, often for multiple years. The proportion of children in this category is even greater in some jurisdictions. In the District of Columbia, for example, more than one third of all foster children have plans of “alternative planned permanent living arrangement” – that is, long term foster care. More than 20 percent of all District children who left foster care left via “emancipation.”

152 Id.
154 Id. at 2, 4. It is not clear how many children with a plan of adoption are the children of parents whose rights have been terminated.
156 Id. at 32.
Even when a permanency trial does occur, it is often years into a case. Permanency trials end a case; if a court grants an adoption or permanent guardianship, the child ceases to be a foster child and his abuse or neglect case closes. As described above, permanency hearings occur no later than 14 months after the state first removes a child from his home. But permanency trials often occur years later. Federal data regarding when children exit care show that more than one-fifth of all children who leave foster care – about 62,000 children – have remained in foster care for 30 months or more. These children have remained in foster care for more than a year – and for tens of thousands, multiple years – before the permanency trial occurs. These data points also involve significant state by state variation. In the District of Columbia, half of all children with a permanency plan of adoption or guardianship have been in foster care for three years or more.

II. The due process argument for more meaningful procedural safeguards

In certain situations, children and parents’ constitutional due process rights demand some minimally sufficient procedural safeguards at permanency hearings – at the very least, that decisions be based on evidence, parties have the ability to present evidence and call witnesses, and witnesses be subject to cross-examination. (In addition to these trial court rights, the right to appeal adverse decisions will be discussed in Part III.) This Part will follow the familiar three-factor analysis of Matthews v. Eldridge, considering the importance of the private interest at stake, the risk of erroneous decisions under the procedures currently used and the probable benefit of alternative procedures, and the governmental interest, to discuss under what circumstances permanency hearings should trigger these procedural protections on a constitutional basis.

---

157 Supra note 20.
159 389 children with plans of adoption or guardianship have been in foster care for three years or more. CFSA annual report at 29. 763 children had plans of adoption or guardianship. Id. at 26.
160 As discussed in Part III, the due process argument for a right to appeal is substantially weaker than the right to evidentiary hearings.
This section will only address a constitutional due process argument; many of the same points made in this section support policy arguments for providing these procedural protections, and further policy arguments are made in Part III.

a. Private interest

The importance of the constitutional right to family integrity is well-settled. In 2000, when it most recently addressed the constitutional rights of parents in detail, the Supreme Court wrote that “[t]he liberty interest at issue in this case – the interest of parents in the care, custody, and control of their children – is perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this Court.”162 For nearly a century, parental rights have formed core elements of the Supreme Court’s substantive due process jurisprudence, and have been repeatedly reaffirmed,163 and described as a matter of “intrinsic human rights.”164 Reviewing these cases, the Court concluded, “[i]n light of this extensive precedent, it cannot now be doubted that the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment protects the fundamental right of parents to make decisions concerning the care, custody, and control of their children.”165 Although they are less well established than parents’ rights to the custody of their children, some courts have recognized a reciprocal right of children to live with their parents.166

Permanency hearing decisions – independent of later permanency trials – have tremendous impact on children and families and implicate the core rights that inhere in the parent-child relationship. They, first, can terminate or extend a child’s separation from his or her parent. A

165 Troxel, 530 U.S. at 66.
166 E.g. Wallis v. Spencer, 202 F.3d 1126, 1136 (9th Cir. 2002) (“Parents and children have a well-elaborated constitutional right to live together without governmental interference.”) (emphasis added). The Supreme Court has also alluded to children’s interests in their relationship with parents, writing “until the State proves parental unfitness, the child and his parents share a vital interest in preventing erroneous termination of their natural relationship.” Santosky, 455 U.S. at 760.
Permanency hearing includes a determination of the “continuing necessity” of foster care, and, if it is not necessary, the hearing can include an order that the child should return home.\textsuperscript{167} Indeed, it has been a core rule of child abuse and neglect law for more than a century that when parents remedy conditions of neglect, the state should return their children. The New York Court of Appeals described this rule in 1899 thusly:

> Intemperate parents are deemed to be unfit custodians of their children, and the state steps in and cares for and supports them for the time being. It now appears that the parents have reformed, are living honorable lives, and are abundantly able to care for their children. It seems self-evident that public policy and every consideration of humanity demand the restoration of these children to parental control.\textsuperscript{168}

Permanency hearings determine whether a parent has reformed sufficiently to be entitled to custody of their children or whether they will be deprived of their child’s custody for a further period of time. The latter option is itself a significant deprivation of liberty, especially from the perspective of children, who are both the subjects of state custody and whose sense of time demands prompt action.\textsuperscript{169}

Second, permanency hearings establish what services, if any, will be provided to facilitate reunification between parents and children. When a permanency plan is changed, the state agency no longer has any obligation to make “reasonable efforts” to achieve the old permanency plan.\textsuperscript{170} Whatever services had been offered to help a parent address whatever problems led to his or her child’s removal will likely no longer be offered – indeed, the parent and child will no longer have any entitlement to such services. The child will now be entitled to a different set of services – those deemed to be “reasonable efforts” to achieve the new permanency goal.

\textsuperscript{167} D.C. Code § 16-2323(b)(2) & § 16-2323(f).
\textsuperscript{168} In re Knowack, 53 N.E. 676, 678 (N.Y. 1899).
\textsuperscript{169} See Pitchal, \textit{supra} note 18, 15 TEMPLE POLITICAL AND CIVIL RIGHTS L. REV. at 676-77 (2006) (describing children’s interest in avoiding state custody throughout abuse and neglect cases and that children “experience time much more slowly than adults”).
\textsuperscript{170} See \textit{supra} notes 23-24 and accompanying text.
Third (and related to second point), permanency hearing decisions set in motion a process of working towards the chosen permanency plan which can take years, if not the remainder of a foster child’s childhood. The length of time that will follow – which is indefinite at the time a permanency plan is decided – adds significant weight to these decisions, especially considering children’s sense of time.\(^{171}\)

At the point a permanency plan is decided, nobody can be sure when or even if a later trial will occur. On one hand, the permanency plan is supposed to be “final,”\(^{172}\) but, on the other, it may be revised at any subsequent permanency hearing based on new facts. The Utah Supreme Court wrestled with this issue in *In the Interest of K.F.*, in which it held that a parent could appeal a decision setting a permanency plan of long-term foster care (contrary to that court’s general rule that permanency plan changes were not appealable because they require further judicial action to achieve).\(^{173}\) The Court noted that a permanency plan is “by its very nature . . . subject to revision.”\(^{174}\) But the Court held that the abstract ability to revise a permanency plan was not sufficient to deny the protections of an appeal, because of “the very real possibility” that the plan would never be changed and no opportunity would exist to challenge it before the child was an adult.\(^{175}\)

The Utah Supreme Court addressed one of the easier situations demanding greater procedural safeguards at permanency hearings. Following a permanency plan of long-term foster care means that a child will remain in foster care and no permanency trial will ever occur – no such trial will be necessary to achieve the plan of keeping the child in foster care until he reaches the age of majority. In such cases, switching the plan from reunification to long-term foster care has the same effect as a trial determination – it means reunification will never occur and a parent will be

\(^{171}\) See *supra* note 169 and accompanying text.
\(^{173}\) 201 P.3d 985, 995-96 (Utah 2009). I use the phrase “long-term foster care” as the most precise description of a permanency plan that calls for a child to remain in foster care until he or she reaches the age of majority. Federal law uses an alternative phrase, “another planned permanent living arrangement.” 42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(C).
\(^{174}\) *Id.* at 996.
\(^{175}\) *Id.*
permanently deprived of the custody of his or her child – and represents an end-run around a trial’s
due process protections.

In less clear cut cases, it is more difficult to distinguish between those permanency plan
rulings likely to permanently deny custody and those likely to lead to a permanency trial in the near
future. The indeterminate length of permanency plan decisions is itself a strong argument for
stronger due process protections for permanency plan decisions. The interest at stake – a
permanent decision regarding family integrity – is so precious that some trial-type procedures are
required. When it is unclear at a permanency hearing if a permanency trial will ever occur, the only
way to ensure that trial-type protections are provided is to do so at the permanency hearing.

Still, factors do exist that courts can use to predict when permanency trials would follow a
permanency plan decision. As In the Interest of K.F. indicates, a plan change to long-term foster care is
least likely to lead to a permanency trial because the state agency is not charged with recruiting an
adoptive parent or otherwise working towards a legal status that would require a permanency trial.
On the other end of the spectrum, changing a child’s plan to adoption when the government has
already filed a termination of parental rights case and the child’s foster parent has indicated a desire
to adopt is likely to lead to such a trial in the near future. Situations in between – such as setting a
plan of adoption with no adoptive parent on the horizon or setting a plan of guardianship – present
harder decisions.

In these in-between situations, the long time that can pass from setting a permanency plan is
an essential element in establishing the importance of evidentiary standards at permanency hearings.
Delaying a due process moment itself raises constitutional concerns; the Supreme Court described
an 18-month delay in the disposition of $8,850 to be “quite significant,” so surely waiting years for
disposition of the far more weighty right to family integrity is also significant.

Even more important, though, is the effect such a passage of time has on any later permanency trial. The Supreme Court has explained that the state’s “power to shape the historical events that form the basis for termination” (or, by extension, any other form of permanency besides reunification) increase the risk of error at the ultimate termination proceeding. The time that passes between a permanency plan change away from reunification and any later permanency trial heightens this state power and thus increases the likelihood that a termination of parental rights, adoption, or guardianship motion will both be filed and granted, permanently eliminating parents’ right to care, custody and control of their children. This phenomenon occurs in multiple ways.

By the time an adoption or guardianship trial occurs, the child has been living in foster care – often with the family seeking adoption or guardianship – for years, and courts will likely consider how well the child is doing while in foster care and whatever bonds may have formed between the child and his foster family. Similarly, the court will consider the state of the child’s relationship with his parent – a relationship that will surely have been affected by months or years of forced separation, limited only by state-regulated visitation. As the D.C. Court of Appeals has explained, abuse and neglect cases are unique proceedings that do not “involve only facts gone by.” Foster children’s “lives are an ongoing event” and adoption and guardianship cases involve “a fresh assessment of the present situation” – not a review limited to facts that occurred in the past. The child’s relationship with his parent is particularly likely to have changed because of the immediate legal effects of a permanency plan change. Continuing the child’s separation from parents will further reduce the bonds between children and parents. Removing the legal requirement that the state agency make

178. *See, e.g.*, D.C. Code § 16-2353(b)(1) & (3).
179. *Id.*
“reasonable efforts” to achieve reunification means that the state will no longer provide whatever services a parent may have benefitted from – such as assistance obtaining substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, or anything else that would improve his relationship with his child. The absence of such services will in many cases take its toll on the parent’s relationship with his or her child.

Moreover, the decision to change a permanency plan reflects a judge’s factual determination about whether reunification is likely and if not, why not. This determination can establish the factual basis for a later permanency hearing. As a California court observed, “the critical decision regarding parental rights will be made at the dispositional or review hearing, that is, that the minor cannot be returned home and that reunification efforts should not be pursued.”\textsuperscript{181} A New Mexico court put it more modestly: “permanency hearings determine the direction of the proceedings and can increase the risk that the natural family will be destroyed.”\textsuperscript{182} Indeed, it is the precise intent of Congress that permanency plan decisions have the effect that these California and New Mexico courts identified – that they be “final permanency decisions” for a child.\textsuperscript{183}

The practical finality of a permanency plan decision is heightened by the expanding use of unified family courts following a “one family, one judge” model.\textsuperscript{184} In such courts, the same judge who makes a permanency plan decision will hear any later cases regarding the termination of parental rights, adoptions, or guardianships.\textsuperscript{185} In these later cases, therefore, a judge is asked to issue an order to effectuate the permanency plan that she or he set. Judges, like any human being,

\textsuperscript{181} Glen C. v. Superior Court, 78 Cal. App. 4th 570 (Ca. Ct. App. 2000); see also State v. Maria C., 94 P.3d 796, 806 (N.M. 2004) (“Hence, the factual basis for termination is largely established at the permanency hearing, even though a formal TPR hearing follows.”).

\textsuperscript{182} Id.

\textsuperscript{183} House Report No. 105-77 (1997).

\textsuperscript{184} The ABA has recommended use of unified family courts and many states have adopted them. James W. Bozzommo, A Survey of Unified Family Courts, 42 Fam. Ct. Rev. 12 (2004); Unified Family Courts and the Child Protection Dilemma, 116 Harv. L. Rev. 2099 (2003).

\textsuperscript{185} See, e.g., D.C. Code § 11-1104(b)(2).
may be expected to consider their own prior decisions when making later, more permanent decisions on the same subject matter.

The strong role of permanency plan decisions in shaping future events, including permanency trial results, is of crucial importance in light of the rule that the Due Process Clause guarantees the right to be heard “at a meaningful time.”186 When a permanency hearing shapes the facts that will determine a later trial, the meaningful time for due process protections is at the permanency hearing.

Finally, the time that passes from a permanency plan decision to a permanency trial is significant because making important decisions on a child’s sense of time is of particular importance in abuse and neglect cases. Waiting one or two years for a trial and resolution may not seem long in the world of, for instance, commercial litigation. But it is an eternity in the lives of children, especially young children who are disproportionately represented in foster care.187 A seminal work informing abuse and neglect practice emphasized that courts and agencies should handle decisions regarding a child’s placement “as a matter of urgency that comports with the child’s sense of time.”188 Quick decisions are particularly important because children subject to permanency hearings have already spent up to 14 months in foster care – waiting another year or more to get it right raises significant concerns.

1. **The importance of the rights at stake varies depending on the status of the case.**

Not all permanency plan decisions have equal constitutional implications. The core constitutional right at stake in abuse and neglect cases is the parent’s right to “care, custody, and

---

control” of their child,\textsuperscript{189} and the child’s reciprocal right to a relationship with their parent.\textsuperscript{190} Changing a child’s permanency plan from reunification with a parent to anything else directly implicates this constitutional right; it means the state agency will no longer work towards protecting the parent-child relationship and will instead work towards a permanency plan that will permanently disrupt that relationship.

Other permanency plan changes do not affect this relationship. Switching a child’s plan from, for instance, guardianship with an extended family member to adoption by a foster parent has less impact on the parent-child relationship. Adoption will terminate parental rights while guardianship will not. That is no small difference, but still, through either guardianship or adoption, the parent permanently loses the right to care, custody, and control of the child. Still, in some cases, constitutionally-protected relationships may be at stake. The Supreme Court has applied parental rights doctrines to non-parent caregivers\textsuperscript{191} and, in \textit{Smith v. Organization of Foster Families for Equality and Reform}, recognized that the “intimacy of daily association” may lead to a constitutionally-protected relationship.\textsuperscript{192} If a permanency plan change affects such a relationship, then constitutional rights are affected – even if those rights are less powerful than the right to a parent-child relationship. In \textit{Smith}, the Court wrote that a foster family – at least one that had raised a young child for several years – could not be “dismiss[ed] . . . as a mere collection of unrelated individuals.”\textsuperscript{193} The \textit{Smith} Court assumed, but did not decide, that some liberty interest existed in the integrity of a foster family.\textsuperscript{194}

\textit{Smith} was particularly concerned with the possibility that recognizing the due process rights of foster parents would inevitably “derogate[c] from the substantive liberty” interest of parents –

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Santosky}, 455 U.S. at 760 (noting a child’s interest in avoiding “erroneous termination of their natural relationship”).
\textsuperscript{191} The “parent” in \textit{Prince v. Massachusetts} was the aunt of a nine-year-old girl. 321 U.S. 158, 159 (1944).
\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Id}.
\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Id.} at 847.
especially when, as in Smith, foster parents objected to a child’s reunification with her parent. But Smith also noted that when the question was between alternative foster placements and not between foster parent and natural parent, then this conflict is absent. In these situations, the statutory scheme on review in Smith provided foster families with access to a “full adversary administrative hearing” to challenge any removals, and Smith stated that such procedures adequately respected any rights that foster families have.

A permanency plan decision which pits, for instance, adoption by one long-term foster parent against adoption by a different foster parent, does not raise the problem of pitting parents against foster parents. Such decisions may raise due process concerns. If long-term foster parents were statutorily entitled to a full adversary hearing to challenge removals of children, it stands to reason that they should also be entitled to more meaningful procedural safeguards regarding permanency plans that will likely lead to such removals. Smith did not squarely answer the question whether such situations rose to constitutional due process issues – but it bears noting that constitutionally-protected relationships other than parent-child relationships may be at play.

Even when a permanency plan affects no constitutionally-protected relationship, it can have a significant effect on a child. A plan change affects where the child will live, whether and how long the child remains in foster care, and what “reasonable efforts” the state agency will take. These effects may not rise to constitutional status – and in those cases, only a weak due process argument exists. But the absence of a constitutional claim should not unduly diminish the effect of such changes on children’s lives. State policy makers should be significantly concerned with establishing a system that will make these decisions as well as possible. Without evidentiary hearings and appeals,

---

195 Id. at 822 n.5.
196 Id. at 847; see also id. at 853.
197 Id. at 851 (“When the child’s transfer from one foster home to another is pending, the interest arguably requiring protection is that of the foster family, not that of the natural parents.”).
198 Id. at 830.
199 Id. at 847-56.
permanency hearings will have high error rates and will significantly impact the lives of foster children. Ordering state agencies to make reasonable efforts to achieve a permanency plan that is either unachievable or harmful to a child will require state agencies to expend significant resources contrary to the state’s or the child's interests.

b. Risk of error

It hardly requires much explanation to argue that evidentiary hearings are essential to reaching accurate decisions. The Supreme Court has written that “our legal tradition regards the adversary process as the best means of ascertaining truth and minimizing the risk of error.” John Henry Wigmore wrote that cross-examination of sworn witnesses is “the greatest legal engine ever invented for the discovery of truth.” When facts are contested, holding an evidentiary hearing is the best means of determining which party’s version is most accurate. Denying such evidentiary hearings is to create an unjustifiable risk of error. As one New York City Family Court judge stated: “There is such a discrepancy between the Permanency Report and the case record sometimes and it’s too late when you get [to] the TPR to find out… what’s going on.”

In Kent v. United States, the Supreme Court addressed interlocutory decisions issued in another context but, like permanency hearing orders, were based on reports submitted to judges rather than formal evidence, and held that these reports should be subject “to examination, criticism and refutation” by counsel for parties who disagree with the facts or conclusions asserted in such

---

200 Mackey v. Montrym, 443 U.S. 1, 13 (1979). Mackey involved an administrative suspension of a driver’s license without an evidentiary hearing. The Supreme Court stated the general rule, quoted in the text, before noting the exception for some administrative deprivations, especially those that do not have a high risk of error. Id. at 13-17. The Mackey exception does not diminish the strength of the general rule as applied to fundamental rights of family integrity in the midst of an adversarial court process.


204 Kent involved discretionary juvenile court decisions to waive minors accused of certain crimes to criminal court to be tried as adults. The Supreme Court described waiver decision at issue in Kent as based on “recommendations of the Juvenile Court staff, the Social Service file relating to petitioner and a report dated September 8, 1961 (three days following petitioner’s apprehension), submitted to [the judge] by the Juvenile Probation Section.” Id. at 547.
report.\textsuperscript{205} \textit{Kent} involved judges handling juveniles accused of committing criminal acts. Like judges in child abuse and neglect cases, judges in juvenile criminal cases act pursuant to the state’s \textit{parens patriae} authority but, as the \textit{Kent} Court stated, “the admonition to function in a ‘parental’ relationship is not an invitation to procedural arbitrariness.”\textsuperscript{206} Like federal and state permanency hearing statutes, the statute at issue in \textit{Kent} required juvenile court judges to make a critical decision but gave no guidance as to how judges were to do so or what evidence or other information they must consider. The statute required juvenile court judges to determine whether to transfer a teenager to adult criminal court for prosecution as an adult following a “full investigation,” but did “not state standards to govern the Juvenile Court’s decision.”\textsuperscript{207} The lower court had held that cross-examination of material in such reports would be too adversarial,\textsuperscript{208} but the Supreme Court held that some adversarial proceedings (presumably involving the cross-examination of authors of such reports) was essential for “critically important” decisions.\textsuperscript{209} If, as I have argued in Part II.a, permanency hearing decisions are critically important, then \textit{Kent} strongly suggests that adversarial proceedings including cross-examination and the ability to produce and contest evidence should exist at such hearings.

When the high risk of error in permanency hearings do lead to actual errors, the result is unnecessarily difficult custody decisions at later points. When a court incorrectly decides not to pursue reunification with a parent, but denies a later-filed adoption petition (or grants such a petition but is later reversed), the court sets up an even more emotionally fraught custody fight. By the time the court revisits the permanency plan, the child has likely been living in a foster home separated from his parents for years. A recently decided District of Columbia case illustrates this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{205} \textit{Id.} at 563.
  \item \textsuperscript{206} \textit{Id.} at 555.
  \item \textsuperscript{207} \textit{Id.} at 547.
  \item \textsuperscript{208} \textit{Id.} at 560.
  \item \textsuperscript{209} \textit{Id.} at 563.
\end{itemize}
phenomenon. Henry Obiazor\textsuperscript{210} shared custody of his sons with their mother. Their mother stipulated that she had neglected the children but Obiazor was never found to be unfit.\textsuperscript{211} Over Obiazor’s objection, the permanency plan was changed from reunification with him to adoption.\textsuperscript{212} The trial court justified that change by pointing to Obiazor’s recent conviction of misdemeanor sexual abuse of a girl unrelated to him.\textsuperscript{213} Obiazor had no opportunity to appeal this permanency plan decision. Under District law, permanency plan decisions do not require evidentiary hearings and are not appealable orders.\textsuperscript{214}

This permanency plan decision was suspect for multiple reasons. First, Obiazor was never found to be unfit.\textsuperscript{215} Second, the neglect and adoption cases involved no independent exploration of the facts underlying Obiazor’s criminal conviction, and that conviction was later reversed.\textsuperscript{216} Third, even if Obiazor was in fact guilty (as unsettling as child molestation is), it would not necessarily establish that he was unfit to parent his sons. As the D.C. Court of Appeals noted, abuse of one child in the home is not conclusive that another child in the home was or would be abused.\textsuperscript{217} That is particularly true in this case – even if Obiazor was guilty of molesting an unrelated girl, such guilt does not prove that he posed a danger to his biological sons.\textsuperscript{218} Even if the court accepted the later-reversed conviction, more evidence would be necessary to determine that Obiazor was an unfit parent and that reunification with him would not be appropriate.

The resulting gap in time is illustrative of the problem. Obiazor’s sons entered foster care in November 2004, and the permanency plan change to adoption followed in September 2005. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{210} Facts from this case may be found in \textit{In re Petition of S.M. \& R.S.}, Nos. 08-FS-1093 et al. (D.C. 2009). Although the parties are referred to only by initial in the opinion, a related criminal case refers to Mr. Obiazor by name. \textit{Obiazor v. United States}, 964 A.2d 147 (D.C. 2009), \textit{cited in S.M. \& R.S. at *6}.
\item \textsuperscript{211} \textit{Id. at *3}.
\item \textsuperscript{212} \textit{Id. at *4}.
\item \textsuperscript{213} \textit{Id. at *4}.
\item \textsuperscript{214} \textit{Part I.c, supra}.
\item \textsuperscript{215} \textit{Id. at *3}.
\item \textsuperscript{216} \textit{Obiazor v. United States}, 964 A.2d 147 (D.C. 2009).
\item \textsuperscript{217} \textit{S.M. \& R.S. at *14 n.9}.
\item \textsuperscript{218} \textit{Id}.
\end{itemize}
parties then waited 19 months until May 2007 to begin an adoption trial. A final judgment granting the adoption and terminating Obiazor’s parental rights followed 15 months later in August 2008. Obiazor appealed, and 16 months after the final decree of adoption, the adoption was overturned in December 2009 – more than four years after the court made the mistaken permanency plan decision.\(^{219}\)

The Court of Appeals noted the flawed permanency plan at oral argument and indicated that the 2005 permanency plan decision – not the 2008 adoption decision – is where the trial court went off track. Chief Judge Eric Washington put it this way:

> There are cases that have come before us where the fact of the goal change in essence makes a fait accompli of the termination of parental rights and adoption…. Is this virtually unreviewable for us because ultimately when they go back down how are they going to take a kid who has been with somebody six years away from them? It’s the same point there because courts are eliminating visitation, you know, they are taking all the resources away from assisting in the reunification, which is what adoption goal change means, to eliminate this or create a situation in which you can’t defend against a termination . . . . \(^{220}\)

But once those three years had passed, the court felt limited in what it could do. Obiazor’s sons had lived with their would-be adoptive parents since December 2006\(^ {221}\) – three years before the decision reversing the adoption. Recognizing that the “ongoing event[s]” of the children’s lives – including, most obviously, whatever bonding may have occurred with the would-be adoptive parents and whatever harm to the relationship between them and their father that occurred in the interim – should be taken into account on remand.\(^ {222}\) So, more than five years after his sons initially entered foster care, Obiazor was nominally victorious on appeal, but all he truly won was a remand for more litigation to consider his sons’ fate, during which they would spend yet more time separated from

\(^{219}\) In re S.M., at *3-*6.

\(^{220}\) In re S.M., Oral Argument, Recording on file with author, quote near 11:36:34 in the recording.

\(^{221}\) In re S.M. at *5.

\(^{222}\) *18.
him. Had the permanency hearing gotten it right the first time, Obiazor would have had a much more meaningful victory – the right to immediately regain custody of his sons.

The lack of sufficient procedural safeguards at the permanency hearing in 2005, therefore, set up an unnecessarily difficult and emotionally fraught decision upon remand after the 2009 appellate decision: Return the children to their fit (or, at least, not proven unfit223) father or leave them with the individuals who have acted as their parents for three years – the longest span in these boys’ lives that they have had steady parental figures. No matter how this case is resolved, the boys will be unnecessarily harmed by the protracted litigation and the likely (if not inevitable) separation from either their father or their caretakers of the previous three years. I do not suggest that the Obiazor children’s foster parents and their father stand on equal footing; they do not.224 Rather, I suggest only that by delaying the due process moment for four years imposes unnecessary emotional trauma on everyone involved – the children, their father, and their foster parents – that the legal system ought to avoid. The due process relief – overturning the adoption and traumatizing the children by separating them from their caretakers of many years or their fit father – is, in the words of Chief Judge Washington at oral argument, “almost a sham.”225

c. State interest

The state interest also weighs in favor of greater protections at permanency hearings. The state is not well served by creating dilemmas like the remand in Obiazor’s case. Indeed, the state’s interest in speedier resolution of cases – and the avoidance of cases such as Obiazor’s – is served by greater procedural safeguards at permanency hearings.

223 The government indicated it would attempt to retry Obiazor on molestation charges after his conviction was reversed on appeal, Slip Op. at *6, and had alleged that he neglected his sons by leaving them with their mother and grandmother who he knew to be drug addicts, even though this allegation was not the basis of a neglect adjudication or the later adoption. Slip Op. *3 n.3.

224 The D.C. Court of Appeals, consistent with the Supreme Court, made clear that the children’s father is entitled to a constitutional presumption that custody with him will serve their best interests. S.M., Slip Op. at *9-*17 (discussing parental presumption); Smith v. Org. of Foster Families for Equality and Reform, 431 U.S. 816, 846-47 (1977) (describing rights of foster families as secondary to rights of natural families).

225 In re S.M., Oral Argument, Recording on file with author, quote near 11:27:00 in the recording.
Greater procedural protections at permanency hearing stages would impose additional litigation burdens on the state agencies. But these burdens should not be great when considered in light of the broader set of child abuse and neglect laws. If a state agency seeks to change a child’s permanency plan from reunification to adoption, the agency should have, under federal law, made reasonable efforts to reunify the child with his parent or parents, developed a case plan to achieve reunification, and, if the state urges a permanency plan other than reunification, documented why its efforts failed and why a new plan is appropriate. Having done all of that work as required by the federal statutory and regulatory scheme summarized above\textsuperscript{226} (which the state should have done regardless of the procedures required at permanency hearings), the additional burden of proving that they have done that work and defending their professional judgment is relatively slight. When the state has failed to do that work or has not exercised sound or lawful judgment regarding a child’s permanency plan, the state has no legitimate interest in avoiding accountability in court.

Greater procedural protections at permanency hearings would also impose greater burdens on state courts, which would have to hold these evidentiary hearings. But by improving the quality of decision-making, such protections should lead to more children reaching legal permanency faster, thus reducing the burden on state courts imposed by long-open abuse and neglect cases. If the District of Columbia Family Court had gotten the permanency hearing in \textit{Obiazor} correct the first time and reunified Mr. Obiazor with his children, it could have closed the case fairly quickly and avoided the need for several years’ worth of permanency hearings and at least one permanency trial. Such added efficiencies balance out those cases in which courts would reach the same result with evidentiary hearings as they would without. To the extent one believes that the latter category of cases outweighs the former and thus creates significant judicial efficiency concerns, the Supreme Court’s response to such concerns in the core parental rights case \textit{Stanley v. Illinois} is apropos: “\[T\]he

\textsuperscript{226} Supra Part I.b.
Constitution requires higher values than speed and efficiency. Indeed, one might fairly say of the Bill of Rights in general, and the Due Process Clause in particular, that they were designed to protect the fragile values of a vulnerable citizenry from the overbearing concern for efficiency and efficacy that may characterize praiseworthy government officials."\textsuperscript{227}

III. Solution

The due process donut hole should be filled through two basic steps: providing evidentiary hearings regarding permanency plans and reasonable efforts findings when the factual basis to those findings is contested, and a right to appeal adverse rulings. The arguments made in Part II also establish policy grounds for taking these two steps, and further policy arguments are developed below.

a. Evidentiary hearings when permanency plan is contested

Permanency plan decisions often rest on various mixed questions of fact and law: What steps are necessary for a parent to regain custody of his or her children? Has a parent fully or substantially complied with those steps? If not, is the harm to the child of continued separation from his or her parent greater or less than the harm of returning to an incompletely remedied home? Has the state agency provided adequate assistance to help the parent comply with necessary steps?

When a judge must make important decisions as the facts underlying those decisions are contested, it is elementary that evidentiary hearings should occur. The essence of due process is the opportunity to be heard in a meaningful way at a meaningful time.\textsuperscript{228} If, as I have argued, permanency hearings involve important decisions, and if questions like those listed in the preceding paragraph are contested, then it seems indisputable that being heard in a meaningful manner must

\textsuperscript{227} 405 U.S. 605, 656 (1972).

\textsuperscript{228} Matthews v. Eldridge, 424 U.S. 319, 333 (1976) (quotation and citation omitted).
“include[] an opportunity to review and present evidence, confront and cross examine witnesses, and consult with counsel”\textsuperscript{229} – in other words, to have a contested evidentiary hearing.

Such evidentiary hearings should be required by law whenever the parties disagree over what permanency plan the court should adopt for a child. When such disagreements exist, the evidentiary hearing should also address whether the state has made reasonable efforts to achieve the permanency plan that has been in place. To make these evidentiary hearings as meaningful as possible, states should provide indigent parents with counsel.\textsuperscript{230}

The availability of evidentiary hearings will have an additional positive effect of strengthening the negotiating position of parents and children regarding permanency hearing decisions. Professor Erik Pitchal has relayed the story of two of his former child clients who had been in foster care and who could not reunify with their mother, who had not remedied the conditions which led to the boys’ removal.\textsuperscript{231} The boys wanted to live with an aunt, but their social worker thought that their aunt would not take care of them well.\textsuperscript{232} The boys disagreed – their aunt had lived with them in the past, “achieved some stability in her own young life,” and was planning to move to South Carolina where other extended family members could support her.\textsuperscript{233} And the judge treated permanency hearings as “ten minute pro forma” events at which he “generally endorsed whatever caseworkers presented.”\textsuperscript{234} Without a chance to challenge the social worker’s conclusions about the boys’ aunt through an evidentiary hearing – or at least threaten to do so – the children’s lawyers had little opportunity to make their case to leave foster care and live with their aunt.

Fortunately, these children’s lawyer could use evidentiary tools to achieve a better result for them because New York law provides that parties may introduce material and relevant evidence at

\textsuperscript{229} New Mexico v. Maria C., 94 P.3d 796, 805 (N.M. Ct. of App. 2004).
\textsuperscript{230} Cf. supra notes 111-114 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{231} Pitchal, supra note 18, at 663-65.
\textsuperscript{232} Id. at 663.
\textsuperscript{233} Id.
\textsuperscript{234} Id.
permanency hearings. Following discovery requests and written interrogatories, the foster care agency settled, and the boys eventually lived with their aunt. The risk of error for these children was reduced because their attorney could use these classic due process tools. If those tools had been foreclosed, the agency could have ignored the lawyer’s request, and the boys would likely have remained in foster care.

This conclusion applies, of course, regardless of the competing plans at issue, or whether parents or children use the tools described. If the boys wanted to reunify and they or their mother could prove that their mother was fit and able to take care of them, the same lawyerly tactics should have been available, and could have led to analogous results.

b. Appealing adverse rulings

Policy makers should also permit aggrieved parties to appeal adverse permanency plan and related reasonable efforts decisions.

Constitutional doctrine does not provide the primary reason for this recommendation, because the Supreme Court has held that “the Federal Constitution guarantees no right to appellate review.” Some constitutional concerns are evident; although the Court has not recognized a due process right to appeal, it has addressed equal protection challenges to state actions that limit an individual’s right to appeal when the state grants it in similar situations. That is, “once a State affords” the right to appeal, “the State may not ‘bolt the door to equal justice.’” Although some creative arguments may exist to establish a right to appeal, that is beyond the scope of this article.

Rather than constitutional doctrine, my argument rests on policy concerns which should animate state action to provide for appeals of permanency plan decisions. The same argument

235 See supra note 94 and accompanying text.
236 Id. at 666.
238 Id. (quoting Griffin v. Illinois, 351 U.S. 12, 24 (1956)); see also id. at 120 (noting that most decisions regarding the right to appeal rely are subject to an equal protection analysis).
regarding evidentiary hearings applies – the risk of trial court error is high and the state (as Obiazor
demonstrates) should have an interest in getting permanency plan decisions correct. Appellate
courts’ error-correction function helps ensure trial court accuracy and thus address these concerns.
In addition, by resolving whether the state made reasonable efforts to reunify children with parents
early in a case, the state can ensure that a later TPR or adoption or guardianship will not fail due to a
finding that the state failed to make such efforts.\(^\text{239}\)

In addition, the law-creating function of appellate courts should encourage state
policymakers to permit appeals of permanency plan decisions. These decisions currently suffer from
a lack of clear legal guidance. The most common standard to be applied is the best interests of the
child – that is, no standard at all.\(^\text{240}\) Federal law requires permanency hearings to exist but does not
prescribe the standards to be applied to plan changes. Similarly, federal law requires state courts to
determine if a state agency has made “reasonable efforts” to reunify the child or achieve whatever
other permanency plan has been set, but does not define the term.\(^\text{241}\)

It is this absence of clear legal guidance that led to mistakes like those in Henry Obiazor’s
case discussed above. The absence of any finding of unfitness against Mr. Obiazor should have
affected the permanency plan decision – any other result would violate the core doctrine that a
parent is presumed fit and custody with him is presumed in his child’s best interests. When Obiazor
appealed the ultimate adoption ruling, the D.C. Court of Appeals ruled in his favor, vindicating the

\(^{239}\) State courts would, as a recent Alabama decision held, rule that such challenges should be raised at the appropriate
time at permanency hearings and not at permanency trials. “[A]ny error the juvenile court may have committed in this
case by relieving DHR of the duty to use reasonable efforts should have been appealed at that point and cannot now be
raised following the judgment terminating the mother’s parental rights.” \textit{M.H. v. Jefferson County Department of Human
trials to hear appeals of reasonable efforts findings amounts to “[p]unishing the [c]hild for the [f]ailures of the [s]tate

\(^{240}\) The New Jersey Supreme Court, for instance, has described the best interest of the child standard as providing a
Pannick}, 540 P.2d 1051, 1054 (Alaska 1975) and \textit{In re B.G.}, 523 P.2d 244 (Cal. 1974)). \textit{See also} Martin Guggenheim,
\textit{What’s Wrong with Children’s Rights,} at 40 (2005) (the best interest of the child standard “invites the judge to rely on his or
her own values and biases to decide the case”).

\(^{241}\) 45 C.F.R. § 1356.21(b)(2).
long-standing legal rights of fit parents. But because the permanency plan could not be appealed, no new law regarding the permanency plan decision was created – and thus no new guidance was offered to trial judges the next time a case like Obiazor’s occurs – let alone a more difficult case in which a parent’s past unfitness is established but present unfitness is unclear and contested.

More difficult questions will also arise in permanency plan cases, such as:

- When a parent has partly remedied conditions which supported a finding of neglect, should the child reunify, or should the plan be changed away from reunification due to the parent’s incomplete actions?
- When a parent has remedied conditions which supported a finding of neglect, but the state claims that some other facts justify continued or permanent separation of the child from a parent, under what circumstances is continued separation legally justified?
- In close cases, how should courts weigh a child’s opinion about his or her permanency plan? How does the answer to this question vary with a child’s age?  
  \(^{242}\)
- How should a state agency’s failure to make reasonable efforts to achieve reunification in the past inform a decision about a permanency plan in the future?
- What hearsay testimony, if any, should be admitted at permanency hearings?

My purpose is not to answer these questions – doing so is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I offer a short list of questions of law and fact that arise at permanency hearings and for which appellate guidance would be useful. Without appeals of permanency plan and related reasonable efforts findings, however, only a void exists.

---

State law must fill the void – but with most states merely echoing vague federal law in their own statutes,\footnote{See, e.g., D.C. Code § 16-2323(c) (requiring courts to determine a child’s “permanency plan” at a permanency hearing, but not providing details regarding the procedural protections surrounding such decisions).} trial courts are left with nearly unfettered discretion. Permitting appeals of permanency plan and reasonable efforts decisions will force appellate courts to develop decisional law providing more useful guidance to trial courts. Uniformity of decisions would be enhanced, and difficult substantive questions of law could receive some answers.

The concern expressed by some state courts is that appeals will take too long.\footnote{See supra note 116 and accompanying text.} These concerns can be addressed through specific appellate mechanisms: states can provide for expedited appellate procedures, including specific deadlines for briefs and decisions. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges has proposed a 150-day timeline for adjudicating TPR appeals,\footnote{National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Adoption and Permanency Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases, at 40 (2000), available at \url{http://www.ncjfcj.org/content/blogcategory/369/438}.} and shorter timelines should be possible for permanency hearing appeals. States can also provide rules for when, if ever, a permanency plan decision should be stayed pending appellate review or when consideration of an appeal should be stayed pending other prompt trial court developments. Just as the due process right to an evidentiary permanency hearing is less when a TPR trial will occur imminently,\footnote{See supra Part II.a (distinguishing permanency plan decisions leading to indefinite stays in foster care before a permanency trial with those likely or certain to lead to a prompt permanency trial).} hearing an appeal of a permanency plan order is less important when a permanency trial based on that order occurs in a short time after the permanency hearing. States with multiple levels of appellate review can at least provide access to intermediate appellate review.

c. Implementing these policy changes

As the law governing child abuse and neglect cases finds its sources in federal statutory law, constitutional law, state statutory law, and state case law, the above solutions should be implemented through all such sources.
Congress and the Children’s Bureau (the division of the Department of Health and Human Services charged with implementing the relevant provisions of federal law) should better define the “procedural safeguards” at permanency hearings. Through statute, regulation, or non-regulatory guidance, they should make clear that evidentiary hearings should be available to any party that contests the basic facts relevant to permanency hearing decisions, and that state court systems should provide for prompt appeals of such decisions.

As a matter of federal constitutional law as well as state law, courts handling these cases should provide the basic protections outlined here – evidentiary hearings and the right to appeal. If state courts fail to do so, state legislatures should step in – a point particularly appropriate in those states whose courts have explicitly ruled that evidentiary hearings or appeals are not required for permanency hearings.

IV. Alternative due process protections provide unsatisfactory solutions.

One might ask whether the due process protections at the beginning and end of an abuse or neglect case are insufficient on either constitutional or policy grounds. In other words, might the donut itself resolve whatever concerns exist within the donut hole? This section will argue that neither the initial abuse or neglect trial nor the permanency trial provides sufficient process to satisfy the constitutional or policy concerns discussed above.

a. Initial abuse or neglect findings are insufficient protections.

As discussed in Part I.a, the initial stage of an abuse or neglect case involves trials – with all the due process protections common in most civil trials – regarding whether a parent has neglected his/her child in the past. These trials provide insufficient protections because their subject matter is distinct from the subject matter that determines a permanency plan. An abuse or neglect trial is necessarily backwards-looking – it determines whether a parent has abused or neglected the child in the past. It does not determine what services are necessary to remedy the parent’s unfitness,
whether the agency provided adequate services to remedy the parent’s unfitness, whether the parent would continue to abuse or neglect the child in the future, or whether reunification or some other permanency plan (and if some other plan, which one) would best serve a child’s interests.

Existing federal law establishes that an initial finding of abuse or neglect does not, in the vast majority of cases, indicate that any of the other issues are irrelevant. Federal law provides that in most cases reasonable efforts to reunify families “shall be made . . . to make it possible for a child to safely return to the child’s home.”247 The only exception to this requirement is when the parent’s conduct demonstrates “aggravated circumstances” exist, such as the murder or voluntary manslaughter of another child, or the serious physical abuse of the child.248 These extreme cases are the only situations that, under federal law, indicate abuse so bad that reunification ought not be pursued at all. They are, therefore, the only situation in which post-adjudication facts – such as the adequacy of agency and parental efforts to reunify – are not relevant. The logical corollary is that in the vast majority of cases,249 a finding that abuse or neglect occurred in the past is not sufficient to conclude whether the child should reunify with a parent or whether the agency should work towards placing the child in someone else’s permanency custody. An abuse or neglect adjudication, therefore, does not answer the questions that permanency hearings are required to answer, and thus cannot provide sufficient due process protections at such hearings.

b. Permanency trials – and, especially, termination of parental rights trials – are insufficient protections.

The stronger counterargument to more due process protections for these interim periods is that termination of parental rights (TPRs) or other permanency trials (such as guardianship trials) will provide parents and children with the necessary procedural protections. These permanency

249 Two-thirds of all children removed from their families by child protection authorities were removed for neglect, not the severe abuse that would trigger the “aggravated circumstances” requirement. U.S. Dep’t of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Child Maltreatment 2008, 79 (2010), http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/cm08.pdf.
trials address some of the same issues that inform permanency plan decisions, such as a parent’s remediation (or lack thereof) of the conditions leading to the child’s neglect. But, as discussed above, it is not possible to determine at a permanency hearing when or even whether such permanency trials will occur. The only way, therefore, for these permanency trials to fill the due process donut hole is to require that they occur relatively quickly after a permanency hearing.

Federal law has indeed taken a step in this direction. Since 1997, federal law has required, absent certain exceptions, states to file termination of parental rights petitions whenever a child has been in foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months, making it more likely that TPRs will occur promptly, effectively providing due process protections when children remain in foster care for an extended period of time. Some state laws go further; Florida, for instance, requires that a TPR have been filed or that one will soon be filed as a condition precedent to setting a permanency plan of adoption.

TPR trials, however, do not empirically provide these due process protections in many cases, existing law does not require them to do so, and their policy purpose is ill-suited to fill the due process donut hole.

What empirical data exists suggests that many states take advantage of federal law provisions that excuse states’ decisions to not file or not pursue TPRs. Federal law lists several exceptions to the requirement of filing TPRs – including whenever the state documents “compelling circumstances” not to do so. Federal law also only requires states to “file” TPRs; in individual cases, the government and other parties are free to ask judges to delay holding TPR trials until an adoptive parent is identified to avoid unnecessarily terminating rights. A 2002 GAO survey of states found wide use of exceptions to the requirement of filing TPRs. Among participating states, “the number of children exempted from the provision [encouraging TPRs after 15 of 22 months in foster care]...
care] greatly exceeded the number of children to whom it was applied.” In addition, national data shows 123,000 children “waiting to be adopted,” only 75,000 of whom have been the subject of a TPR. About 50,000 children, therefore, have had a court set a permanency plan of adoption, but have not been the subject of a TPR. These children may “wait” for a TPR or adoption trial for months or years, and these permanency trials do not provide due process protections in the interim. About 100,000 more children have permanency plans other than reunification or adoption; a TPR is not necessary to achieve these permanency plans and these children are thus unlikely to be subject to TPR proceedings.

The empirical reality that TPRs do not fill the due process donut hole is as it should be. TPRs are limited and imperfect policy tools; using them to more fully fill the donut hole would lead to bad results.

Terminating parental rights is a “drastic remedy” intended to increase a foster care agency’s chances of finding adoptive parents for those children. Despite this purpose, little empirical evidence exists to suggest that widespread TPRs actually lead to more adoptions. On the contrary, significant evidence exists that widespread TPRs only lead to more “legal orphans” – children deprived of a legal parent by the TPR for whom child welfare agencies do not place in a legally permanent family.

---

255 Id.
256 In re C.M., 916 A.2d 169, 175 (D.C. 2007).
257 Some legislatures have connected TPRs to adoptions more directly, stating, for instance, that the “sooner a child is freed for purposes of an adoptive placement [that is, subject to a TPR], the sooner he or she will finally obtain an environment of permanence and continuity of relationships.” Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on the Judiciary, Report on Title IV of Bill No. 2-48, The Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Act of 1977 at 6 (1977). Courts have put the issue more modestly, stating that a TPR decision includes “[a]n analysis of the likelihood that the child would be adopted if parental rights were terminated.” Cal. Wel. & Inst. Code § 360(a)(6); cf. In re Dependency of A.C., 98 P.3d 89 (Wash. Ct. App. 2004) (considering “the likelihood the child would be adopted if parental rights were terminated”); Department of Children & Families v. J.W., 773 So.2d 128 (Fla. Ct. App. 2000) (declining to grant TPR because of unlikelihood of adoption following a TPR).
Richard Barth, the Dean of the University of Maryland School of Social Work and a leading child welfare scholar, has studied national data regarding the effect of TPRs on adoption and concluded:

There seems to be negligible evidentiary support for ASFA’s implicit assumption that TPRs would allow for improved child-specific recruitment and result in a vastly greater, national pool of adoptive families to provide permanency to older children. Instead, there is growing evidence that a substantial number of children will reside in foster care, or leave foster care to exits other than adoption, after their legal ties to their parents have been terminated.258

Barth has quantified this effect: in recent years, an average of 20,000 more children were subjects of termination orders than were adopted, meaning the number of legal orphans increased by tens of thousands each year.259 Dean Barth’s conclusion echoes the conclusions of various studies over the past two decades. A 2003 study of federal foster care and adoption data concluded that “termination of parental rights is not assuring swift, legal permanency for children in foster care.”260

A 1997 study found that the number of children whose relationship with their parents had been legally terminated, but who remained in foster care without a permanent family had more than doubled across the United States.261 A detailed multi-year study of Michigan and New York – both states which increased the number of TPRs even before passage of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act – reached a sobering conclusion. “Five years of aggressively terminating parents’ rights has produced a clear pattern: The number of children freed for adoption goes up every year; the number of children adopted fails to keep pace with the number of adoption-eligible children; and

259 Richard P. Barth, Adoption from Foster Care: A Chronicle of the Years After ASFA, in Intentions and Results: A Look Back at the Adoption and Safe Families Act 65 (2009), available at http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1001351_safe_families_act.pdf.
the total number of orphaned children not adopted continues to increase fastest of all.262 More frequent use of TPRs coincided with an increase in the number of adoptions,263 but a causal link remains unclear and, as the study concluded, those increases did not “keep pace” with the number of legally orphaned children.264

District of Columbia statistics demonstrate a similar conclusion: A majority, perhaps a very large majority, of children whose relationships with their parents are terminated without an adoptive parent already identified become legal orphans. The District of Columbia Family Court has reported very low rates of TPRs leading to adoptions. In contrast, the percentage of children who remain legal orphans after a TPR has increased substantially. In 2005, the Family Court granted 50 TPR motions, and 56 percent of affected children remained legal orphans. In 2006, 40 TPRs were granted and 65 percent of affected children remained legal orphans. In 2007, 47 TPRs were granted and 75% of affected children remained legal orphans.265 Although one might conclude that these TPRs did lead to a substantial number of adoptions – ranging from 25% in 2007 to 44% in 2006 – the data does not provide enough evidence to support that conclusion. Many – and probably most – of the cases in which an adoption followed a TPR, the TPR was adjudicated only after a prospective adoptive parent has been identified and after the child has moved in with that individual. Those TPRs are better considered as part of the adoption process once an adoptive parent is identified; they are not legal actions to further adoption recruitment.

TPRs, of course, have serious implications for parents’ and children’s fundamental constitutional rights. The Supreme Court has repeatedly observed that TPRs, unlike other child

263 *Id.* at 129-30 (showing an increase of about 700 adoptions per year in Michigan and 600 in New York).
264 *Id.* at 132.
custody decisions and unlike “mine run civil actions,” impose a “unique kind of deprivation.” Permanently and irrevocably terminating the legal relationship between a parent and a child “involve[s] the awesome authority of the state” and TPR orders “are among the most severe forms of state action.” The weight of the right at stake and the lack of empirical evidence suggesting that terminating this fundamental right on a wide scale leads to positive aggregate results counsels strongly against using TPR trials as an all-purpose due process guarantee.

Terminating parent-child relationships is especially troublesome for older children and youth – the group that represents two-thirds of children in the District of Columbia’s foster care system, and a majority of foster children nationally. Older children and youth are more likely to have strong relationships and ongoing contact with their birth parents, siblings and extended family members. Older children have formed a sense of identity dependent on these relationships. Terminating children’s relationships with these individuals can harm their identity, and undermine their adjustment to a new home and long-term well-being. For all of these reasons, the older a child is when the government removes him from his family, the less likely he is to be adopted; nationally, 38 percent of children removed before turning 1 are later adopted, compared to 19

271 See, e.g. Natalie M. Barone, Psychological Bonding Evaluations in Termination of Parental Rights Cases, 33 Journal of Psychiatry and Law 387, 408 (2005) ("[G]iven that this child is well into adolescence, three years from adulthood, severing her relationship to her primary love object may result in more harm than good."). Perhaps as a result, children have a more difficult time adjusting to an adoptive home the older they are at the time of adoption. See Thomas P. McDonald, The Postadoption Experience: Child, Parent, and Family Predictors of Family Adjustment to Adoption, 80 Child Welfare 71 (2001) ("Older adopted children had more difficult adjustments in their adoptive homes."); David Howe, Age at Placement, Adoption Experience and Adult Adopted People's Contact with Their Adoptive and Birth Mothers: An Attachment Perspective, 3 Attachment and Human Development 222 (2001) ("[W]hen asked if they felt they had belonged in their adoptive family while growing up, 73.5% of those placed before they were 7 months old agreed, compared with 50.9% of those placed after their second birthday.").
percent of children removed between 1 and 5, and less than ten percent of children removed
between 6 and 12, and likely even less for older youth.\textsuperscript{272}

Indeed, many states have already recognized the significant importance of youth’s
connections with their birth family, even when they cannot reunify with their parents. That is
precisely the concern underlying guardianship statutes, which allows children to live with a legally
permanent family while maintaining the child’s relationship with his birth family.\textsuperscript{273}

The increasing variety of legal options for permanency – including options other than
adoption and which do not require TPRs – also demonstrates the inappropriateness of using TPRs
to fill the due process donut hole. TPRs are an unnecessarily drastic remedy in the growing
proportion of cases in which children leave foster care to a legal status other than adoption. These
legal statuses – most commonly referred to as “guardianship”\textsuperscript{274} – do not terminate the parent child
relationship, thus obviating the need to terminate parents’ legal rights, as some courts have begun to
recognize.\textsuperscript{275} In fiscal year 2008, fifteen percent of children who left foster care went to live in a
permanent guardianship or to otherwise live with a relative other than their parents.\textsuperscript{276} This reflects
an increase from the eleven percent who did so in fiscal year 1998.\textsuperscript{277}

The increasing frequency of kinship care is also grounds for restraint in using TPRs. Federal
law already recognizes that states need not file TPRs when a child is living with a relative.\textsuperscript{278} Fully

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{272} Barth, \textit{supra} note 259 at 65.
\item\textsuperscript{273} \textit{See}, e.g., D.C. Code § 16-2381 \textit{et seq.}
\item\textsuperscript{274} \textit{Id.}
\item\textsuperscript{276} AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2008 Estimates, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report16.htm. Seven percent of foster care exits were to guardianship and eight percent to “living with other relative(s).”
\item\textsuperscript{278} 42 U.S.C. § 475(5)(E)(i).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
one quarter of foster children now live in a kinship foster home, following significant increases in the 1980s and 1990s. 

Congress was slow to recognize this trend, but federal law now recognizes and funds permanency options with relatives that do not require TPRs. In 1997, Congress expressed some awareness of kinship foster care but only established an advisory committee to report on it. More than a decade later, Congress amended federal law in 2008 to recognize guardianships, providing funding to states to support subsidies for kinship guardianships, a development likely to increase the number of children who leave foster care to guardianship.

States have also begun to expand subsidized guardianship to non-kin, for the explicit purpose of permitting foster parents to obtain permanent custody of a foster child without terminating the child’s legal relationship with his parents. In 2008, the Children’s Defense Fund documented 23 states offering subsidized guardianship to non-kin. That number is growing; the District of Columbia has enacted legislation expanding subsidized guardianship to non-kin. As this trend grows, it is likely to eliminate the need for TPRs for tens of thousands of foster children, including those who in present practice might be subject to a TPR. A study of a pilot program in Illinois shows that offering subsidized guardianship to non-kin both induces many families who otherwise would have chosen adoption to choose guardianship and helps more children leave foster care to permanent families than offering subsidized adoption alone. The study included a control

---

group in which the only means for a non-kinship foster family to obtain legal permanency was to adopt the foster child, and an experimental group in which non-kinship foster families could obtain legal permanency through either adoption or guardianship. In the control group, 25.3 percent of children in non-kinship homes were adopted, but that number was only 16.7 percent in the experimental group. However, 15.8 percent of children in the experimental group left foster care to guardianship with their foster families. That group appears to include the 8.6 percent of children in non-kinship foster care forced into adoption (and, by legal necessity, a TPR) when guardianship is not an option, and 7.2 percent of children in non-kinship foster care who would have remained in foster care without guardianship as an option. This study provides an empirical basis for the policy judgment of those states which offer subsidized guardianship to non-kin: a significant number of families choose that option over a legal option that requires terminating rights, and a significant number of children will leave foster care to that option who would otherwise remain in state custody.

None of this is to suggest that TPRs should never happen. TPRs can serve important purposes in certain cases. They play a legally necessary role in furthering an adoption (when that is appropriate). Despite the lack of evidence that widespread TPRs meaningfully increase the chances of finalizing an adoption, it is plausible that TPRs of certain subsets of foster children will further adoption – such as very young children without substantial bonds to their parents. In some rare cases, a parent may be so dangerous that placing a child in foster care is insufficient to protect the child, and a TPR may be necessary. But these useful purposes of TPRs are not so widespread that they could justify their use in all cases. They therefore are a poor choice to fill the due process donut hole.

CONCLUSION

The American abuse and neglect system has established multi-stage legal processes to determine whether a state may use its authority to temporarily or permanently break up a family. To respect the fundamental constitutional rights at stake and to ensure that states only use their authority to separate children from their parents when absolutely necessary, judges and policymakers should pay greater attention to what federal law calls “procedural safeguards” within this system. The supposed safeguards that exist in the years-long middle of abuse and neglect cases are in serious need of reform. Congress, states legislatures, and state courts should move to require that contested permanency planning hearings involve evidentiary hearings and factual findings, and involve the right to appeal and have such appeals decided promptly. These reforms will result in more accurate decision-making and better results for children and families in foster care.