

Foster Home Recruitment and Retention: One Size Does Not Fit All

By Stacey Priest and
Jennifer MacBlane

Introduction

Nationally, the number of children entering foster care increased every year from 2013 to 2017.¹ Meanwhile, at least half the states in the United States saw a decrease in the number of available foster homes.² Traditional means for recruitment and retention may need to be revisited to be more suitable for modern families.

When placement is necessary, research has shown that children placed in foster homes have better outcomes when compared to children placed in congregate care settings (shown below). Healthy attachments with a parent figure are necessary for children of all ages and help to reduce problem behaviors and interpersonal difficulties; even children who have never experienced secure attachments can develop them in appropriate family settings.³

Congregate Care vs. Family Foster Care⁴

Congregate Care

- Young adults who have left group care are less successful than their peers in foster care.
- Youth with at least one group-home placement were almost 2.5 times more likely to become delinquent than their peers in foster care.
- Youth placed in group homes, rather than in family care, have poorer educational outcomes, including lower test scores in basic English and math.
- Youth in congregate care are also more likely to drop out of school and less likely to graduate high school.
- Youth who have experienced trauma are at greater risk for further physical abuse when they are placed in group homes, compared with their peers placed in families.

Family Foster Care

- Fewer placements.
- Less time in out-of-home care.
- Less likely to be re-abused.
- More likely to be placed near their community of origin.
- More likely to be placed with their siblings.

With the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), when placement is necessary, the federal government has recently moved to structure federal funding to support that children should be placed in foster home settings. Family First limits Title IV-E claiming for children in non-family-based settings to a maximum of two weeks unless certain criteria are met. States need to prioritize implementing practical and targeted solutions to recruit and retain foster parents. Agencies have varying challenges when it comes to recruitment and retention.

No single solution will work in every state or jurisdiction.

To develop and maintain a pool of qualified foster parents, child welfare agencies must assess what is and isn't working in their jurisdiction and address those specific challenges. Below we highlight examples of how jurisdictions have resolved common recruitment and retention challenges with modern and targeted solutions.

Recruitment

Identifying Potential Foster Parents

Children are placed in foster care because they have experienced abuse or neglect in their own homes; unfortunately, being removed from their homes adds to the trauma they have already experienced. Placing children in homes in their own community with caregivers of the same race/ethnicity can make foster care less traumatic.

Some states have deployed data driven/targeted recruitment strategies to recruit more diverse caregivers in certain locations. Data such as the number of current and needed foster homes, locations, and ethnicity can be collected as well as the number of sibling groups, to determine how and where to recruit needed foster homes. For example, New Mexico has targeted recruitment to address the data-indicated county-specific population of need. New Mexico compared the number of children in care by county and ethnicity in each region and number of active foster and adoptive providers by county and ethnicity in each region to the reviewed data collected from statewide customer service surveys to drive their recruitment plans. New Mexico has realized an increased number of foster homes that is attributed to their targeted recruitment.⁵

Orientation, Application, and Training

Some jurisdictions may lose foster parents when there are delays in the orientation, application, or training processes. Prospective foster families are often enrolled in an informational meeting as a first step after they inquire about foster care. Informational meetings are typically only offered periodically at specific times. Given busy schedules, it could be months before prospective families are able to attend the informational meeting. No interested prospective family should have to wait more than two weeks for orientation, because a long delay will reduce the likelihood of attendance.⁶ According to data from November 2018 through January 2019 from A Family for ME (an organization in Maine), attendance at informational meetings was significantly less than the number of inquiries; and the number of applications submitted was even less than the number of individuals who attended orientation, indicating that families are lost in the process.⁷

Similarly, states generally require that families undergo a process that includes a home study to assess the suitability of the prospective parents, including their health, employment, finances, criminal history, etc. In many states, the application to become a foster parent is primarily paper based. This process can be time consuming for both the agency and applicants to complete and process. There is also a risk that not all pieces of the application will be completed entirely and/or correctly, and the agency will have to reach back out to the applicant.

Children in foster care are at higher risk for behavioral and emotional problems which requires foster parents to be adequately trained and prepared. But, often times, initial training is spread out over numerous days and weeks. It may be difficult for prospective families to commit the time to training, factoring in travel time and resources. Missing a training prolongs the time to complete licensing requirements, during which time prospective parents may simply give up.

States are resolving these challenges by modernizing and streamlining recruitment and licensing processes to better meet the needs of today's families, many of which have two working parents. Some states have utilized technology to improve the ability for parents to attend orientation. An orientation curriculum that is hosted online and can be taken at any time, in place of the current in-person informational meetings, will help decrease the number of prospective families that do not complete an orientation due to losing interest or the inability to attend an in-person meeting, with limited times offered.

To increase the quantity of licensed foster homes, internal processes and infrastructure should be in place to efficiently engage, develop and support foster parents throughout the licensing process.⁸ By utilizing a web-based application process, agencies are able to receive and process applications more quickly. Additionally, controls can be built in to only allow submission of complete applications reducing the need for the agency to follow up with families.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has implemented an online application process, with the option to print and mail the form, or contact the Department of Child and Families Foster Care/ Adoptive Unit for help completing the application online.⁹ The District of Columbia rolled out an online system where application forms could be completed online and electronically submitted to the Child and Family Services Agency's Family Licensing Division, with the opportunity to send forms and questions directly to a central electronic mailbox.¹⁰

San Diego County reduces barriers to training participation through their evidence-based kin and foster parent training intervention, KEEP, by scheduling group sessions at times and locations that are convenient for cohorts of caregivers. KEEP provides a \$15 transportation stipend for each session, plus refreshments and childcare at trainings. If a caregiver is unable to attend one of the sessions, facilitators provide home visit make-up sessions.¹¹ Rhode Island is trying a new approach by consolidating a 10-week, 30-hour training program into 16-20 hours of training, concentrated during one weekend.¹² This structure allows for the training component to be finished several weeks faster.

Retention

Agency Support

Equally as important as recruitment, foster parents must be retained to have a sufficient number of family homes available for children. Each child and family is unique, and the child welfare system is complex. Even the best onboarding training cannot prepare foster parents for the unpredictability and impact of fostering. A healthy partnership between caseworkers and foster parents, and inclusion of the foster parent as part of the child and family's team reinforces a sense of respect, trust and transparency. Foster parents need a consistent, reliable agency contact to answer questions, guide them through the system and to help them understand their role and expectations for each component of the process, including but not limited to family share, visits, court hearings, paternity testing, family team meetings, daycare or school, medical and specialist appointments, and relationships with biological parents.

Casey Family Services identified that successful retention strategies include the following elements:

- Being available and responsive;
- Organized peer support;
- Respite care;
- Training; and
- Tokens of appreciation.¹³

In San Diego, caseworkers commit to promptly calling foster parents back within a certain amount of time, such as 24 hours, and to making monthly visits. Florida implemented a Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) tasked with tailored recruitment and retention strategies to the needs of foster parents in each district. Caseworkers and foster parents develop a QPI Partnership Plan together. Florida foster parents and caseworkers regularly submit feedback to each other about how well they are fulfilling the partnership plan.¹⁴

A Resource Parent Support Plan establishes practices for timely response and communication, like an outreach and response plan for new foster parents. The plan should include specific practices for timely response and direct contact time for caseworkers to build relationships and support foster parents.¹⁵

Keeping families feeling included and supported in their fostering role is a key element to foster family satisfaction and retention. Ideally families remain licensed as long as they have the space and desire to continue fostering.

Peer Support

In some cases, peer support may be helpful in retaining foster parents. Some child welfare agencies have developed and organized foster parent associations and/or support groups. Peer support, such as in support groups, is particularly effective at helping foster parents understand, manage, and cope with their children's challenging behaviors. As explained by Susan Livingston Smith and Jeanne Howard, leading adoption and foster care researchers, "One important aspect of groups is that they can place issues in context, helping members move from seeing their problems as particular to their child and family to understanding them as common and, in light of their children's pasts, expectable. Thus, group participation can normalize feelings."¹⁶

Peer support can be offered in a variety of ways and formats. Support groups could be held online, on the phone or in person. Newer foster parents could also be connected with more experienced foster parents in a mentoring type role. Advocates could also be utilized to support foster parents in navigating the system and working with various stakeholders.

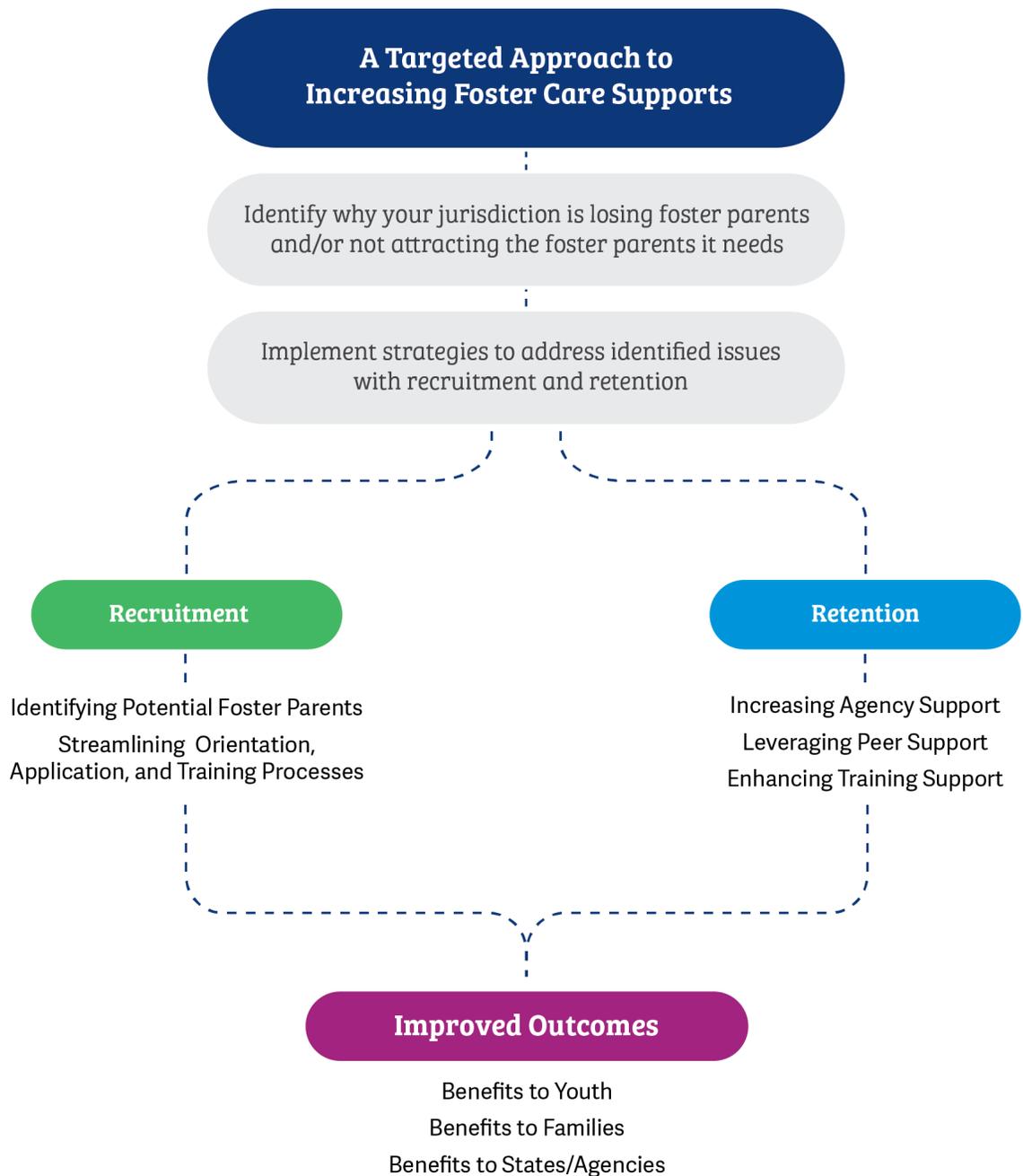
Iowa has a foster and adoptive parent association that offers comprehensive peer and resource support for foster and adoptive parents, including: 11 peer support parents, 52 support groups, parenting support trainings, weekly emails, parent listserv for questions and answers, and a telephone hotline. Surveys completed by the foster parents indicated increased knowledge and high satisfaction regarding the peer and resource support.¹⁷

Training Support

Being a foster parent involves caring for children who have experienced trauma related to substance abuse and may have significant behavioral health needs. Research indicates that almost all children coming into foster care have experienced one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES).¹⁸ Children sometimes change foster homes due to foster parents not being able to cope with the child's behavior related to the trauma they have experienced.

Foster parents have expressed that the required trainings are not preparing them for the dynamics of caring for traumatized foster youth. By providing foster parents with more trauma-informed strategies in dealing with children struggling with these issues, agencies can increase placement stability and potentially increase foster parent retention. There are a variety of curriculums from which to choose, such as: Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC)¹⁹ and National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), the Resource Parent Curriculum (RPC).²⁰

UCLA Training, Intervention, Education, and Services (TIES) for Families, is a partnership of the University of California at Los Angeles Departments of Pediatrics and Psychology and the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services that offers training, support and resources before, during and after placements. Additional training is provided to foster parents in the form of multiple sessions focused on supporting children and families with substance use disorders. The vast majority of families surveyed report TIES was the most useful service received and a longitudinal study showed disruption rates of only three percent with parents reporting less stress and more satisfaction over time after participating in TIES.²¹



Conclusion

Many jurisdictions are looking to improve their foster home recruitment and retention strategies. As this paper indicates, a number of solutions have been employed across the country to address this issue but no single solution will resolve foster home recruitment and retention issues in every jurisdiction. Agencies must identify their strengths and challenges in this area, understand where they are losing parents in the process, and then prioritize the areas to focus on and implement changes. Public Consulting Group's (PCG) Child Welfare team can work with your agency to assess its strengths and weaknesses and then design and deliver targeted solutions to improve your foster home recruitment and retention rates.

About the Authors

Stacey Priest, a Senior Consultant within PCG's Human Services practice, has significant program experience in child welfare, foster care, adoption, Title IV-E funding and random moment time studies (RMTS). Recently, Ms. Priest completed an assessment of the Foster Care System in Norfolk, Virginia. This included conducting focus groups and surveys with various stakeholders, case file reviews and developing recommendations for Norfolk to make improvements. Prior to joining PCG in 2009, Ms. Priest served as a caseworker in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, gaining experience in the child welfare system that includes both the programmatic and fiscal sides of operation. While a caseworker, she worked in the treatment unit which involved working with intact families, families whose children were placed into state custody and children who could not be returned to their parents and adoption was necessary. Ms. Priest also serves in her community as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for foster children. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania and a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Clark University. Contact Ms. Priest at spriest@pcgus.com.

Jennifer MacBlane, MPA, is an Associate Manager at PCG with over 20 years of experience in human services, government, and government consulting. She specializes in children's system of care management and purchasing and payment reform.

Recently, Ms. MacBlane worked with the state of Maine to complete an assessment of the state's children's behavioral health services, resulting in 29 recommendations to make the system more accessible and effective for children and their families. Ms. MacBlane is now supporting the state's efforts to implement the recommendations. In partnership with the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities and the American Public Human Services Association, Ms. MacBlane assessed New Hampshire's child serving system of care and made recommendations for a more comprehensive, integrated, and effective system, guided by system of care principles. The report was publicly praised by the Governor and the Secretary of Health and Human Services as providing a solid path forward for the state. In Kent County, Michigan, Ms. MacBlane has been assisting with the transition to a care management model, in which a consortium of child welfare providers was created to oversee and pay for all services for children in foster care including family preservation and stabilization services as well as placement services. Ms. MacBlane and the PCG team have assisted with all aspects of this transformation. Prior to joining PCG, Ms. MacBlane served as an Assistant Budget Director at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Office for Administration and Finance. Early in her career she provided child welfare case management for families at risk of foster care. Contact Ms. MacBlane at jmacblane@pcgus.com.

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(800) 210-6113



info@pcgus.com



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Endnotes

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