

# **ADDRESSING HIGH ACUITY FOSTER YOUTH DISPLACEMENT**

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for York/Poquoson Department of Social Services



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIAL SERVICES



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### **Disclaimer**

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency including York/Poquoson Department of Social Services or Virginia Department of Social Services.

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## Executive Summary

Foster care displacement, particularly among high acuity youth, presents a critical challenge within Virginia's child welfare system. High acuity foster youth—those with complex behavioral, emotional, medical, or developmental needs—face significant barriers to stable placement, resulting in a troubling trend: children sleeping in local Department of Social Services (DSS) offices due to a lack of adequate options. In York/Poquoson DSS, this issue mirrors statewide patterns and leads to detrimental effects on children's long-term mental health and social stability.

While Virginia's DSS, under guidance from the Safe and Sound Task Force, has initiated several programs to address the crisis—such as specialized placement staff and pilot programs—challenges persist. Local agencies report persistent shortages in foster homes that can meet high acuity needs and systemic barriers that limit kinship care options.

Based on a review of the literature, policy context, and stakeholder interviews, this report evaluates four alternative strategies that Virginia DSS might pursue to reduce displacement among high acuity foster youth:

**Status Quo:** Continue existing Safe and Sound Task Force initiatives, including the ECP and ETFC pilot programs and support staff.

**Decrease Barrier Crime List to Align with the Adam Walsh Act:** Adjust Virginia's restrictive foster parent eligibility criteria to increase the pool of kinship care options.

**Expand ECP Program to Full-Time:** Make the one-time \$3,000 financial support available to foster parents of high acuity youth a permanent offering.

**Expand ETFC Pilot to Additional Providers:** Broaden the reach of the professional foster parent model to more private agencies across Virginia.

Each option was assessed based on four key criteria: **effectiveness**, **political feasibility**, **equity**, and **cost**. The analysis reveals that **decreasing the barrier crime list** presents the most promising path forward. This alternative has

strong political backing, minimal associated costs, and the potential to increase kinship placements—shown by research to enhance placement stability and overall child well-being. While evidence of its direct effect on high acuity youth is still emerging, this approach stands out as both viable and impactful.

By combining systemic reform with existing supports, York/Poquoson DSS can help ensure that more high acuity foster youth are placed in stable, nurturing environments—breaking the cycle of displacement and laying the foundation for long-term well-being and permanency.

### **Problem Statement**

*There are currently more children in York County/ Poquoson’s Department of Social Services (DSS) foster care than there are adequate placement options, forcing those with high acuity to be displaced and sleep in the local social services office while awaiting placement. This disruption in stability is shown to lead to long term negative mental and social health outcomes for the children (Newton et al., 2000). High acuity youth refer to children who exhibit behavioral, emotional, mental, physical, or medical challenges (Safe and Sound Task Force, 2023).*

## Client Overview

York county and Poquoson city are located in southeast Virginia, in a region known as Hampton Roads. The York/Poquoson DSS is responsible for providing human services to residents of both York County and Poquoson City residents, including foster care. The foster care system serves to house children with the least restrictive placement option while assisting in reunification with their parents or seeking other permanent placement options for that child, if reunification is not a viable option (i.e. adoption). York/Poquoson DSS, in line with Virginia DSS policies, prioritizes placing foster children with relatives whenever possible (kinship care). This organization is directly responsible for overseeing the wellbeing of all children of residents placed into foster care. When a child is displaced, the agency must provide 24-hour care for that child until placement is found. Additionally, this DSS agency is responsible for recruiting, licensing, and monitoring foster placements within their jurisdiction.

Local DSS agencies are under the jurisdiction of Virginia DSS. The Virginia DSS works alongside the Department of Juvenile Justice and Department of Health and Developmental Services to enforce and monitor implementation of regulations put forth by the Virginia General Assembly. In 2022, Governor Youngkin created the Safe and Sound Task Force in response to the growing displacement rates of high acuity youth within the commonwealth. The task force seeks to understand and create actionable solutions to the problem through supporting local DSS agencies, resource families, and group home providers and closing the gap between critical resources (Safe and Sound Task Force, 2023). The task force is still in-action and currently provides contracted placement specialists and coordinators at Virginia DSS, among other pilot programs.

Funding for foster care comes at both the federal and state level. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act allots considerable funding for eligible foster care programs that adhere to federal standards. This funding is aimed at creating and maintaining out-of-home care for foster children, assisting in reunification, and foster care prevention. The areas of funding fall under maintenance, administration, and training (VDSS, n.d.).

## **Consequences of Displacement**

Children who are high acuity struggle to find proper placement options due to their unique needs. These complex needs require placements that can provide them with the care they need to thrive, which often requires some form of specialization. Their unique challenges are also associated with exasperating the probability of placement disruptions and subsequent movement (Chamberlain et al., 2006). This lack of stability in foster care is shown to exacerbate behavioral and mental health issues (Newton et al., 2000). Oftentimes these children are placed in placements located outside of their original hometown, at times across the state. When children are moved to different communities, they often face the challenge of adapting to new social settings, schools, and peer groups. This has been associated with both external and internal negative changes in behaviors (Hindt et al., 2021). These movements are also associated with negative effects on academic performances (Clemens et al., 2018).

Caseworkers also report that the children often experience a severe lack of understanding of the changes occurring in their environment, lack of control, and lack of trust of those around them (Jennifer Bolden, Personal communication, 2024). All of these impacts combine to create a vicious cycle in which a child's challenges are exacerbated by the lack of stability and these negative impacts affect their ability for future stability in foster care.



## Placement Process

The commonwealth of Virginia boasts a kin first culture, meaning they prioritize placing children with family members or those adjacent, prior to investigating any other placement option for a child in foster care. When children enter foster care, their assigned caseworker is responsible for searching for and contacting relatives who may be eligible to provide placement for that child within 15 days. If relatives are found and contacted, they may choose to go through the licensing process. The licensing process typically takes around 10 weeks and is reported to be a large time commitment that includes weekends (Cherrie Good, Personal Communication, 2024). However, caseworkers may submit kinship waivers to allow for 6 months for the family to complete training and required physical assessments. This process is limited to those who have not committed any of the “barrier crimes” outlined by the Virginia DSS. Some of the more serious crimes on this list do not allow for the perpetrator to ever serve as a licensed foster parent, while others lift this barrier after 10 years from conviction (VDSS, n.d.). Many stakeholders argue that this barrier crime list is a major factor for why very few of the children in foster care are placed with relatives, despite the kin first culture (Margaret Mack-Yaroch & Jennifer Bolden, Personal Communication, 2024).

### Virginia Barrier Crimes Examples:

- Reckless endangerment of others by throwing objects from places higher than one story; penalty
- Reckless handling of firearms while hunting
- Burning or destroying personal property, standing grain
- Carelessly damaging property by fire

*Source:* (VDSS, 2023)

If no relatives are found or are unwilling/unable to become licensed, the caseworker is tasked with locating the least restrictive placement option for that child, while considering all of their needs. Restrictive placements, such as residential treatment or congregate care are reserved for children whose needs cannot be met in a family setting placement such as kinship care or a traditional foster home (Schmidt et al., 2013). Caseworkers apply on behalf of the child to the placement option. Many have voiced that this process often limits the child to their challenges, rather than amplifying other more positive aspects (Resource Family & Jessie Foreman, Personal Communication, 2024). This process of applying is often time consuming and difficult for caseworkers who have children with compounding needs (i.e. a child with both sexualized behaviors and an autism diagnosis). It has also been noted that York/Poquoson DSS lacks an adequate number of caseworkers. These issues lend themselves to the likelihood a child will be displaced on the chance they are abruptly removed from a placement option and seeking another one.

As stated previously, Virginia DSS now offers several full time and part time placement specialists at the state level. If a caseworker has exhausted all options, they may refer the child's case to these specialists. The specialists then step in and take on the responsibility for searching for and applying for placements on the child's behalf. This unloads a time burden for the caseworker and allows them to better address the immediate needs of both that high acuity youth and the rest of their caseload (Jessie Foreman, Personal Communication, 2024).

## Placement Options

Kinship placement/care is defined as when a child is placed with a relative or fictive kin, such as a family friend or neighbor. Kinship care has widely been implemented across the United States in the past decade due to literature supporting the idea that this placement is healthier for the child's behavioral, emotional and mental health (Children's Rights, 2023). Kinship care has also been found to result in more permanency and less placement disruption for the child (Webster et al., 2000). There is disagreement upon whether kinship placement results in higher rates of adoption than non-kinship placements (Winokur et al., 2014).

If kinship placement is unavailable, a child is placed in a foster family home, group home, or residential placement, depending on the child's needs. Group homes and residential placements are referred to as “more restrictive” than typical foster family homes. These more restrictive placements are often recommended for children who need more specialized care (Family First Virginia, n.d.). Group homes and residential treatment places often specialize in care for children with specific needs, such as children with developmental delays. However, few group homes specialize in compounding needs and often have disqualifying criteria for children who have more extensive needs than what they can provide (VDSS employee, Personal Communication, 2024). Other placement options include residential care, hospitalization or detention centers.

## VDSS Policy Context

Displacement for high acuity foster youth is not unique to York/Poquoson DSS but is rather a statewide issue. In 2022, Governor Glenn Youngkin created the Safe and Sound Task force, a multisector approach at addressing “long-standing and recent challenges, including placement disruptions and high-acuity youth in foster care sleeping in local offices or other unsuitable locations” (Safe and Sound Task Force, 2023). The task force was informed by governmental, non-profit, faith based, advocacy and general population representatives to inform four core recommendations. These recommendations are:

- 1.) Prioritize the recruitment, retention, and needs of relatives, kin, and foster parents
- 2.) Address gaps in children's community-based continuum and increase access to evidence-based services.
- 3.) Improve residential treatment services.
- 4.) Improve integration and collaboration across child-serving systems, including the workforce.

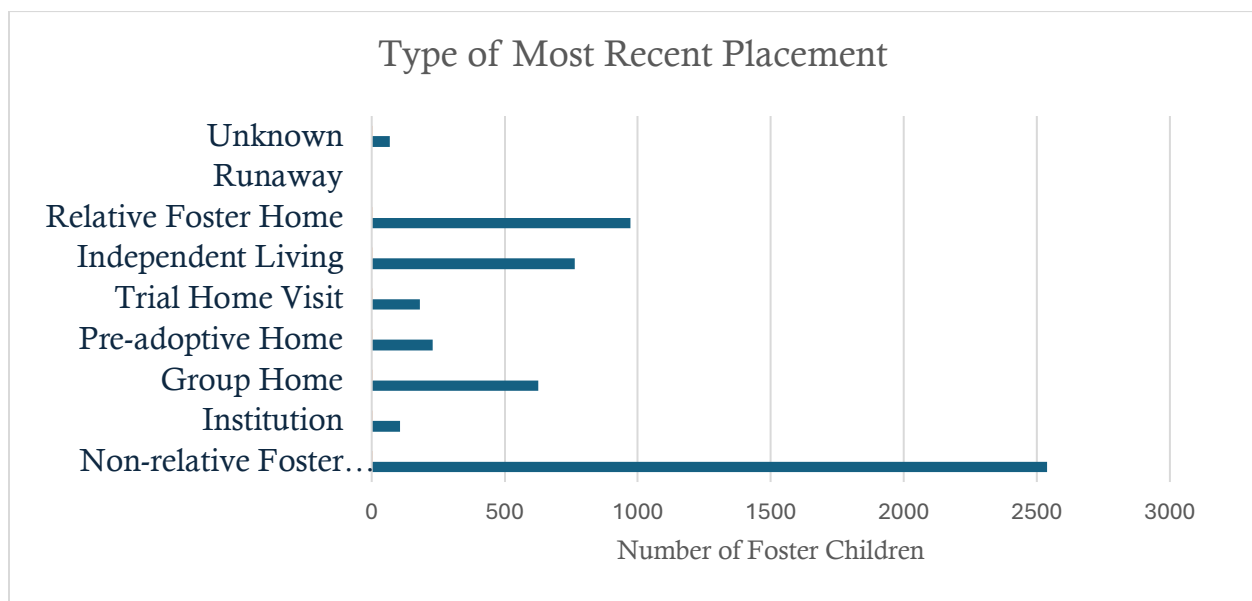
Alongside the creation and execution of the Task Force, Youngkin’s administration oversaw the creation and implementation of the Faster Families Highway. This software was created to relieve bureaucratic wait times for families seeking to become foster homes, as well as facilitate the coordination of localities' by allowing them to quickly identify foster home options outside of their jurisdiction when necessary (Virginia DSS, 2024).

In collaboration with the Safe and Sound Task Force, VDSS utilizes statewide information systems, the Child Welfare Advisory Committee, and The Permanency Practice Advisory Committee, among other partnerships, to inform decision making. In June of 2024, VDSS published their 2025- 2029 strategic plan with the input of these resources. The report outlined several goals relevant to foster care such as engaging fathers and kin in permanency planning, increasing kinship care placements, reducing the use of congregate care placements, and recruiting foster families.

## VDSS Statistics

As of March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025, the commonwealth had a foster care population of 5,486. Almost 53% of these children resided in non-relative foster home. Despite the stated goal of reaching 35% kinship placements by 2025, only 17.73% of foster youth reside in these prioritized placements. Additionally, almost 13% of all foster care children in the commonwealth have experienced 6 or more placements, roughly 715 children (VDSS, 2025).

**Figure 1:** Type of Most Recent Foster Care Placement as of March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025

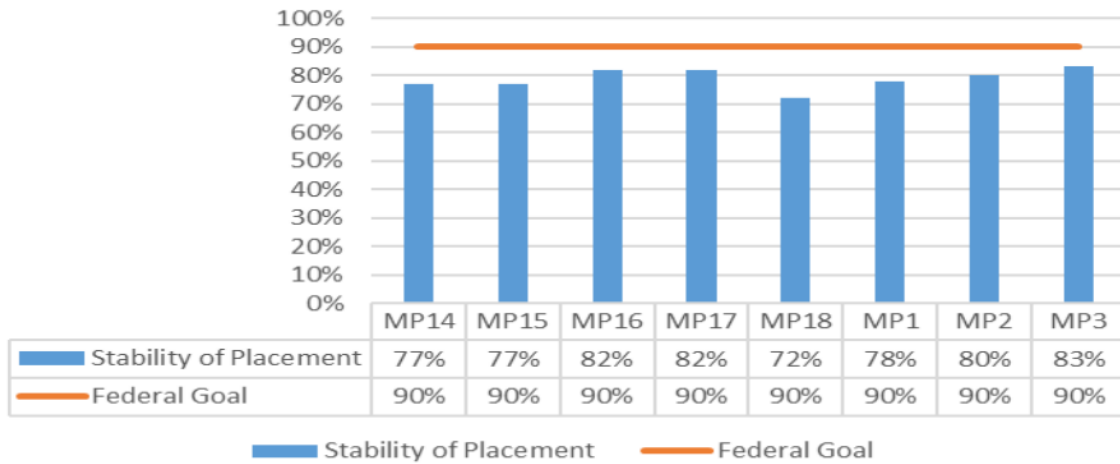


*Source:* (VDSS, 2025)

Data regarding those specifically identified as high acuity is not publicly available.

The 2025-2029 plan published by VDSS found that the most recent time frame of data collection (August 2023-January 2024) experienced lower rates of placement stability than that set forth by the federal goal of 90%, and the state goal of 86% (figure 1).

**Figure 2:** Placement Stability percent between August 2023 and January 2024



*Source:* VDSS, 205

The plan subsequently outlines several plans to increase placement stability such as increasing kinship care placements, decrease workforce turnover, and data utilization to inform areas of opportunity (VDSS, 2024).

## Evidential Programs

The contextual background of foster care placement and disruptions lends itself to several viable options for solutions to be explored. Displacement most often occurs between placements rather than at the onset of entering foster care (VDSS employee, Personal communication, 2024). Because of this, placement disruptions are being used as analogous measures of effectiveness, when evaluating potential interventions. Additionally, effort was made to analyze any other impacts on the child's overall wellbeing under each intervention.

### Tiered Payment System

One policy intervention proposed by the Director of York/Poquoson DSS is a tiered payment system for foster families. This policy would fiscally compensate homes that accept high acuity foster youth at an increased level than compared to their peers. Currently, foster families in Virginia are compensated at levels associated with the age and number of children in the home, as seen in Figure 3. (Virginia DSS, 2021). However, there is currently a state level pilot program, the Exceptional Circumstances Pilot Program, being monitored that is allowing for higher compensation on request for resource families who accept children with high acuity challenges.

**Figure 3:** Virginia's Monthly Maintenance Payment Rates

Age of Child	Room and Board	Clothing	Personal Care, Recreation, Reading	Monthly Allowance	Total Payment Rate
0 thru 4	\$339	\$62	\$95	\$0	\$496
5 thru 12	\$388	\$102	\$102	\$10	\$580
13 and over	\$470	\$109	\$109	\$32	\$735

*Source:* (VDSS, 2021)

There is a general lack of studies regarding this intervention. However, one study conducted in the state of Minnesota utilized a difference in difference design centered around a statewide policy that implemented financial

incentives for relatives who adopted or became guardians of foster youth. Only foster children 6 years and older were eligible for this program, naturally lending itself to a quasi-experimental design. The sample size was considerable, with over 50,000 cases. The study concluded that financial incentives were effective in increasing adoption and kin guardianship for foster youth (Simon et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that these findings are not necessarily generalizable to non-relative families, especially those who are not looking to adopt. Additionally, there is no readily available evidence of the impact of tiered payment systems for foster families on placement disruptions for high acuity foster youth.

### **Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care**

Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) is a policy intervention aimed at mitigating the use of restrictive group homes by recruiting, training, and monitoring foster families who take in high acuity foster youth. There are two major variations of MTFC, one focused on preschool aged youth (MTFC-P) and one focused on adolescents (7-17 years of age). Both programs involve efforts to foster healthy behavioral and emotional regulation through foster parent training and support, coupled with youth therapy. This structure typically lasts around 3-9 months and includes caseworkers who work closely with foster families to monitor and reward good behavior. Treatment Foster Care is used to stabilize children and allow them to be placed into more permanent placements after receiving treatment.

Multiple studies support the narrative that MTFC is effective in reducing criminal and delinquent behavior of high acuity foster youth (Chamberlin, 1990, Fisher, 2007, Biehel, 2012). These studies used both RCT's and quasi experimental designs.

Only one study was found on how MTFC affects permanency patterns for foster youth. This RCT was conducted on preschool aged participants (3-5 years of age) of MTFC in a county in Oregon. Children were randomly assigned to MTFC-P and both the caseworker and foster family had to consent. Ultimately, 117 children were in the sample with 57 being treated with the MTFC-P intervention and 60 assigned to regular foster care (RFC). The study found that youth in MTFC experienced fewer placement disruptions than those in regular foster care. Additionally, children in the MTFC-P program who experienced four or more foster care transitions before the study were 2.5 times more likely to be permanently placed within a year compared to children in the RFC program (Fisher & Kim, 2007). Regarding child's wellbeing, the study also showed significant positive impacts on attachment



related behaviors for children in MTFC-P compared to RFC. However, since this sample size is relatively small and in a specific setting, the findings are not as generalizable.

### **Model Family Foster Home Standards**

As mentioned previously, evidence shows that foster children placed in the care of relatives experience higher rates of permanency and overall, well-being than those placed in the care of non-relatives (Rubin et al., 2006 & Day et al., 2024). However, almost 50% of foster children in the nation reside in non-relative care (*KIDS Count Data Center*, n.d.). Some argue that the lengthy foster family approval process is a major deterrence for eligible kinship foster placements (Jennifer Bolden, Personal Communication, 2024). The Administration for Children and Families has published a rule permitting kin-specific licensing standards for kinship foster care home approval. The Model Family Foster Home Standards set forth a process of kinship approval created by the National Association of Regulatory Administration (NARA) and The American Bar Association, alongside other foundations (2014). This process includes a background check that meets state specific criteria, a kin caregiver suitability examination conducted by a caseworker, and a kin caregiver home safety discussion. There have not been studies conducted to analyze this change's impact on kinship placements nor placement disruptions (NARA, 2014).

## Alternatives

Four policy alternatives emerged as viable options for VDSS. These were identified through a comprehensive process that included stakeholder interviews, an in-depth review of relevant literature, and preliminary data analysis.

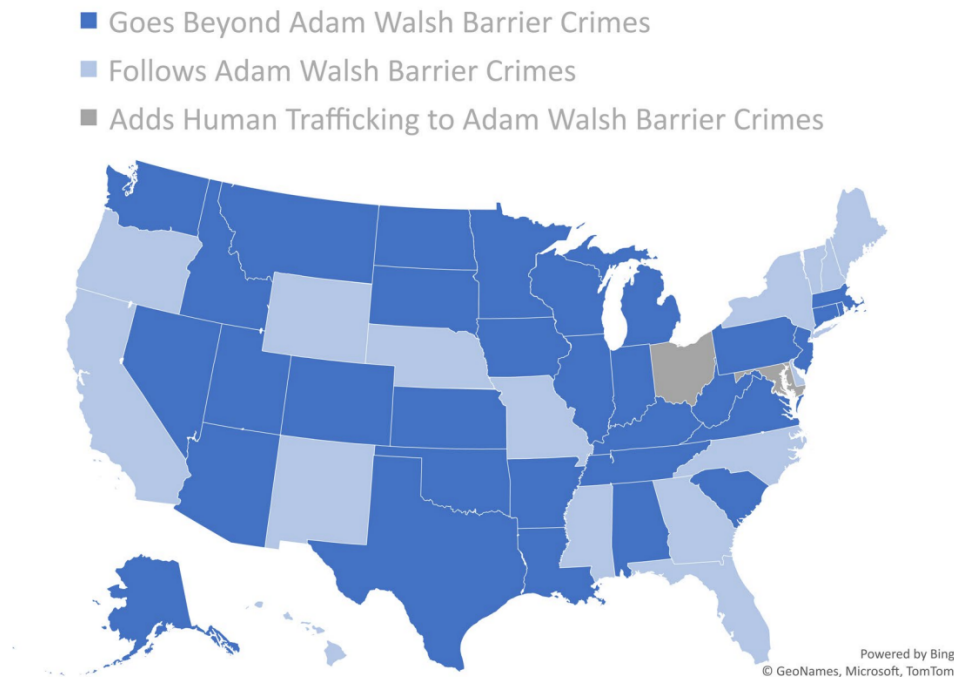
### Decreasing Barrier Crime List to Adam Walsh Act

Currently, the state of Virginia has one of the longest barrier crime lists that disqualifies otherwise eligible relatives to serve as foster parents, at over 160 crimes (American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law & Generations United, 2024). The state of Virginia, in line with federal recommendations, pledges to uphold a “kin first culture” where agencies seek eligible kin or fictive kin placement options before placing a child in a different placement option (York County, n.d.). Kinship care has been shown to be associated with less placement disruption, higher rates of permanency, and general benefits to the child's social and emotional health (Children's Rights, 2023 & Webster et al., 2000). Local agencies are directed to diligently search for and notify relatives regarding the child in foster care and their ability to serve as a foster home through written communication. Additionally, there are decreased licensing standards for these kin placement options, as well as a waiver approval process for relatives who may have a violation of a barrier crime (Avula, 2023). Despite these facilitative developments, only 16% of all of Virginia’s foster children were placed in kinship foster placements, as of January 2025 (VDSS, 2025).

Virginia’s lengthy barrier crime list holds over 160 different convictions that can either deem relatives as permanently ineligible for foster approval or banned for 10 years after conviction (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). This list is a substantial increase from the federally recommended Adam Walsh Act, which outlines certain crimes as either permanent barriers to foster approval or five years ban (American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law & Generations United, 2024). The American Bar Association released a 2022 report regarding Virginia’s significant deviation from the federally recommended list of barrier crimes and its impact on kinship care. This report recommended for the Commonwealth to alter its current barrier crime list to that outlined in the Adam Walsh Act. In addition, the VDSS reported they “had received consistent feedback” from local agencies regarding difficulties in approving eligible relatives for kinship care because of these barrier crimes (Avula, 2023). In 2022, the General Assembly responded by soliciting a report

that involved stakeholder meetings and research regarding the issue. The report was inconclusive on adjusting the current barrier crime list and instead recommended further research on if states with lower lists are associated with higher rates of kinship care (Avula, 2023).

**Figure 4:** State by State comparison of Barrier Crime Lists



*Source:* (American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law & Generations United, 2024)

Support for decreasing the barrier crime list has been persistent amongst local agencies and interests' groups throughout the commonwealth (Voices For Virginia's Children, n.d.). For the barrier crime list to be adjusted, the General Assembly must initiate the change to be executed through VDSS in the upcoming 2026 session.

### Status Quo

In response to the Safe and Sound Task Force report recommendations, VDSS has created several full and part time positions, and two pilot programs directly aimed at alleviating displacement of high acuity foster youth within the commonwealth (Safe and Sound task force, 2023). These positions include two full time High Acuity Placement Coordinators and several part time Placement

Specialists. If a local caseworker has exhausted all options in finding an adequate placement option for a foster youth in their care, they may refer the child's case to these specialists. The specialists then step in and take on the responsibility for searching for and applying for placements on the child's behalf. This unloads a time burden for the caseworker and allows them to better address the immediate needs of both that high acuity youth and the rest of their caseload (Jessie Foreman, Personal Communication, 2024). These state positions are reported to be effective in reducing displacement frequency, however, the data regarding this is not publicly available (Jessie Forman, Personal Communication 2024).

In addition to the relatively new positions, VDSS is currently collecting data on two pilot programs: Exceptional Circumstances Payment (ECP) Program and Enhanced Treatment Foster Care (ETFC) Program. ECP focuses on relieving financial stress of foster parents who accept and care for high acuity youth (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). The motivation of this program is to retain parents who have already been willing to accept this vulnerable population (Jessie Forman, Personal Communication 2024). This tool works in conjunction with the Virginia Maintenance Assessment Tool (VMAT) which provides funds specifically focused at meeting the child's needs (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2019). ECP differs by providing funds to reimburse families for any financial sacrifices they are making to assist a child they are caring for (i.e. missed employment opportunities).

The ETFC Pilot Program builds upon traditional treatment foster care by providing recruited treatment foster care families with an additional \$45,000 stipend that guarantees one non-working parent in the home (*ENHANCED TREATMENT FOSTER CARE (ETFC) REFERRAL FORM*, 2024). This is more commonly known as the Professional Foster Parent Model. Few studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of this professionalization of foster homes. The pilot program is currently being tested out on three contracted TFC agencies: Embrace, The Bair Foundation, and Depaul Community Resources. ETFC is designed as an alternative to group homes and to last 3-6 months, preparing children to be placed in a more long-term foster home. S

### **Expand ECP Program to Full Time**

As described above, the ECP program is currently in pilot form. The ECP is a \$3,000 per household payment designed to be a one-time allocation intended to help families meet the immediate and often critical financial needs

associated with caring for children experiencing disruptions in their living situations. However, a built-in reassessment process is included in the program design, allowing for a review of the family's circumstances after 30 days to determine if continued financial support is warranted. The families are not required to document how the funds are used. The window for this program was originally set to last from February 1, 2023, to May 31, 2023, but has subsequently been extended to June 30, 2025 (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023).

The state of New York has already fully implemented a similar financial support system designed to assist families caring for children with specialized needs (Adoptive and Foster Coalition New York, 2017). This system categorizes payments as either "special" or "exceptional," depending on the severity of the child's challenges and the level of care required. Payments under New York's model are adjusted based on specific eligibility criteria, which include considerations such as medical conditions, developmental disabilities, and behavioral challenges. Unlike the ECP program in its pilot form, the New York system requires local agencies to take responsibility for determining eligibility and setting the appropriate payment rate based on the family's circumstances and the child's needs. Additionally, families participating in New York's program must undergo a reassessment every 60 days to ensure that the payments remain aligned with the child's current needs and the family's capacity to provide adequate care (City of New York Administration for Children's Services, 2019).

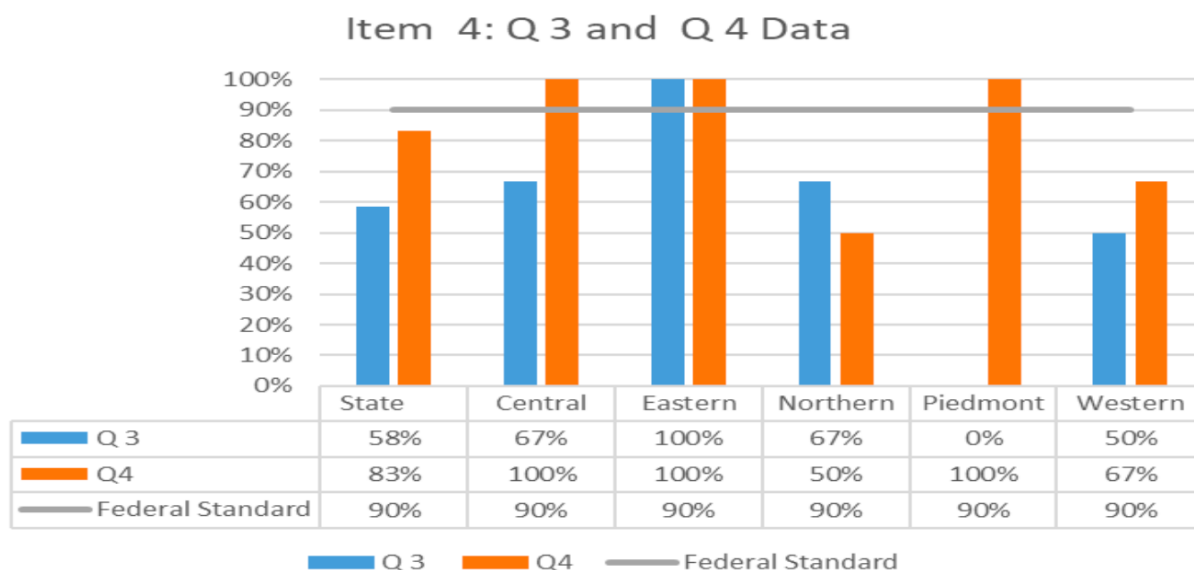
VDSS could similarly implement the ECP to full time status. This would first require a comprehensive evaluation of the data currently being collected by the program lead, Jessie Forman. The data includes the number of requests being filed by locality and agency size, child demographics and needs, amount spent per month, and whether the child remains in placement after exceptional payment ends (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). The evaluation will inform the anticipated full-time cost to VDSS, as well as any adjustments that may need to be made. VDSS will remain responsible for reviewing applications and granting funding. This will likely require an expansion of staff for the current pilot program in response to an anticipated increase in payments granted.

## Expand ETFC Pilot to Additional Providers

In similar fashion, VDSS could expand the ETFC pilot program to full time by including additional private providers as beneficiaries of the funding to provide ETFC. This professional foster parent model has little research and historical implementation in other states. While TFC has become highly utilized, cases of full-time compensation have not been widely recorded (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, n.d.).

After evaluating the corresponding data collection regarding the program's outcomes, VDSS could identify three more TFC providers to be recipients of the funding for ETFC payments. These providers should be located closest to areas in the state with the highest rates of foster youth at risk for displacement. According to the 2025-2029 strategic plan report, the areas that had the lowest permanency results during the most recent phase of data collection were the Northern and Western regions (VDSS, 2025). The appropriate expansion in budget allocation should be estimated using current data of utilization rates across the current pilot program. Further evaluation of the program's effectiveness in increasing placement stability for high acuity foster youth will need to be conducted as soon as possible.

**Figure 5:** Placement Stability percent by region between August 2023 and January 2024



Source: (VDSS, 2025)



## Criteria

To evaluate the previously described alternatives, I utilized the following criteria:

### *Effectiveness*

Since displacement predominantly occurs because of placement disruption and change, rather than at the onset of entering foster care, decreasing placement disruptions and increasing placement stability/permanency will be used as analogous measures of whether an intervention is effective in solving this sensitive problem. Effectiveness will be measured by the associated decrease in placement disruptions for the child in foster care. Data regarding placement movement of the specific subpopulation of high acuity foster youth is not publicly available, however, information regarding general trends of disruption for all foster youth in the commonwealth is (VDSS, 2025). The findings of studies will then be applied to the commonwealth data to project the anticipated change, or lack thereof, in placement disruptions associated with each alternative. This criterion will be ranked on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating there is no evidence to suggest the alternative is effective in decreasing placement disruptions, and a 5 indicating there is robust evidence. Additionally, since effectiveness is crucial to ensuring child welfare and garnering political support, this criterion will be weighted at 0.3.

### *Political Feasibility*

Any changes proposed to such a sensitive population, such as those impacting foster care, are subject to the approval of the General Assembly, making political feasibility a critical consideration. Political feasibility will be operationalized through a multi-faceted approach. This includes identifying political gatekeepers in the General Assembly who can either facilitate or obstruct reform efforts, as well as key interest groups, such as Voices of Virginia's Children. It will also involve analyzing historical challenges to reform by examining past legislation, understanding the reasons for its success or failure, and determining the lessons that can inform the current proposals. This criterion will be ranked on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating there is substantial anticipated pushback against this policy and a 5 indicating there is robust political support by diverse stakeholders. Since political support is crucial to a given alternatives ability to be placed into action, this criterion will be weighted at 0.3.

### *Equity*

Foster youth, especially those who exhibit high acuity needs, are a particularly vulnerable set of community members. When evaluating alternatives, centering child welfare is crucial. Equity will be defined as centering the overall benefit to the specific subpopulation of high acuity foster youth. This will be operationalized by analyzing literature to conclude how a specific alternative impacts placement disruptions for children who meet the characteristics of being high acuity, and not just the general foster care population. Additionally, other indicators of child welfare will be analyzed for each program when accessible, such as behavioral, emotional, mental, and educational health indicators. This information will be cultivated through applicable research and case studies. This criterion will be ranked on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating the initiative shows no evidence for an initiatives impact on the welfare of high acuity foster youth and and a 5 indicating there is robust evidence that the alternative has a positive impact on this specific subpopulation's wellbeing.

### *Cost*

The financial burden of the proposed program will be considered in evaluation. This cost will include any applicable costs to be funded by the Virginia General Assembly. The financial burden will be identified by using past and current budget allocation proposals and approvals. This criterion will be ranked on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating that this policy is extremely costly while a 5 will indicate no to minimal costs.



## Alternative Analysis

### Status Quo

The Virginia General Assembly can continue their current initiatives set out by the Safe and Sound Task Force, including two critical pilot programs (Exceptional Circumstances Payment program and Enhanced Treatment Foster Care program) and maintain both full time and part time staff.

#### *Effectiveness*

Information regarding the specific effectiveness of the current programs is currently not accessible. VDSS employees have noted that they believe they are creating a positive impact on decreasing placement disruptions that may create opportunities for displacement (Jessie Forman & VDSS employee, Personal Communication, 2024). However, quantitative trends indicate that children in the Commonwealth's foster care with more than six placements, the highest amount of placement movements that VDSS records and publishes data on, has only decreased by 12.6% from 2022 to 2024 (VDSS, 2025). It should be noted that this change does not account for other critical changes occurring in the commonwealth over the past two years and may not fully encapsulate effectiveness of the current programs. Since there is uncertainty on the effectiveness of this criteria, it receives a score of 2.5.

#### *Political Feasibility*

There is evidential support by the current administration to address the issue of foster care within the commonwealth. Governor Youngkin has introduced the Safe and Sound Task Force and signed into law several pieces of legislation aimed at increasing kinship care and recruiting foster families to relieve the persistent issue of displacement among high acuity youth in foster care (Safe and Sound Task Force, 2023). These legislative developments have received bipartisan support and allocated significant funding to the new initiatives, including the creation of the Faster Families Highway and funding for the ETFC and ECP programs (Voices for Virginia's Children, n.d.). Proposed additional funding is currently being decided in the 2025 budget amendment session. In recognition of the bipartisan support, and willingness to fund initiatives, there is reason to believe that the continuation of the programs will not face significant political push back. However, due to lack of advertised significant change in placement disruption and kinship care placements, it is possible local agencies may be unsatisfied with the current programs and raise

political pushback. Therefore, political feasibility is ranked 4 for the status quo alternative.

### *Equity*

The initiatives set forth by the General Assembly are specifically aimed at relieving the negative consequences faced by high acuity youth in the commonwealth's foster care system. This targeted approach allows the programs to be tailored to the needs of this subpopulation. Unfortunately, specific data regarding the effectiveness of these programs and subsequent consequences on child well-being are limited in access. While there is reason to believe that the well-being of the children do benefit from these programs due to their targeted nature, lack of data contributes to uncertainty, resulting in a score of 2.5.

### *Cost*

The biennial fiscal budget is currently in the amendment process in the Virginia General Assembly. Both the House and Senate proposed budgets allocate \$1,500,000 per year to “implement pilot programs that increase the number of foster care children adopted” (Virginia Legislative Information System, 2025). This is the same amount allocated in previous years to maintain the Safe and Sound Task Force, resulting in no change in cost (Virginia Legislative Information System, 2025). Subsequently, the cost criterion receives a score of 5.

## Decreasing Barrier Crime List to Adam Walsh Act

The Virginia General Assembly can lower the foster care licensing barrier crime list to the federally recommended list as set out by the Adam Walsh Act for kin relatives seeking licensure.

### *Effectiveness*

While federal, state and local organizations are advocating for decreasing the barrier crime list to a minimal form in effort to increase kinship placements, there is little specific evidence that this policy change is effective in soliciting that result (Voices for Virginia's children, n.d. & Avula, 2023). Local agencies have offered anecdotal evidence in reporting that the barrier crime list is a strong deterrent for otherwise eligible kin in serving as foster parents (Margaret Mack-Yaroch & Jennifer Bolden, Personal Communication, 2024). With this understanding, reducing barrier crimes to becoming a foster parent is expected to result in an increase in eligible kinship care placements.

There is robust evidence that kinship care is associated with decrease in placement disruptions (Onjin et. al, 2019 & Osborne et. al, 2019). A metanalysis study concluded that children in kinship care were 2.6 times less likely to experience three or more placements than those in traditional foster care settings (Winokur et al., 2015). Thus, the effectiveness of this policy hinges on the assumption that decreasing the barrier crime list will solicit more eligible kinship placement options, allowing for more stability for foster children. Recognizing the lack of substantial evidence about the barrier crime list and the robust evidence supporting placement stability in kin placements, these alternatives score a 3 on effectiveness.

### *Political Feasibility*

Past efforts to decrease Virginia's lengthy barrier crime list have solicited responses by VDSS. In 2011, the Virginia Crime Commission recommended amending barrier crime list to allow for case-by-case waivers regarding certain offenses once 10 years has past conviction (Virginia State Crime Commission, 2011). This recommendation was placed into law in 2012, signifying a willingness to adjust these laws as they serve as barriers to kin serving as foster parents. In 2022, the General Assembly required that the department to recommend any suggested changes to the barrier crime list in a report submitted to the Governor and Chairman of the relevant House and Senate committee in 2023. The report concluded that despite urges from the American Bar Association, there was a general lack of data supporting the consequences

of aligning the barrier crime list to that of the federal recommendation. The report also notes that the working group held reservations for changes about licensing standards because federal law prohibited separate standards for kin and non-kin foster parents (Avula, 2023). However, as of September 2023, the Administration for Children and Families issued a ruling explicitly allowing specific licensing standards (Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, 2024).

In response to consistent advocacy by local DSS agencies reporting that the current barrier crime list significantly hinders the amount of kinship placements within the commonwealth, both the Senate and House proposed budget amendments mark specific instructions for VDSS to “develop foster home certification standards for kinship caregivers using as a guide the Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards” (Virginia Legislative Information System, 2025). The Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards specifically advocates for minimal barrier crime lists that align with the federally recommended Adam Walsh Act (National Association of Regulatory Administration, n.d.). Despite past difficulties, the recently developed significant support for this policy initiative offers a significant policy window, resulting in a score of 5 for political feasibility.

### *Equity*

Kinship care is supported by robust research that shows a high association with reducing trauma by maintaining familiarity and reducing community movement for the child (Day & Margo, 2024; Garcia et al. 2025). It is also shown to result in better behavioral, social, mental and emotional outcomes for children when compared to non-kin placements (Goodmen et al., 2011 & Winokur et al., 2015).

However, there is little data on the specific subpopulation of high acuity foster youth and how their well-being fares under kinship placements. Balancing both the known benefits to the general foster care population, with little analysis on how high acuity foster youth specifically fare under foster care compared to traditional placement options, equity receives a score of 3.

### *Cost*

Costs for this policy adjustment would be minimal because there would not be any obvious administrative changes required. The infrastructure to locate, inform and approve kin applications already exists under previous efforts to maintain kin first culture. Additionally, the training and funding for these

placements exists within the current budget. Most notably, since kinship care placements require less administrative burden to become licensed, there is a reduced cost by increasing their approval. Currently, both the Senate and House proposed a budget plan to allocate funding to support kinship care. This budget ranges from \$100,000 to \$425,750. Considering this range of funding is already being allocated, the cost of this policy initiative receives a score of 5.

## **Expand ECP Program to Full Time**

VDSS could continue utilizing the current Exceptional Circumstances Payment (ECP) program past its pilot date, set to end in June 2025, to full time.

### *Effectiveness*

The ECP program is born out of the assumption that by offering financial support to foster families that home high acuity children, these families will face less burn out. Preventing burn out and offering this resource support is expected to retain high acuity foster youth placement options.

Since its inception in February of 2023, the program has received 133 requests, with only 17 denials. They received 24 second requests and 9 third requests. After 60 days of initial request, 69 of children remained in placement. After 6 months, 34 remained in placement. The VDSS employee in charge of oversight of this program did offer that she believes it is effective in allowing foster parents to feel more comfortable leaving work to assist high acuity children in their needs. She also noted it is effective in retaining foster parents who were already willing to accept high acuity foster youth (Jessie Forman, Personal Communication, 2024).

More generally, data regarding the effectiveness of increasing payments to foster parents is lacking. One study found that financial incentives for relatives to adopt or serve as guardians were effective in increasing permanency (Simon et al., 2024). However, no studies have shown significant impact of financial incentives for serving as foster parents. Given the lack of conclusive evidence and weak supporting program specific evidence, ECP scores a 2 on effectiveness.

### *Political Feasibility*

As discussed previously, the Virginia General Assembly and Youngkin administration have exhibited willingness to address the issue of high acuity foster youth displacement. This program was born out of this concern, demonstrating support. Additionally, VDSS recently published their Virginia Kin First Diligent Recruitment Plan that specifically lists exploring avenues to continue this program (2025). Avenues for securing additional funding may face a barrier for garnering support. During the 2024 General Assembly session, Delegate Coyner requested for continuation and funding of this program, but this request died in committee (Virginia Legislative Information

System, 2024). Considering these challenges, the criterion of political feasibility receives a score of 3.

### *Equity*

The ECP program is directly targeted at offering financial relief to foster homes that care for children with high acuity needs. The payment serves to allow for parents to take time off of work and to care for the unique requirements of the child as needed (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). This would ideally lead to the indirect betterment of the child by allowing the parent more flexibility in affording the child proper attention. The logic of this initiative is functioning under the assumption that foster parents are using this payment in effort to benefit the child. While it is painful to think otherwise, this may not always be the case. Since VDSS does not require documentation of how funds are utilized, little is known as to how they are benefitting the child (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). Ultimately, without data about how the wellbeing of the child fares under the ECP pilot program, conclusions cannot be confidently drawn. This lack of information lends itself to an equity score of 2.

### *Cost*

According to the failed budget amendment, funding the ECP program for an additional fiscal year would cost \$175,000 (Virginia Legislative Information System, 2024). After this, VDSS would be able to access federal funding under maintenance payments covered under Title IV-E. While this is not the costliest of expansions, it would still require additional investment from the General Assembly. Therefor this criterion receives a score of 3.



## **Expand ETFC Pilot to Additional Providers**

VDSS could expand the current Enhanced Treatment Foster Care Program (ETFC) to three more outside contracted providers in regions with the highest level of identified at-risk high acuity foster children.

### *Effectiveness*

The ETFC program serves as a step up from more Therapeutic Foster Homes, known as the professional foster parent model. TFC's are predominately utilized for behavioral concerns of the child. However, there is limited association with a decrease in placement disruptions (Chamberlin, 1990; Fisher, 2007; Biehel, 2012). Specific state level data on the effectiveness of TFC's is not accessible.

Since June of 2023, 20 youth have been placed in ETFC placements. The programs head reports success of the programs goal of "helping youth step-down from congregate care into a less restrictive setting" As of March 2025, there were 7 approved ETFC homes, and 6 available to accept children, due to reported success in transitions for the previous youth residing in care. However, a VDSS employee noted that not as many families are being approved for ETFC and thus there are doubts on the overall utilization and effectiveness to date (Jessie Forman, Personal Communication, 2024). Additionally, data would need to be collected and analyzed to understand how ETFC may decrease a child's subsequent placement disruption rate.

Considering the general research consensus that TFC is successful in increasing placement stability, and the recent success in ETFC graduating children to less restrictive placements, there is reason to believe that the program is at least mildly effective by indirectly preparing children for less placement disruption. However, the limit in significant data regarding the enhanced version of TFC results in a score of 2 for effectiveness.

### *Political Feasibility*

Similar to the evaluation conducted for the ECP pilot program, while the program was initiated because there is substantial concern regarding the high acuity foster youth population, the lack of data supporting this specific program's effectiveness will hinder its likelihood of garnering political support. Additionally, there has not been specific mention of expanding this program,



as most support efforts have been aimed at increasing kinship care placements. Subsequently, the criterion of political feasibility receives a score of 2.

### *Equity*

The ETFC program aims to allow for high acuity foster youth to be in homes with foster parents specifically trained on meeting the child's unique needs. TFC is shown to be associated with significant benefits to social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of the child, especially those with previous behavioral, criminal and delinquent backgrounds. ETFC is theorized to continue these benefits by allowing for at least one parent to be a full time stay at home caretaker to the child. However, there is a lack of evidence in how this additional payment succeeds in furthering the well-being of the child apart from traditional TFC. Weighing this information, the equity analysis receives a score of 3.

### *Cost*

Governor Youngkin originally allotted \$1.1 million to the creation of the ETFC pilot program (Voices for Virginia's Children, 2023). To expand the program to double the providers would require roughly an additional \$1,129,000. This lofty additional investment results in a score of 1 for cost.

### Outcomes Matrix

	Status Quo	Decreasing Barrier Crime List to Adam Walsh Act	Expand ECP Program to Full Time	Expand ETFC Pilot to Additional Providers
<b>Effectiveness</b> (weight of 0.3)	2.5	3	2	2
<b>Political Feasibility</b> (weight of 0.3)	4	5	3	2
<b>Equity (.2)</b>	2.5	3	2	3
<b>Cost</b> (1 = high cost, 5 = low cost) (.2)	5	5	3	1
<b>Total</b> (weighted average)	3.55	4	2.5	2

## Recommendation

The above matrix summarizes the analysis of each alternative according to each criterion. Ultimately, the matrix visualizes the recommended policy alternative is to **decrease the current barrier crime list to that of the federally recommended outlined by the Adam Walsh Act**. While the other pilot programs show promise, the inaccessible evidence of effectiveness ultimately hinders both this criterion and its predicted political feasibility. Both criteria were weighted of highest importance, as they ensure that an initiative is both worthwhile and realistic given the political landscape. Moreover, these two programs would have demanded lofty investments by the legislature, when compared to maintaining current initiatives and decreasing the barrier crime list, which estimated little to no additional funding.

It is important to note that the effectiveness in the adjustment of the barrier crime list on placement disruptions and subsequently displacement rates is not conclusive. However, federal and state backing suggest the program has promise and could usher in an increase of kinship care placements which are ultimately associated with more placement stability. The current political support by advocacy organizations, local DSS agencies, and crucially both chambers of the General Assembly note that this alternative has a high likelihood in passing. While overall child well-being is said to be better in kinship care compared to traditional foster placements, it is important to note that little research has been done on these benefits to the specific subpopulation of high acuity youth. Lastly, the cost of this initiative is predicted to be low, especially when compared to the other alternatives, as the infrastructure currently exists to contact and license eligible kin as foster parents. In fact, the licensing process for relatives is lower and thus ushering in kinship care may result in cost savings.

This recommendation also advocates for the continuation of the status quo. Maintaining the Safe and Sound Task Force, as well as the pilot program initiatives are already afforded political and financial support, indicating no greater burden by its continuation. Additionally, the current programs would benefit from further analysis once data is collected on its effects.

## Implementation

The continuation of the current initiatives under the Safe and Sound Task Force, alongside decreasing the barrier crime list for kinship foster care licensing, shows significant promise in providing children with high acuity needs more opportunities for healthy and stable placement options. These initiatives aim to create a more inclusive and effective foster care system that prioritizes the well-being of children while addressing systemic barriers that have historically limited placement options. To ensure the implementation of these recommendations, York/Poquoson DSS should continue advocacy efforts to decrease the barrier crime list, continue to utilize and monitor ECP within the locality, continue utilization of VDSS placement specialists, and participate in advisory meetings.

York/Poquoson DSS should continue its efforts alongside other local agency heads to advocate for the decrease of the commonwealth barrier crime list for kin relatives. Organized legislative advocacy through established coalitions of regional agencies should utilize both qualitative and quantitative evidence that this list is deterring otherwise eligible kin to become licensed. York/Poquoson DSS should take care to track and retain all data regarding kin relatives applying to become licensed or even expressing interest. This should then be compared with approval and kinship placements rates, to determine the severity of the deterrence of the barrier crime list within the locality. Additionally, York/Poquoson DSS should take care to gather evidence of successful kinship placement options specifically for high acuity foster youth. Administration should then combine these findings with neighboring jurisdictions and compiled to be presented to VDSS at dedicated advisory meetings. York/Poquoson DSS should be made to share all non-restricted data with Voices of Virginia's Children, to further expand legislative advocacy.

Following approval of the decreased barrier crime list, York/Poquoson DSS should take care to distribute notification of eligibility to foster care relatives who were previously ineligible. The informational campaign regarding this change will be crucial to ensuring eligible kin are aware of the opportunity to serve as a foster placement of a loved child. This notification should utilize the current infrastructure for contacting relatives to include written contact inviting the family members to “discuss ways to be involved in the child’s life, including the possibility of becoming a foster parent for the child, and explain opportunities available through kinship guardianship assistance” and “Request assistance in locating relatives who may be willing to be involved in the child’s

life, including being considered as possible placements for the child” (VDSS, 2024). These processes have already been established for contacting relatives at the onset of a child entering foster care, thus York/Poquoson DSS should implementation reasonably integrate this step into existing structures.

Once approved, local social workers should educate kinship placements on support services such as the KinGap program, local nonprofits (i.e. Tidewater Friends of Foster Care), and additional maintenance payment opportunities, such as ECP. York/Poquoson DSS should also encourage participation of stakeholders in the proposed Kinship advisory committee at the state level, to ensure transparency and communication between all levels of care providers. Since this would likely be a time commitment from already strained resource families, York/Poquoson DSS/ VDSS should explore the opportunity of an honorarium to adequately compensate kinship relatives who offer their ground level expertise to the advisory committee.

Regarding current initiatives, York/Poquoson DSS should continue to utilize the ECP program and high acuity placement specialists when deemed necessary to avoid displacement incidences. Utilization rates of these services, their outcomes on placement stability and child welfare metrics should be recorded by York/Poquoson DSS to advise VDSS of any changes that should be made to better address the needs of social workers and resource families. Additionally, York/Poquoson DSS should speak with resource families regarding their experiences with ECP and their perspective on any adjustments that could be made to better meet the needs of the foster child.

York/Poquoson DSS plays a critical role in expanding kinship foster care opportunities and ensuring the stability of high-acuity placements. By advocating for a reduced barrier crime list, leveraging data-driven recommendations, and continuing to monitor the outcomes of current VDSS initiatives, the agency can facilitate meaningful change for the high acuity foster youth who call York County and Poquoson home. Through persistent advocacy, data collection, and capitalizing on current infrastructure, York/Poquoson DSS can enhance the foster care system’s inclusivity for children with high acuity needs and maintain its prioritization of the well-being of children and families

## Conclusion

The displacement of high acuity foster youth represents a critical and ongoing challenge for the York/Poquoson Department of Social Services and the broader Virginia child welfare system. This report recommends decreasing the Commonwealth's barrier crime list to align with the federally established Adam Walsh Act—a strategic shift that promises to expand kinship placement options, which are consistently linked to improved stability and well-being for foster youth. By adopting this reform alongside the continuation of existing initiatives under the Safe and Sound Task Force, Virginia can make significant strides toward reducing foster care displacement and ensuring that its most vulnerable children are placed in safe, nurturing environments. These combined efforts have the potential to increase placement permanency, strengthen family connections, and promote better long-term outcomes for high acuity youth both in York/Poquoson's care and across the Commonwealth.

### **AI Disclosure**

AI assisted me in wording my implementation section to be thorough, specifically, I asked it where my explanation was missing information and what could be expanded. AI also assisted in the creation of my executive summary and conclusion sections.

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### Appendix

Status Quo effectiveness calculation	<p>Percentage of children in Virginia's foster care that have experienced 6+ placements each month of the given year divided by 12:</p> <p>Average of 6+ placements in 2022 =  <math>(16.75\% + 16.54\% + 16.32\% + 16.23\% + 16.32\% + 13.41\% + 13.55\% + 16.33\% + 12.94\% + 12.36\% + 12.18\% + 15.79\%) / 12 = \mathbf{14.89\%}</math></p> <p>Average of 6+ placements in 2024=  <math>(12.56\% + 12.66\% + 12.29\% + 12.17\% + 15.71\% + 11.95\% + 12.33\% + 12.47\% + 12.72\% + 12.65\% + 12.75\% + 15.86\%) / 12 = \mathbf{13.01\%}</math></p> <p>Percent change between years =  <math>(14.89\% - 13.01\%) / 14.89\% = \mathbf{12.6\%}</math></p> <p><i>Data sourced from VDSS</i></p>
Expand ETFC Pilot to Additional Providers cost calculation	<p><math>(319.1 - 282.54) / 282.54 = 0.129</math></p> <p><math>\\$1.1\text{million} \times 1.129 = \\$1,129,000</math></p> <p><i>CPI information sourced from Federal Bank of St. Louis</i></p>