



The Florida Senate

Interim Project Report 2000-16

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Committee on Children and Families

Senator Mario Diaz-Balart, Chairman

ENHANCED FAMILY FOSTER HOME RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

SUMMARY

Foster care is one of the critical pieces of the child protection system which is designed to identify and protect children who are abused, neglected or abandoned and to move children to permanency, preferably with their own parents or in adoptive homes. In spite of predictions of its demise, the demand for foster home placements remains strong and is growing faster than the system's ability to recruit and license homes. Among the several developments that recently have impacted Florida's reliance on foster care (resulting either in a demand for more or, conversely, the potential for some relief) are these: a shift in emphasis from family preservation to best interest of the child as the primary goal of the child protection system, a rash of child deaths in Florida of children already known to the state's child protection system, establishment of the Relative Caregiver Program, and passage of the Kayla McKean Child Protection Act.

In an effort to understand the factors impacting recruitment and retention of foster homes in Florida, staff gathered information from a variety of sources including surveys, key informant interviews, field visits and a review of rules, the literature, and other relevant material.

The recent literature, the Senate survey responses, and all of the interviews conducted for this project support the conclusion that the problems associated with foster home recruitment and retention do not lend themselves to statutory solutions at this time nor were foster care rate and related cost issues identified as the most critical considerations although continued focus on improved funding is recommended. Several critical issues relating to foster care, both substantive and fiscal, have been addressed recently by the Legislature and are summarized in this report.

The findings indicate that recruitment and retention are most strongly influenced by the quality of the

relationship between the agencies and their foster parents. Four themes emerged, followed by a series of related and more specific recommendations to the agencies that retain foster homes: (1) It is essential to create a working relationship between the foster parents and agencies that is based on clear and concise expectations and communication; (2) Personal recruitment of foster parents and mass media are both effective recruitment methods; (3) Foster care recruitment strategies must be continuous; and (4) Effective training and support of foster parents increase retention.

BACKGROUND

Florida law defines a "family foster home" as a private residence "in which children who are unattended by a parent or legal guardian are provided 24-hour care. Such homes include emergency shelter family homes, family foster group homes, and specialized foster homes for children with special needs." (s. 409.175[1][e], F.S.) Foster homes are licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF) and are utilized both by the department and by private child-placing agencies for the care of children who have been taken into custody and are part of the child protection system. Florida, like most states, is experiencing a serious shortage in the number of foster homes needed to meet the current demand.

Foster care is one of the critical pieces of the child protection system which is designed to identify and protect children who are abused, neglected or abandoned and to move children to permanency, preferably with their own parents or in adoptive homes. Although foster care has been an essential service for millions of children nationally, the increased attention given to this service in the last two decades has focused more on its limited ability to achieve its intended outcomes than on its successes. This criticism has resulted in a devaluing

of foster care as well as predictions of drastic reductions in its use. Alternatives to traditional foster care, including professional foster care and even a return to the orphanage, have been proposed as more viable alternatives to traditional foster care, and, in fact, both concepts are currently being tested in Florida, including these:

- The SOS Children's Village can be considered an orphanage only in the sense that its mission is to be the permanent home for the children placed there. All placements are by DCF and involve children who are unable to return home and unlikely to be adopted, often large sibling groups and adolescents. The department reimburses the Village at the foster care rate which constitutes less than 25 percent of the actual cost of care; most of the balance is made up with private contributions. The SOS Children's Village is licensed for 61 children who live with house parents in 11 homes built in a residential neighborhood in Coconut Creek.
- In the professional foster care model, unlike traditional foster care, at least one of the foster parents in a home is paid a salary and is considered an employee of the program. Section 39.817, F.S., establishes a pilot project through the Ounce of Prevention to test this approach to foster care and determine whether it improves on the achievement of program goals. Through contract with the Ounce of Prevention, the Jane Addams Hull House Association employs a foster parent in each of six foster homes in Volusia County that care for sibling groups whose goals are to return home or be adopted. Preliminary plans would expand the pilot project to Alachua and Broward Counties.

In spite of predictions of the demise of traditional family foster care and its replacement with another model, however, the reality has been quite different. Though the use of the service has shifted, reflecting social and political events, foster care remains and will likely continue to be an important child protection service. In fact, the demand for foster home placements appears to be growing faster than the system's ability to recruit and license homes.

Among the several developments that have recently impacted Florida's reliance on foster homes, resulting either in a demand for more or, conversely, the potential for some relief, are these:

- *A shift in emphasis from family preservation to best interest of the child as the primary goal of the child protection system.* At the federal level, this focus is articulated in the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the precepts of which are found in Florida law which provides that "the health and safety of the children served shall be of paramount concern." (s. 39.001[1][b]1., F.S.) Prior to 1997, family preservation was the primary goal.

This policy shift, while still maintaining support for families, has an impact on the need for foster homes in at least two divergent ways: children believed to be at risk of harm in their own homes are more likely to be taken into custody and placed in care; at the same time, tighter time frames required by the new federal law are intended to move children through the system to permanence more quickly which would mean shorter stays in foster care.

- *A rash of child deaths in Florida.* A number of children who had already come to the attention of the state's child protection system have died at the hands of their parents or other care givers in recent years. These deaths, sometimes clustered together geographically and in time, have led to a public outcry for more effective child protection which, in turn, has resulted in more children who are alleged to be abused being taken into custody and placed in foster care.

Child deaths are certainly not unique to Florida nor does this state experience a greater problem than other comparable states. National statistics are frightening: More than a million cases of significant child abuse and neglect are substantiated every year; five children in this country die each day from abuse and neglect; and the incidence of child abuse and neglect of all forms more than doubled between 1983 and 1996.

- *Establishment of the Relative Caregiver Program.* Created by the Legislature in response to the recognition that relatives of dependent children, frequently grandparents, are among the best substitute parents but are often limited financially, the Relative Caregiver Program

gives relatives who meet certain criteria financial assistance to care for children who might otherwise be placed in foster care. In June, 1999, the program supported 2,571 children in relative care.

- *Passage of the Kayla McKean Child Protection Act (ch. 99-168, L.O.F.).* With the passage of this law, the 1999 Legislature addressed a number of weaknesses in the existing child protection system. Neither this law nor the 1998 rewrite of ch. 39, F.S., focuses on the removal of children from their families, but the emphasis in both of these laws on more careful assessment of risk to a child alleged to be abused could result in significant increases in children placed in foster care.

The challenge to recruit and retain a sufficient number and mix of foster homes is ongoing both for the Department of Children and Families and for private child-placing agencies. The system faces growing numbers of children needing care, increasingly serious behavioral and emotional issues of foster children, and tight budgets. At the same time, the demographics of the traditional foster parent pool are changing dramatically as more and more families include two working parents and single parent families are becoming increasingly the norm, increasing the challenge to identify and recruit foster parents.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to understand the factors impacting recruitment and retention of foster homes in Florida and to make recommendations for improvement, staff gathered information from a variety of sources, including these: a survey conducted in 1998 of foster parents associated with four of the department's districts, a follow-up survey developed by Senate staff and administered to foster parents associated with child-placing agencies in the same districts, and surveys sent to the 15 DCF District Administrators and to the members of the Board of the Florida State Foster Parent Association; key informant interviews with, among others, foster care staff in the department's Family Safety and Preservation Office, national experts in the field of foster care, and staff with the Child Welfare League of America; a field visit to meet with district staff who work directly with foster parents; a meeting with members of a local foster parent association; and a review of current and proposed rules and operating procedures, the literature, and other relevant material.

FINDINGS

According to national and state statistics, the need to recruit (more specifically, to target recruitment) and retain foster homes is substantial and unrelenting:

- Admissions into foster care have been increasing. Nationally, the number of children in out-of-home care increased by 44 percent between 1986 and 1996 with an estimated 75 percent of these children in foster care.
- Although the proportion of adolescents in foster care has decreased slightly, the number of adolescents in care has increased in the past decade and nationally comprise roughly one-third of the foster care population.

In 1980, 47 percent of children in foster care were minority children. By 1995, the figure was 61 percent.

- At the same time that the number of children in foster care increased, providers steadily decreased. In Florida, the decline is illustrated by the fact that in just one four month period, between October 1998 and February 1999, the number of DCF foster homes dropped from 3,890 to 3,541 for a net loss of 349 homes. This is a net loss demonstrating that the department's success at foster home recruitment is being outstripped by foster homes leaving the system.
- Not only is there a shortage in the overall number of foster families, but there is a shortage of foster families with the attributes and willingness to parent children with certain characteristics or circumstances: a shortage of minority foster families and foster families for sibling groups, adolescents and foster children with behavioral or emotional problems. Nationally, 35 percent of licensed foster homes had no children placed with them, a figure which is consistent with the experience in Florida, indicating a mismatch between the types of foster homes that are needed and the types being recruited and licensed.

As one result of the increasing demand for placements and the decreasing supply of appropriate foster home beds, existing foster homes are being

over- and mis-utilized. In most cases, foster homes in Florida are limited to 5 children, including the foster family's children, unless a specific waiver is granted (ch. 65C-13.001[1][a], F.A.C.). However:

- In February 1999, a typical month, 453 homes statewide had more than 5 children, 69 percent of which did not have an appropriate waiver.
- Although, according to rule, children and foster homes are supposed to be matched so that children are placed where foster parents are most capable of meeting their individual needs, the sheer demands on the system often prevent such careful placement from occurring. The results can be disastrous for both children and foster parents leading to further abuse of children in care, disrupted placements, and foster parent burnout.
- In October, 1998, a class action suit was filed in the Southern District Court of Florida against the department's Secretary and District 10 (Broward) Administrator alleging, among other things, that more than 400 children were deliberately confined in overcrowded foster homes in District 10, with no regard for the appropriateness of the placement, and that these homes exceeded their licensed capacity.
- In assessing a recent crisis in DCF District 7, it was discovered that the district had only about half the number of foster homes it needed. The foster care population had almost doubled in 2 years to more than 2,000 children, but the number of foster home beds had remained fairly stagnant at 840. In its extreme, the department had responded by placing as many as 16 children more than the licensed capacity in a single foster home and by keeping others for several days in the district's service centers.

It is encouraging to note that much of the professional literature reports that it is quite possible, even in this day and age, to successfully recruit and retain an adequate supply of foster homes for most of the children entering care. The Benton Foundation, for example, conducted a national survey of American public opinion in 1998 and found that Americans hold a positive opinion of foster care: 91 percent think there is a serious need for foster care, and, after being presented with specific information on the challenges facing children today, 35 percent say they are willing to consider becoming foster parents themselves. Respondents who knew a foster parent were twice as likely to report a willingness to consider becoming one themselves.

Based on an extensive literature review conducted by the University of Central Florida, four *principles of foster care recruitment and retention* were discovered which proved to be consistent with the findings of the several surveys conducted by Senate staff with department and private agency foster parents and with other information gathered for this project. The principles are these:

1. Create a working relationship between the foster parents and agencies that is based on clear and concise expectations and communication.

Foster Parents as Team Members. The literature suggests that one of the biggest mistakes agencies make is to fail to set clear expectations, communicated consistently to potential and existing foster parents, which focus on foster parents as key members of the foster child's team.

Although not at all a universal response, foster parents responding to the Senate's surveys said that they felt undervalued by their workers, that they were told little about the children being placed with them, and that they "lacked much say in the child's future, e.g. not being asked to participate in staffing and judicial reviews" in spite of the fact that department policy provides for these things to occur.

At every official level, the department endorses the concept of the foster parent as team member. The rule which governs this program specifically provides that "the department must share all available information on each child referred to substitute care parents since parents have to . . . make an informed decision about whether the child should be placed in their home . . . (and) the department must involve the substitute care parents, as team members, in all major decisions for children in their care." (ch. 65C-13.010, F.A.C.) These and related policies are reflected in the Bilateral Service Agreement Between the Department and Foster Parents which clarifies roles and is required to be routinely negotiated and signed by all parties. The problem is not the policy but the uniform and statewide execution of the policy which often gets lost at the district level. The execution of the Service Agreement is just one element of an effective policy, but the fact that the Attorney General reported to the court as recently as July, 1999, that "service

agreements have been established for the first time between the District (10) and its foster homes” illustrates the problem.

Foster Care Counselors as Communicators. Foster parents reported that the “constant turnover of staff” was their single biggest complaint about Florida’s foster care system. “Large caseloads often prohibit routine contact, resulting in interactions occurring only when problems arise or the child is being moved to another placement.” Even in District 2 which has relatively few problems with its foster care program, DCF and agency foster parents report that counselors are generally too overworked and hurried to spend more than 5 minutes with them during their mandated monthly visits.

The department’s current data system does not allow staff turnover among foster care counselors to be tracked nor can turnover of these staff be isolated from other child welfare staff, but a manual analysis of the child welfare staff finds a 29 percent turnover rate for the first 7 months of fiscal year 1998-1999, up slightly from the previous year, in spite of such legislatively established, positive impacts on the system as a significant infusion of staff resources and the phase-in of the competency-based training and pay plan. It is suggested that the positive effects of these factors have been offset, at least temporarily, by such things as the onset and anticipation of further conversion to a private, community-based system of care; a highly competitive economy in which workers can often easily find other, less stressful jobs; and an environment in which the child protection staff find themselves highly criticized in the media.

In spite of the disruption to the current system brought on by conversion to community-based care, an evaluation issued in March, 1999, of the existing community-based systems reported that in 65 percent of the cases, children in foster care had at least weekly personal contact by foster care staff compared to 18 percent by the department; the average caseload was 18.9 cases compared to 40.8 for the department (Based on funded positions, the average DCF caseload for April, 1999, was down to 29.6 statewide); 12.8 percent of the cases experienced three or more counselor changes as compared to 37 percent of the cases with DCF; and 78.9 percent of the foster parents rated the community-based program more effective than the department’s program. These findings bode well for

the future as community-based care is implemented statewide over the next few years.

2. Personal recruitment of foster parents and mass media are both extremely effective recruitment methods.

According to a number of recent studies, mass media and personal contact are both effective recruitment tools. Most of the Senate’s survey respondents reported that they first heard about foster parenting from friends or family followed by articles in newspapers. One critical element of the recruitment effort, however, is the need for *targeted* recruitment based on an assessment of the children in the area needing to be placed. We know that, increasingly, foster homes are needed for adolescents, large sibling groups, minority children, and children with behavioral and emotional problems. Recruitment campaigns must target potential care givers for these children.

Respondents to the Senate’s District Administrator survey reported many efforts to reach out to the public to recruit foster homes, but the efforts do not appear to be particularly well focused or to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of children needing care. The absence of clear focus is compounded by the fact that although some districts have the resources to devote a position to recruitment, in most districts it is the responsibility of foster care counselors and licensing staff in addition to their other duties and, therefore, recruitment receives insufficient attention from staff not trained in marketing techniques. However, the department plans to devote a portion of a special lump-sum provided to the department in the 1999-2000 General Appropriations Act to provide 73 staff statewide devoted to foster home recruitment and foster parent support which should have a major and positive impact on the number of foster homes recruited and on the quality of the foster parent experience.

Both the literature and the Senate’s surveys suggest that foster parents make effective recruiters and that they are underutilized. Foster parents in District 2 suggest that resources would be saved if new, potential foster parents were first assigned to existing foster parents to provide support and to learn what fostering is really like and to continue to be mentored during at least

their first year of caring for children. DCF District 9 sets aside a small amount of its out-of-home care budget allocation to provide a stipend to a small group of foster parents who are particularly effective recruiters, and these foster parents serve as a speakers bureau and help in other ways to support and mentor potential and novice foster parents.

3. Foster care recruitment strategies must be continuous.

The literature suggests that foster home recruitment is least effective when it is sporadic, and yet, other than the most routine of undertakings, much of the recruitment effort implemented in this state over the past five years appears to be short-term, often crisis-driven, and uncoordinated. According to some reports from DCF districts, for example, efforts spearheaded by headquarters to utilize mass media to create heightened interest in foster parenting have not been coordinated with the districts which were then unprepared to respond to the calls the media campaign generated. Senate survey respondents indicated some frustration with their initial contact with the department or private agency either because too much time passed between their phone call and a response or because the person they spoke with seemed disinterested or ill-informed. This lack of coordination is exacerbated in many areas by the growing competition between DCF and private agencies for foster homes which is confusing for potential foster parents and counterproductive for the agencies.

A major research finding, most notably from a study conducted among foster parents in Virginia, indicates that for most potential foster parents, the recruitment message must be received at least three or four times before it actually “gets through.” There is evidence from the Virginia study that a great deal of time, on average at least 12 months, passes between someone first hearing about the need for foster parents and the family’s decision to pursue foster parenting and make that first agency contact. A consistent message delivered by a variety of media as well as personal contacts built around a single theme and planned as a 5-year strategy is most effective, especially in the recruitment of particular types of foster homes such as those for adolescents, minority children, and therapeutic homes for children with special needs. At any one time, Florida has close to 45 percent of its homes either with no foster children or with fewer than their licensed capacity indicating that at least part of

the department’s investment in time and other resources necessary to recruit, train and license foster homes is not well focused on the kind of homes children in care need.

4. Effective Training and support of foster parents increase retention.

A licensed foster home is a valuable commodity. Not only has the department or agency invested time getting to know that family, training them, and doing all the other things necessary to get them ready to receive foster children, but foster parents are also pivotal in either recruiting or discouraging other potential foster parents from becoming licensed. As one senior professional in the field put it, “A happy foster parent is your best recruiter; an unhappy one can destroy your program.”

The Senate survey of foster parents and of the foster parent association board asked about the positive and negative elements of foster parenting from a variety of angles -- what things do foster parents find most rewarding about the experience and what things are most frustrating or could cause a foster parent to leave the program. The responses were varied, and even though the need for a “higher board rate” and other financial support were mentioned fairly frequently (and the most recent statistics from the Child Welfare League of America places Florida at about 35th among the states, although these findings predate a recent increase here) as well as the need to universally spare foster parents the costs associated with child care (although the department maintains that their data shows no foster children waiting for subsidized child care), such cost issues do not appear to be at all the most important factors. Support from the agency, whether good or bad, appears to be the single most important factor in whether a foster parent considers the work rewarding enough to stick with it over time, and particularly past the first year when as many as 40 percent of foster parents leave the program, according to national data. As stated by one foster parent and association board member, “The strongest foster care recruitment and retention system is only as strong as the underlying structure Recruitment and retention cannot be effective unless those within the foster care system believe the system supports their work as foster families.”

The literature supports the findings of the Senate surveys and maintains that support networks for foster parents are the primary determinant of an agency's ability to retain foster parents once they have been recruited and licensed. Such support includes opportunities for foster parents to feel empowered by being considered key members of their foster child's team and, therefore, critical participants in staffings and court hearings; being consistently and thoroughly informed about the background and special medical or social needs of children being placed with them and having a real voice in determining whether the placement is a good idea for both the child and the foster family; and having consistent, professional support from agency staff who are in their positions long enough to know how to perform their duties and for their foster parents to get to know them. Staff turnover seriously damages an agency's ability to provide necessary support to foster families.

Support through effective pre- and in-service training is also critical to foster parent retention. Most Senate survey respondents report that they find the pre-service training provided to department foster parents and to most parents associated with child-placing agencies to be good and relevant to their jobs as foster parents. However, many respondents state that in-service training needs to be strengthened and to be more closely focused on the particular behaviors and other problems being experienced by children in care so that the foster parents feel well equipped to address them.

Foster parents also express a need to be supported in their efforts to deal with separation and loss which are part of the foster parent experience, and the literature suggests that foster parents who are unable to deal effectively with loss are seriously at risk for foster home closure. The department addresses such issues through its normal in-service training and recently sponsored a statewide meeting for foster care staff and some foster parents featuring a national expert on dealing with separation and loss. Relevant research indicates that such training efforts strengthen an agency's ability to retain its foster families.

Providing targeted, child-specific support to foster families, particularly those caring for children with behavior problems, was mentioned by professional staff in several districts as they search for ways to prevent foster family burnout and enhance retention. District 6 utilized available lump-sum funds several

years ago to add psychologists to their staff in response to their finding that foster parents were unprepared to address the challenging behaviors of children placed in their homes. The district found that "significant improvements resulted when behavior analysts provided 30 hours of instruction, role-play and in-home follow-up. Placement disruptions were prevented in newly licensed homes, and there was a 48 percent reduction of placement changes across all competency-trained homes that experienced disruptions prior to training . . . \$336,700 was saved in 15 months."

Recent Legislative Actions

In the context of considering whether the Legislature can contribute to the success of efforts to recruit and retain foster homes, it is important to note that the Legislature has recently addressed several issues important to foster parents, including the following:

- Ch. 98-29, L.O.F., made certain identifying information contained in foster home licensure files exempt from public scrutiny and disclosure.
- Ch. 99-193, L.O.F., authorized the department to place a child in a foster home while awaiting the results of the federal criminal records check.
- Ch. 99-206, L.O.F., limited the liability that can be incurred by foster care providers in locales with privatized foster care systems.
- Ch. 99-206, L.O.F., also authorized foster care providers who meet certain criteria to also provide registered or licensed family day care services and be dually compensated.
- The FY 1999-2000 General Appropriations Act provided:
 - \$19.8 million to, in part, reduce the foster care caseload from 27 to 21;
 - \$9.3 million for local initiatives designed to address the critical problems identified in the foster care system;
 - \$26.6 million to enhance the state's ability to purchase the most appropriate residential placement for children in its custody; and
 - \$1.5 million to provide a 2.5 percent foster home rate increase.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nothing in the literature, Senate surveys or interviews supports the need for any specific legislative action to achieve an improved system of foster home recruitment and retention with the exception of the need for ongoing legislative support of improved staffing and financial support to foster parents. Such support would help create an environment in which quality foster homes are in place and well supported by professional staff.

It is recommended that the Department of Children and Family Services, along with child-placing agencies, where appropriate, do the following:

- Utilize professional marketers to help develop strategies to target recruitment efforts to generate a supply of foster homes that more closely match need.
- Based on the fact that potential foster parents need to hear the message repeatedly and over time, develop a long-range recruitment campaign, jointly across agencies whenever possible, which draws on the talent and expertise of current foster families.
- Consider moving unutilized homes to other functions such as recruitment or support to other foster parents.
- As capacity grows, improve the process of assessing children coming into care, matching them with foster families, and involving foster parents in placement decisions.

- Consistently and thoroughly address the Bilateral Agreement with foster parents to be certain its provisions are well understood and followed by foster families and agency staff.

This recommendation ties to the larger issue of the need for DCF to continue to work towards an effective organizational management system in which district staff are held accountable for carrying out departmental policies.

- Evaluate and replicate successful strategies, such as District 6's use of on-staff psychologists to support foster families and District 9's stipends to foster parents who assist with recruitment.
- Continue to stabilize and professionalize agency staff by reducing caseloads, continuing to implement the competency-based training and pay plan, focusing on the need to strengthen supervision, and putting in place the 73 foster care recruitment and support staff.
- Improve agency efforts to assist foster parents identify and access community resources for their foster children, including addressing the apparent conflict between the department's data which indicates that virtually all child care needs for foster children are being met through the subsidized child care program versus numerous reports from around the state that foster parents are having to incur that cost themselves.

COMMITTEE(S) INVOLVED IN REPORT *(Contact first committee for more information.)*

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MEMBER OVERSIGHT

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