

Foster parent recruitment and retention: Developing resource families for Washington State's children in care

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Partners for Our Children is committed to improving the lives of Washington state foster children through rigorous research, analysis and evidence-based innovation. The organization, founded in 2007, is a collaborative effort of the University of Washington School of Social Work, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services and private funders.

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INTRODUCTION

Partners for Our Children (POC) is a unique collaboration between the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, the University of Washington School of Social Work and the private sector committed to making positive changes in the child welfare system.

Like many other child welfare systems across the country, DSHS' Children's Administration (CA) is trying to do a better job of recruiting and retaining foster parents. As part of this effort, CA asked Partners for Our Children to identify challenges and opportunities for improvement.

POC undertook a three-pronged analysis: 1) review of literature and reports, 2) review of state child welfare trends, and 3) stakeholder interviews.

It's important to note that although a growing proportion of children is placed with unlicensed relatives, the focus of this document is licensed foster parents. For an excellent review of kinship care see Washington State Institute for Public Policy report, 02-06-3901.¹

Report Structure

The report is presented in three sections: 1) literature review, 2) trends, child and foster parent characteristics, and 3) Washington State policy and practice.

Each section begins with a review of the data, followed by key findings, which includes a brief summary. The last section — concluding analysis and potential strategies — contains an overall analysis and a related list of potential strategies that are based on a statewide assessment, recognizing the need to tailor specific approaches to a local context.

SECTION I: LITERATURE AND REPORT REVIEW

POC divided our review of literature into two parts: 1) a review of published research and reports, and 2) a review of strategy literature.

Review of Research Literature

We conducted a review of research and reports generated by organizations and agencies, but found that there is little rigorous evaluation research related to recruitment and retention. Instead, these findings are mainly drawn from satisfaction or exit surveys of licensed

caregivers, or feedback from child welfare agency staff and administrators. A few studies examined agency administrative data.

Foster Parent Recruitment

In 2002, the Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, issued a report summarizing findings from a national survey of foster parents and child welfare agency staff, identifying the following barriers to recruiting foster parents:

- negative public perceptions of foster parenting,
- inadequate agency responsiveness to prospective foster parents' initial inquiries,
- burdensome application processes and,
- inordinate licensing and training requirements.²

Child welfare staff responding to the 2002 national survey believed that foster parents' "word-of-mouth" was most effective in recruiting potential foster parents. Yet most states were underutilizing foster parents as recruiters. Instead, many state foster care program managers reported relying mostly on media campaigns and community presentations. These strategies tended to recruit families who were unwilling to care for many of the children in need of foster homes, particularly school-age, teenage, and special needs children.³ Also, national survey data found that foster parents who first heard about fostering through mass media provided fewer years of service than those who had learned about fostering through a religious organization.⁴

Foster parent motivation and retention

Two studies focusing on motivation for fostering identified several factors influencing the decision to foster including:

- to save children from harm and to take in children who need loving parents⁵
- moral/religious duty⁶
- friends' experience and family and community encouragement⁷
- contact with foster parents or children
- interest in adopting⁸
- personal resources (e.g., adequate housing and time)⁹
- employment in a helping profession (e.g., teaching and social work)¹⁰

However, evidence exists that most foster parent applicants never complete training or quit fostering soon after training.¹¹ Furthermore, among the cadre of licensed homes, about 20 percent provide 60 to 80 percent of the foster care.¹² Other studies have also found that foster parents who were willing to foster special needs children were more likely to have foster children placed with them.¹³

Satisfaction with Fostering

Because foster parents' satisfaction with their fostering role is likely to contribute to their longevity as foster parents, researchers have tried to identify aspects of fostering which most trouble foster parents. The factors mentioned most frequently by foster parents include:

- reimbursement rates¹⁴
- training¹⁵
- child care allowances¹⁶
- money for clothing, school activities and special needs¹⁷
- assistance obtaining services¹⁸
- high needs of children¹⁹
- input into decisions affecting foster children²⁰
- support and communication with caseworkers^{21, 22}
- involuntary closure of homes.²³

Review of the Strategy Literature

A number of strategies for improving foster home recruitment and retention have been developed and implemented by foundations and advocacy organizations. POC reviewed a variety of resource materials available from many of these programs. A summary of these major recruitment and retention efforts follows.

Child Welfare League of America

Foster Parent Retention and Recruitment: The State of the Art in Practice and Policy is a helpful guidebook with history, case examples, and recommendations for retention, support and recruitment of licensed caregivers.²⁴ The authors suggest practical ways to support foster parents by 1) recognizing their contributions, 2) enhancing their skills and competencies, 3) providing child care and respite care 4) matching the placement needs of children with the capacities of the foster parents and 5) joining with and relating to foster parents as members of a professional team.

Casey Family Programs' Breakthrough Series Collaborative (<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/BreakthroughSeries/RecruitingRetaining.htm>)

In 2002, Casey Family Programs supported teams of child welfare staff, resource families, community members, and youth in care in 22 public child welfare agencies to improve the recruitment and retention of resource families.

AdoptUsKids (<http://www.adoptuskids.org>)

AdoptUsKids is a national initiative to partner with states and tribes to recruit foster and adoptive families by providing on-site training and technical assistance to child welfare staff, maintaining a database of waiting children and prospective adoptive parents, and conducting national multi-media campaigns.

Family to Family (<http://www.aecf.org/Home/MajorInitiatives/Family%20to%20Family.aspx>)

Funded by Annie E. Casey Foundation, Family to Family is an initiative to reform family foster care with a focus on family engagement, community-based partnerships and resource family recruitment and retention.

Key Findings

1. "Word-of-mouth" from satisfied caregivers is believed to be the most effective recruitment tool.
2. Negative public perceptions, burdensome application processes, and poor agency responsiveness contribute to recruitment challenges.
3. Targeted recruitment is more effective than general media approaches.
4. Foster parents are motivated by altruism and/or a desire to adopt.
5. Many foster parent applicants do not complete the process.
6. A small percent of foster parents provide the majority of care.

The literature suggests several ways in which foster parent recruitment and retention could be improved; and it is likely that a variety of efforts will need to be undertaken and evaluated to determine their relative effectiveness.

A dominant theme emerging from this analysis is that retention *is* recruitment. Foster parents are the best asset the agency has for recruiting new foster parents. Focusing on the needs of existing foster parents and recognizing their contributions is critical to recruitment of future foster parents.

The majority of foster parent applicants do not complete the licensing process. Assisting applicants throughout the process and following-up with those who drop-out could potentially increase the number of licensed foster parents.

It is not clear why some foster homes are underutilized. Understanding this phenomenon better could lead to efficiencies. For instance, if some families are unwilling or unable to care for the children in need of placement, targeted recruitment and better early communication is in order.

How the child welfare agency approaches its work with applicants and foster parents will have a major influence on any retention effort. Approaches which build positive relationships with the foster parents, respond to concerns in a timely manner, help foster parents manage children's behaviors, reduce the amount of "bureaucratic red tape" encountered, and enhance foster parent input are more likely to succeed.

SECTION II: TRENDS, CHILD AND FOSTER PARENT CHARACTERISTICS

To better understand the challenges of foster care recruitment and retention, this section covers selected characteristics and experiences of children in care and their caregivers. We divided this section into three parts: 1) child placement and foster care trends, 2) child characteristics, and 3) foster parent characteristics.

Child Placement and Foster Care Trends

Here we describe trends in Washington's out of home care population, child demographics, placement characteristics, caregiver descriptive data, and socioeconomic trends that may affect foster parent recruitment and retention.

General Trends

An analysis of Washington State administrative data illustrates recent child welfare placement trends. As seen in Figure 1, between 2000 and 2007, the number of children in out-of-home care increased by 17 percent from approximately 8,600 to 10,400.²⁵ A recent analysis of reunification patterns over the past decade links this growth in the foster care population to increased length of stay rather than increased entries to care.²⁶ During this same period there was a decline in new foster home licenses from 1,440²⁷ in 2000 to a low of 1,182²⁸ in 2005, followed by an uptick in 2007 to 1,348.²⁹ The rate of retention has remained relatively constant with roughly 58

percent of foster families remaining licensed after three years, excluding those who adopted.³⁰

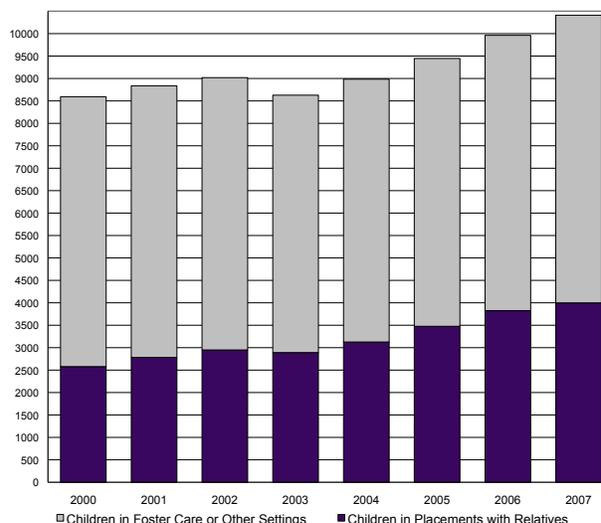
Inactive Foster Homes

An analysis of foster home inactivity has found that 17 percent of homes once licensed do not have an associated foster placement and about 35 percent of licensed homes do not have a placement in any one year.³¹ These rates may be somewhat inflated because they do not account for homes that become licensed for specific limited purposes. For instance, some licensed caregivers provide respite through the Division of Developmental Disabilities, while others become licensed to care for an out-of-state relative child.³² It follows that these homes would not be available to serve the pool of children needing foster placements. Since detailed licensing and placement data are not readily available, it is not possible to quantify the impact of these licensures and other factors that contribute to the reported rates of inactivity. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that some of the factors are influenced by agency practices. Further exploration into utilization and development of licensed foster homes is warranted.

Relative Caregivers

CA has actively pursued relative caregivers as the placement of first choice for children in care. Figure 1 shows the percentage of children in relative placement has grown in almost every year since 2000 and now accounts for 38 percent of all placements.³³ However, if the foster care population continues to grow without corresponding increases in kinship care, there will be continued pressure for non-relative placements.

Figure 1: Children in Out of Home Care, 2000-2007, by Type of Setting



Reduction in Residential/Group Care Beds

Over the past few decades there has been a trend toward decreased placements and length of stay in group care or residential treatment settings.³⁴ Between 2000 and 2004 alone, the number of licensed group care beds in Washington decreased by 53 percent from 948³⁵ to 400.³⁶ Thus, it appears that foster parents and kin may be increasingly caring for children and youth with complex needs who would have previously been placed in congregate care settings.

Changing Role of Foster Parents

Historically, calls for foster parents focused on attracting substitute parents for children in care. Over time the role of foster parents has expanded to include expectations that they will engage with birth parents, facilitate sibling relationships, and address the well-being of children in their care. Foster parenting, to some extent, has shifted from a mainly custodial role, to one in which caregivers take an active role in the treatment team.³⁷

Child Characteristics

Reasons for Placement

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, among children in Washington who were victims of maltreatment in 2005, over 80 percent experienced neglect, 17 percent were victims of physical abuse and 6 percent were victims of sexual abuse.³⁸ Parental substance abuse is strongly linked to child neglect.³⁹ A child's own behavioral or emotional problems can also contribute to out of home placement; in Washington this is a factor in 18% of first entries into care.⁴⁰ Regardless of the reasons for entry, children in care face multiple challenges, including elevated rates of poverty, trauma, developmental delays, health and mental health concerns.^{1,42}

Racial Disproportionality

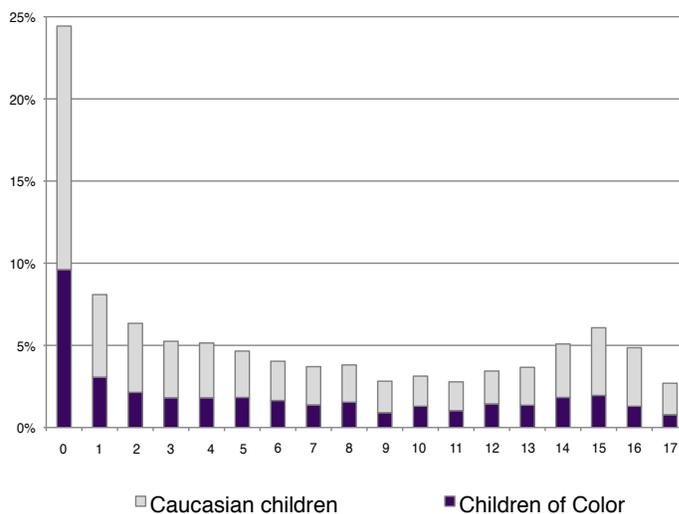
An enduring and concerning characteristic of the child welfare system is racial disproportionality.^{43,44} African American children make up 4.3 percent of the general population in Washington State, but 10.1 percent of children in out-of-home care. Native American children represent 2 percent of the Washington population but 12.2 percent of children in out-of-home care.⁴⁵ Disproportionality increases at key decision points at every stage in a case, such as initial referral, removal, termination of parental rights, and length of stay.⁴⁶

Entries by Age and Race/Ethnicity

As seen in Figure 2, infants under one year comprise almost one quarter of those entering care⁴⁷; many have been prenatally exposed to drugs and alcohol and they experience longer stays in care and are more likely to be adopted than any other age group.⁴⁸ Research with this population of infants documents a marked increase in dysregulation, rendering them more difficult to calm and more likely to have disruptions in sleep.^{49,50} After the age of one, entries by age decline until adolescence. While young children typically are placed due to their parents' problems, for teens their own behavioral problems often contribute to placement. Among youth 13 and older, child behavior was indicated as a placement factor in 61 percent of cases.⁵¹

Also shown in Figure 2 is the proportion of children in each age group who are Caucasian or children of color (African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian). Children of color represent about 40 percent of the population at every age.⁵²

Figure 2: First Entries into Care by Age and Race in CY 2007 (N=4858)

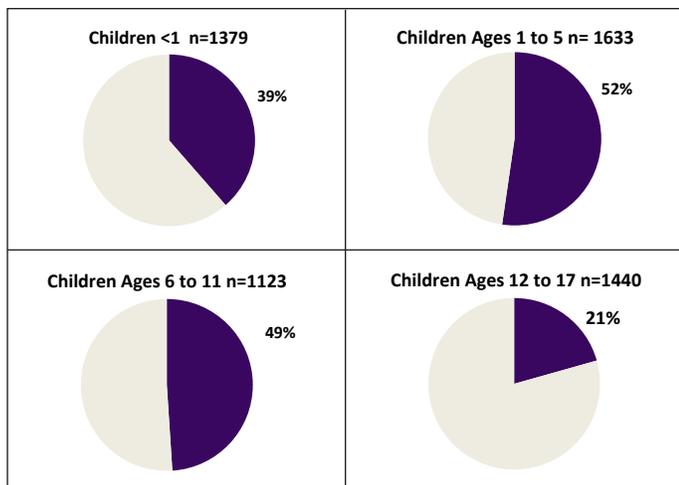


Rate of Relative Placement by Race

Since the rate of kinship care may impact the demand for licensed care, we examined the percentage of children in kinship care by age and race/ethnicity. Among Washington State children first entering care in 2007, relative placement rates (defined as relative placement in any one of a child's first three placement events) were similar for Caucasian, African American, and Multi-

racial children (37 percent to 39 percent); the relative placement rate for Native American children was higher at 46 percent.⁵³ However, as seen in Figure 3 below, when the rate of kinship care was examined by age, adolescents were least likely to be placed with relatives, followed by infants.⁵⁴

Figure 3: Children in a Relative Placement in any one of first three placements by age groups. First Entries CY 2007 (N=5575)



Foster Parent Characteristics

Availability of Homes by Race

The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 requires that “states must diligently recruit foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in the state who need foster and adoptive homes”.⁵⁵ While children of color comprise about 40 percent of those entering care in Washington, 26 percent of foster parents are people of color.⁵⁶ CA has targeted recruitment within specific ethnic and racial groups and in neighborhoods where entry rates are high.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, over the past five years there has been a 12 percent decline in the number of licensed minority foster homes from 1,663 in 2002 to 1,456 in 2007.⁵⁸ Income requirements, background checks, and other licensing standards can create barriers to foster care licensure in communities of color.⁵⁹

Employment Status and Child Care

Foster care payments cannot be the sole source of income for the foster family. The likelihood that foster parents will be employed outside the home is high, especially

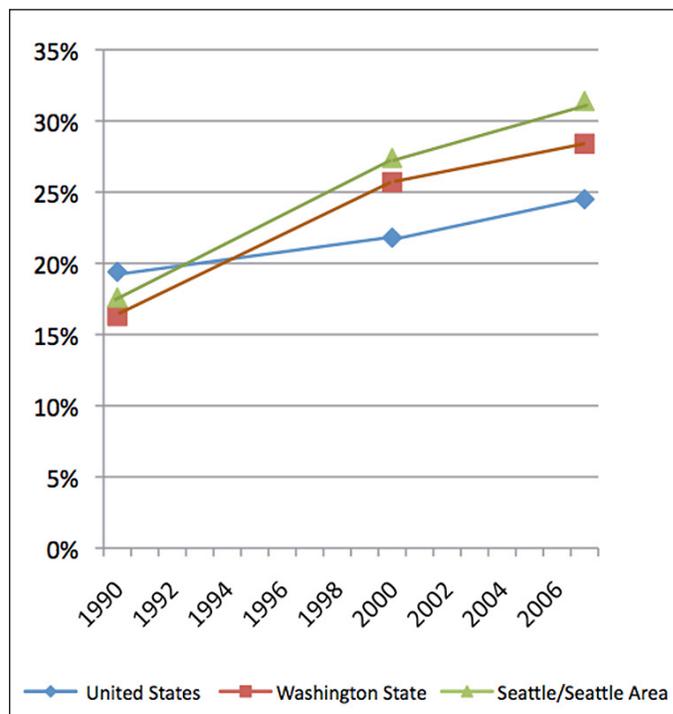
among those who are single heads of household. National data indicate that maternal workforce participation has increased dramatically from 38 percent in 1970 to 68 percent in 2000.⁶⁰

A high rate of employment among the pool of potential foster parents necessitates access to quality child care. Yet the shortfall in supply of child care options has been exacerbated in Washington State by a 17 percent decrease in child care slots over the past five years.⁶¹

Housing Costs and Board Rates

The potential pool of foster parents is also affected by the cost of living in Washington State and the foster care board rate. As a proxy for cost of living, we examined the trend in mortgage costs equaling 30 percent or more of income. As seen in Figure 4, in 1990, 16.3 percent of mortgages equaled 30 percent or more of total income in Washington compared to 28.4 percent in 2007.

Figure 4: Mortgage Greater Than or Equal to 30% of Income (1990 to 2007)



At the same time boarding rates have remained relatively low. A 2006 report found that Washington ranked in the bottom third of all states for foster care rates.⁶² In 2007 Washington’s foster boarding rate increased 5.5 percent with a range of \$424 to \$575 monthly (dependent on the age of the child), an incremental step in closing this gap.⁶³ Research indicates that increasing boarding rates can positively affect the supply of foster homes.⁶⁴

Key Findings

1. In Washington, the number of children in care has increased, the number of newly licensed homes has decreased and the number of kinship placements has increased.
2. The demands on foster parents have increased.
3. In terms of race and ethnicity, the greatest need is for foster parents of color.
4. The pool of potential foster parents is affected by cost of living, maternal employment, child care, and boarding rates.
5. Infants and adolescents likely present the greatest placement challenges.

The child welfare system faces substantial challenges in its effort to recruit foster families. Increases in maternal workforce participation, rising expectations of foster parents, a boarding rate that has not kept pace with costs, and a child population with high caregiving demands create unprecedented recruitment challenges. It has proven especially difficult to recruit families of color; even with targeted efforts the number of minority foster parents has recently fallen.

The two largest age cohorts of children entering care, infants and adolescents, strain the placement resources of the child welfare system. Infants enter care at much higher rates than children of any other age, and many have been prenatally exposed to drugs and alcohol. Considering the demands of parenting a high needs infant, coupled with the fact that a large proportion of potential foster parents is likely to be employed, brings into focus the recruitment difficulties for the single largest group of entering children.

Recruitment of licensed homes for adolescents presents a separate set of issues. Adolescents are less likely to be placed with kin and more frequently struggling with behavior problems. Although the magnitude of the problem is difficult to quantify, key informant interviews document the challenges finding homes for adolescents.

Another group of children frequently difficult to place is sibling groups. It is best practice to keep siblings together unless it jeopardizes their safety. Again, data are not easily obtained regarding the number and size of sibling groups but key informant interviews confirm that this is a formidable problem for the field.

SECTION III: POLICY AND PRACTICE IN WASHINGTON STATE

By conducting stakeholder interviews, attending statewide meetings and reviewing agency reports, we gained insights into the policies and practices guiding Washington's foster parent recruitment and retention efforts. This section presents our findings.

Recruitment and Retention Responsibilities

In Washington, the CA Division of Licensed Resources (DLR) and private agencies share responsibility for foster home recruitment and retention. Recruitment occurs primarily through contracts as described below, however DLR is responsible for the final approval of all foster care licenses. CA also issues contracts to private agencies to assist CA in the retention of foster homes.

Recruitment and Retention Coordination

CA's partnership with recruitment and retention contractors has evolved over the past decade. Shifting from a short-term statewide contract with one agency to the current model of regionally organized 36-month contracts with three local agencies, CA promotes a long-term grassroots community engagement effort for recruitment and ongoing support to foster parents. These contracts were increased in 2008 by roughly 40 percent to \$1.5M annually after six years at the previous rate.⁶⁵ These efforts are also supported by Family to Family recruitment and retention committees.

Statewide and regional Recruitment and Retention Teams, comprised of CA and contract agency staff, meet regularly to monitor progress and to strategize improvements in recruitment and retention efforts. The addition of these groups has improved coordination and allowed contractors to learn from each other.

Improvements in Tracking

In addition to coordination efforts, CA has introduced a mechanism to track the foster parent licensing process. In 2008, the Statewide Recruitment Information Center, a data system designed to track all foster parent applicants from initial inquiry through licensure, was introduced. This has the potential to generate valuable information regarding applicant attrition, which can then be used by CA and its contractors to improve the licensing rate.

Administrative Policies

One impediment to the retention component of private contracts is the DSHS confidentiality policy, designed to protect foster parents from invasions of their privacy. Due to this policy, contract agencies do not have access to contact information for the foster homes they are charged with supporting unless the foster parent has signed a release of information. CA has outreach strategies to inform foster parents about support resources. For example, the monthly caregiver newsletter provides contact information and updates from contractors. However, it is incumbent upon foster parents to contact these agencies for support services. In spite of this obstacle, the recruitment and retention contractors collectively have developed an active network of foster parent support groups. There are over 60 such groups led by experienced foster parents meeting across the state. There are also foster parent liaisons in each region who work with foster parents to address individual needs and resolve concerns.

Fragmentation within CA

Foster parent applicants and licensed caregivers seek continuity of relationship and support from within CA. By way of background, in CA prior to 1998 there was no separation between foster care licensing and child and family services. In order to follow best practice standards calling for the separation of approval of homes from those responsible for placement decisions, DLR was created within CA as an entity more narrowly focused on licensing homes and investigating allegations of maltreatment in licensed facilities. The Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) was designated to provide all other services to children and their families.

This separation of functions was intended to insulate licensors from pressure to maintain much needed foster care beds; and it appears to have met this objective. However, according to interviews with key informants, the organizational structure of CA hinders coordination between functional units and undermines recruitment and retention. Their separation has created tension between DLR and DCFS. In offices where there is strong coordination and collaboration between DLR and DCFS, the problems are lessened. However, DCFS staff, who come face-to-face with the challenges of placing children, sometimes find DLR efforts to be too focused on enforcement of standards rather than problem-solving. Additionally, some foster parents have reported a feeling of intimidation and disrespect when they are being

investigated by DLR/CPS for allegations of abuse or neglect, most of which result in a finding of “unfounded.” DLR staff can experience DCFS staff as uninformed about the difficulties in upholding licensing standards to maintain a cadre of high quality foster parents.

Reporting structures further exacerbate coordination problems within CA. DLR and DCFS have parallel reporting relationships that come together at the Director of Field Operations level. However, this structure has been temporarily modified with the current acting Assistant Secretary as there is no Director of Field Operations until a permanent Assistant Secretary is hired.

Fragmentation Between the Public and Private Sectors

The division of labor between the public agency and private foster parent recruitment contractors has led to some confusion and dissatisfaction with the public agency among foster parents. Private agency contractors are charged with recruiting foster parents and supporting them up to the point of licensure and post-licensure. However, ongoing foster parent support is generally not a primary responsibility of case-carrying CA workers. Understandably, foster parents want contact with and support from the case worker who has decision making responsibility for the children in their home. Foster parents, often unaware of the public/private division of labor, may view CA workers as unhelpful and unresponsive to their support needs, a sentiment voiced in our stakeholder interviews.

Another difficulty that surfaced in the key informant interviews is the frustration foster parents experience in response to CA delays in licensing, home studies and inquiries regarding child needs and concerns. The statewide Recruitment and Retention Oversight Team (previously described) has chosen to spearhead an effort to support foster parents by improving customer service within CA.

Targeted Recruitment, Placement and Matching

In 2007, CA worked with consultants from AdoptUSKids to develop a market-based approach to the recruitment of resource families. This process provided Recruitment and Retention Teams with child data and information regarding the geographic distribution of licensed foster families. CA is using data collected through certain Family to Family offices to track child removals and licensed resources on a geographic basis. CA offices could benefit from more detailed information about the children entering care (and those making placement changes) and the supply of foster parents. Figure 4 provides an example

of data elements that at the regional or office level could facilitate targeted recruitment based on child needs.

Figure 4: Child and Foster Family Data Elements to Inform Targeted Recruitment

CHILD LEVEL DATA	FOSTER FAMILY DATA
Race Distribution	Race Distribution
Age Distribution	Age range preferred
Special Needs	Special needs accepted
Geographic Location	Geographic Location
# in sibling groups	# of beds licensed
# likely to go to TPR	# possible foster/adopt

Permanency Planning

Although the first goal of child welfare case planning is normally reunification, when this is not possible an alternate permanent plan is needed. Currently, practices and policies regarding licensing, placement matching and training of foster parents do not always easily facilitate adoption. Some of the barriers to timely permanency are tied to federal mandates regarding caregiver qualifications and background checks. However, it is worth examining state and local policies and practices that tend to delay the time to adoption when parental rights are terminated. As an example, Washington had put in place a unified home study for foster adopt families, but due to budget constraints and competing demands, the unified home study, or dual foster adopt licensure, is not currently available.

Diligent recruitment through Family to Family

Through the Family to Family initiative, regions are identifying specific neighborhoods with high numbers of children removed from their families’ care and targeting recruitment of foster homes in those neighborhoods. Some localities are using GIS mapping software called *Streets and Trips* to more easily identify communities where homes need to be recruited to allow children to remain in their communities and schools. The visual display has proven to be a helpful tool in engaging communities.

New Legislation

In an effort to increase the ability to place children with kinship caregivers, the Washington state legislature passed a law in 2007 expanding the definition of kinship caregivers who can be placement resources. The current

statute allows for placement of children with blood relatives, step family members, and relatives of a child’s half siblings; for Native American children, placements are allowed with extended family members, as defined by the law or custom of the child’s tribe.⁶⁶ Children can also be placed with individuals who were known to the child or family prior to placement without licensing. CA has also increased resources to identify and assess kinship care placements.

Key Findings

1. Recruitment and retention coordination strategies have been implemented.
2. DSHS confidentiality policy hampers foster parent support.
3. Substantial fragmentation exists within CA and between CA and private recruitment and retention contractors, which undermines relationship building with foster parents.
4. DLR response to inquiries and applications sometimes is not timely and not coordinated with recruitment efforts.
5. Foster parent licensing, training and placement matching are not optimally aligned with adoption requirements.
6. CA offices could benefit from descriptive and need-based data regarding the children in need of placement and the supply of foster families.

CA has taken a number of steps to improve coordination of recruitment and retention efforts at the regional and statewide levels. Longer term contracts and CA/contractor teams have facilitated coordination. In addition, technology is being employed to monitor recruitment, improve marketing, and target outreach. Nonetheless, fragmentation both within CA (DLR and DCFS) and between CA and private contractors impedes recruitment and retention efforts. Foster parents can find the “system” confusing, frustrating, and unresponsive. Reconfiguring these organizational relationships to better integrate child and family services with recruitment and retention is one potential solution.

Foster parent licensing, training and placement matching have not kept pace with the agency’s related goals of promoting placement stability and permanency. Streamlining licensure for foster adopt families, training foster parents to work more closely with birth families, and placing children according to the capacities of foster parents

would improve the experiences of foster parents, birth parents, and children alike.

Finally, providing CA offices with child level and corresponding foster family data could facilitate targeted recruitment; this would serve to match the children at placement with families who can address their needs for healthy development, safety, stability, and permanency.

SECTION IV: CONCLUDING ANALYSIS AND POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

The preceding analyses surfaced several challenges and opportunities regarding recruitment and retention of foster homes in Washington State. In this concluding section, we bring the various findings together to identify leverage points that could increase the number of foster parents and enhance their ability to provide high quality care to children.

It should be noted that our analysis takes a statewide approach. Recognizing that there is significant variation among regions and offices, specific strategies require development within a local context. Also, recruitment and retention of foster homes is arguably more difficult now than it has been historically. CA and contract agencies have made important strides in improving the recruitment and retention process, many of which are noted in this document.

To meet the needs of children in foster care going forward, the child welfare system will need to be both data driven and strategic.

Data Driven

There are several opportunities to use data to inform recruitment and retention. CA has embarked on some of these approaches and others will be new endeavors. The following is at least a partial list.

Describing Children and Foster Families

To better identify the types of foster families needed at a local level, descriptive data regarding children entering care or moving within care and the corresponding pool of foster parents should inform recruitment. This would complement data provided through *Streets and Trips* software used to identify neighborhoods with high rates of child entry to care. In addition, CA is matching data regarding child removal locations with information about

where foster parents live, their lifestyles and where they get their information. CA's new management information system, FamLink, has the potential to provide more data concerning characteristics of children in out-of-home care that could also improve these efforts.

Understanding Why Some Homes are not Used

In Washington as well as other states, about a third of foster homes is not used in any one year and some licensed homes never have a child placed at all. Understanding this phenomenon could possibly increase the use of existing homes or at a minimum provide information about the types of foster homes least likely to be used.

Tracking Foster Parent Applicant Attrition

Introduction of the Statewide Recruitment Information Center will provide valuable information regarding applicant attrition. These data can be used to improve licensing rates.

Strategies

Increase Homes for Children who are Difficult to Place

Recruitment aimed at attracting families open to caring for children who are most difficult to place (e.g. large sibling groups, teens, infants with special needs) could reduce stress on the child welfare system. Educating potential foster parents about the needs of children and youth most in need of placement and the supports available to assist families is one approach to increasing the number of homes. In addition, flexible use of incentives and support could also help increase placement options. Assessing current training, respite care, after school resources for older children and youth, and other supports for those who care for special needs children might be considered.

Assess the Extent to Which Boarding Rates Limit Recruitment and Retention Efforts

Research has shown foster care boarding rates to be associated with the availability of foster homes. Washington's basic boarding rates are lower than the national average in spite of relatively high housing costs in many areas of the state. Collecting information from current and potential foster parents about their perceptions of the adequacy of current board rates could help identify whether rates should be raised.

Align Foster Parent Licensing and Adoption

Some foster parent applicants are interested in adoption. Concurrent planning could be strengthened through alignment of licensure, training, and placement matching. Children would benefit from more timely permanence and costs would be reduced by shortened lengths of stay.

Reduce Organizational Fragmentation

Fragmentation, between DLR and DCFS within CA, and between CA and private contract agencies, contributes to recruitment and retention problems. Some strides have been made but there appears to be more work to be done on this front. An issue that on the face of it seems solvable is the DSHS confidentiality rule that prevents

sharing of foster parent contact information with private agencies providing support. There may be other “fixes” that could reduce fragmentation. However, reconfiguring these relationships to create a system that foster families can understand and easily access will require additional analysis, innovative thinking, and an ongoing commitment from all parties.

Conclusion

POC recognizes that CA is committed to addressing the recruitment and retention challenges our state faces. We appreciate the opportunity to assist CA in its efforts, and look forward to working in partnership on these and other issues in the future.

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