



A MOVEMENT TO TRANSFORM FOSTER PARENTING

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

Reinventing the Child Welfare Agency's Relationship With Foster Parents

Foster parents are ordinary people who do extraordinary things for children and families in crisis. With a deep capacity to care and the commitment to stick with a child in difficult circumstances, these caregivers provide havens for children to begin healing from trauma with the goal of eventually returning home to their families. When appropriately trained and properly supported, foster parents — both kin and non-relative caregivers — are critical partners in a child-centered foster care system.

Just as foster parents are focused on helping children and families thrive, so are child welfare professionals. Those on the frontlines are hopeful, mission-driven professionals, but they can become quickly overwhelmed by unmanageable caseloads, rampant turnover, budget constraints and inflexible, sometimes nonsensical rules.

As systems struggle to find and keep enough loving, supportive adults for children in need, those foster parents who have stepped up face daily frustrations in supporting children who have experienced trauma. Despite being among those who best know the children in their care, foster parents routinely report being left out of key decisions where their voice could make a positive difference. Given these challenges, even

the most experienced and enthusiastic foster parents may be hard pressed to recommend foster parenting to their friends and neighbors.

It's long past time to change the ways in which systems and communities partner with foster parents to fulfill their primary mission: to help children heal and reunite with their families. To do this, all reform efforts must be grounded first and foremost in what children need. Based on this principle, robust foster parent-agency partnerships are already coming alive in many communities. These models must be elevated and shared across the country so that all foster parents and caregivers get the support, encouragement and respect they need to provide the best possible care for children. These

partnerships will require a fundamental shift in the culture of child welfare agencies to elevate foster parents as key partners in achieving positive child outcomes. Also required are leaders to organize staff and other resources to support this child-centered partnership.

Building on years of experience working with communities across the country to improve how children and families fare in child welfare systems, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has deepened its resolve to help the field advance this vision of foster parent partnerships that place children at the center of the equation. It is critical to break the cycle that fuels a negative public perception of foster parenting to help stem the dire shortage of foster families.

“We have seen some truly amazing approaches to engaging and supporting foster parents,” says Tracey Feild, director of Casey’s Child Welfare Strategy Group. “It’s our job to leverage these innovations quickly and effectively to encourage even broader awareness and application of what’s working to improve children’s lives and outcomes. Children in crisis cannot wait any longer for us to get this right.”

This paper explores how public agencies can ensure children receive the care they need and deserve by enlisting more volunteers to step forward as foster parents and by encouraging the extraordinary individuals who have already answered the call to continue their commitment to care. The guidance is informed by a wide array of people who know best: young people who have spent time in foster care, foster parents and kin, as well as those who help — agency leaders and frontline workers, judges, attorneys, service providers and other community stakeholders.

We used to be treated like glorified babysitters who just provided a bed for children. We were disrespected, not appreciated and always frustrated. There’s been a big shift as a result of the QPI work in Florida because now we are considered part of the child’s team. We get the information and support to play this role and also be part of a community that supports one another.

— Lora Diaz, Florida Quality Parenting Initiative Foster Parent

Among these informants, there was strong consensus on three themes for engaging and empowering foster parents:

- **Ensure quality caregiving for children.** In every child welfare system, children’s needs must come first. Foster parents deserve help in building the specialized skills to effectively care for children who have experienced instability and trauma. They also need the targeted resources, information and support services to help children grow and thrive.
- **Forge strong relationships.** To transform their relationships with foster parents, public child welfare agencies and private providers must find new ways to communicate a clear vision for foster parent partnerships, engage foster parents as respected partners and consistently promote the value of foster parenting in every aspect of their work.
- **Find and keep more amazing caregivers.** What’s the best way to sustain a constantly growing and diverse network of foster parents? How can agencies explore new technologies and access data-driven approaches to identify and recruit eager foster families and match them with children’s needs? Across the country, there are great ideas about how to build a robust foster parenting network. Now is the time to apply the most promising strategies in communities that need them most.

New Approach Urgently Needed

In the past, child welfare agencies warned foster parents not to become too attached to children in their care so the relationship would not “interfere” with returning children safely to their parents. Some agencies even went so far as to ask foster parents to sign an agreement that they wouldn’t adopt the child. Today, research proves how critical it is for children who have had chaotic childhoods to have at least one strong and consistent relationship with a reliable adult in their life to help them heal from trauma.

For children in foster care, foster parents often lead the way in helping children develop vital connections. “Today’s foster parents are the child welfare system’s primary intervention for children who have been removed from their families,” Feild says. Over half of the children in foster care are reunited with their parents, and foster parents are the ones who routinely facilitate a safe return home. Given their central role, it is essential to increase the supply of capable and supported foster families to continue meeting children’s most fundamental needs.

Despite its rewards, foster parenting is challenging, and foster parents are not always properly equipped with the most relevant training, specialized knowledge and skills and ongoing support needed to help them provide the best possible care for children. These deficits cause

a counterproductive cycle for child welfare agencies: when caregivers don’t get the support they need, children suffer. Without support and respect, foster parents quickly become exhausted trying to do what is right for children and become less capable of meeting their needs. Or worse, they become so frustrated that they leave foster parenting altogether and share their negative experiences with others. Given that satisfied foster parents are agencies’ best recruiters, it’s no wonder they experience lackluster results when trying to find and keep new candidates. This cycle won’t end until child welfare agencies make crucial changes in how they partner with foster parents, treating them as full allies in everything they do.

Forging strong partnerships with foster parents also addresses the



growing public demand that children in foster care have an opportunity for normal childhood experiences. Congress recently passed a law that requires states to use a “reasonable and prudent parenting standard” that gives foster parents greater authority to allow children to participate in developmentally appropriate sports, travel and other common activities while being legally protected for the decisions they make. The new normalcy requirements were championed by youth in foster care who advocated for the chance to participate in the same activities as their peers. As child welfare agencies begin to implement these new requirements, a more balanced partnership is needed to empower and support foster parents as children’s daily decision makers.

Changing agency culture to support foster parents takes on even greater urgency as child welfare systems strive to reduce group or institutional placements in favor of more developmentally appropriate family placements. A family environment is critical to helping heal children who have previously experienced trauma, allowing them to be enveloped in a loving and consistent routine and remain with siblings and other family members.¹ From a more practical

perspective, foster families offer a far better and significantly less expensive alternative to group placements, but only if they are well supported. Children shouldn’t be in group placements solely because there are no foster family resources available, and those homes that are available need supports to help children thrive.

The widespread lack of support for foster families has had a direct impact on the stability and outcomes of children currently in foster care. One in six children in foster care changes placements more than three times in one year. For teens, one in four experience three or more moves. In addition to the financial cost of disruptions, research shows that frequent placement changes exacerbate the trauma children have already experienced by being separated from their parents; contribute to the onset

of behavioral difficulties; increase the likelihood of school disruptions and lags in educational achievement; and raise the risk of failed permanent placements. Frequent caseworker turnover can also be a negative influence.

Sadly, children and their foster parents, not agency policies, are most often blamed when a placement fails. Instead of helping foster parents address the challenging behaviors that are a natural response to trauma, the agency or provider often simply moves children to the next available family. Children blame themselves for these disruptions while foster parents begin to doubt their caregiving abilities. Child welfare systems and the broader community can help break this cycle by supplying foster parents with the right tools and ongoing support to ensure that the first placement is the best, most stable placement to meet children’s needs.

Today’s foster parents are the child welfare system’s primary intervention for children removed from home.

— Tracey Feild, Director of Casey’s Child Welfare Strategy Group

Three Ways to Engage and Empower Foster Parents for Better Child Outcomes

1 Ensure quality caregiving for children

Despite its profound rewards, being a foster parent is hard work. The ability to succeed over the long term requires two equally important components: the motivation to provide nurturing care to children and the knowledge of specific skills to work through challenges in caring for children who have experienced trauma. Foster parents need both consistent emotional support and help that is customized to meet the unique needs of the children in their care. Child welfare agencies can create a more comprehensive array of resources in the following ways:

DELIVER A ROBUST TRAINING AND EDUCATION PROGRAM

Foster parents should have access to high-quality pre-service training and ongoing targeted learning opportunities. These opportunities can help them build specialized skills and work through and overcome the inevitable “learning curve” they experience in the first several months of caregiving. This should include:

- *Pre-service training.* All foster parents receive training to become licensed. High-quality training also provides foster parents with the fundamentals of quality caregiving for children in foster care, including understanding

the impact of trauma and separation; how to parent children experiencing grief, loss and attachment difficulties; and the importance of affirming each child’s race, ethnicity, culture, sexual identity, etc. In addition to helping foster parents understand what the child needs most, training clarifies agency roles and expectations and allows foster parents and the agency to assess whether caregiving is the right fit for the family.

- *Targeted learning opportunities.* Ongoing training and other educational opportunities for foster parents should be targeted to the individual needs of children in caregivers’ homes, including customized in-home training opportunities, online learning modules or workshops designed to address common areas of concern. Some agencies are providing mobile applications to enable real-time access to the latest trauma-informed, skill-building information. In addition, several training curricula help foster parents better address the unique needs of children and teens. Examples include Teen Connect, Trauma Systems Therapy (TST) and therapeutic foster care approaches such as the Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC)

Promising Approaches to Partnering with Foster Parents

When foster parents feel well prepared, they stay. “The more we can provide knowledge and tools to foster parents, especially those who work with children and teens who have experienced trauma, the more these foster parents can keep kids stable and working toward permanence,” says Casey Foundation Senior Associate Doreen Chapman, who points to several promising approaches, including:

- **TRAUMA-INFORMED PARENTING.** Chapman has led Casey’s collaboration with developers of Trauma Systems Therapy (TST) and Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC). The result: Both have been adapted to child welfare and are being piloted in eight U.S. counties. Four-session TST for Foster Parents helps kin and foster parents work with children on emotional regulation and processing. Nine-session ARC Reflections helps kin and foster parents understand the responses of children and teens to past trauma and build healthy attachments. “It has been remarkable to watch foster parents at the ARC and TST trainings,” says Chapman. “They see the usefulness of the approaches and are able to apply what they have learned immediately.” In 2016, Casey will pilot Connect,² a 10-week evidence-based program developed in Canada and Sweden for birth and foster parents of pre-teens and teens struggling with significant behavioral and mental health challenges.

- **THE QUALITY PARENTING INITIATIVE (QPI).**³ QPI is a systems-change approach to developing partnerships between foster parents and agencies to make the culture, policy and practice changes necessary to focus child welfare systems on excellent foster parenting, since it is the most important intervention for children in foster care. QPI helps agencies and foster parents articulate what each expects of the other and build consensus on what makes for quality caregiving. QPI provides practical, web-based tools and resources to build foster parent knowledge and skills. “We need to promise prospective foster parents and the community in general that foster parents will be respected, well trained, skilled partners in providing high-quality parenting,” says Carole Shauffer of the Youth Law Center, which developed QPI with several child welfare agencies and stakeholders. QPI also focuses on equipping foster parents with more in-depth knowledge about child development to help children thrive and meet key developmental milestones. QPI is used statewide in California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana and Nevada and is being implemented in several local jurisdictions, including Milwaukee, Cleveland, Fort Worth and Philadelphia.
- **MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY MODEL (MFM).**⁴ MFM is an integrated approach to foster care service delivery that creates microcommunities

(called Constellations) that provide a community-based network of supervision and support for caregivers and children and adolescents who have come to the attention of the child welfare system. MFM promotes placement stability, prioritizes sibling connections, leads to active child protection and increases permanency. Foster parent retention improves as this system helps support caregivers. “We believe in taking good care of the people who take good care of children and youth,” says Jim Theofelis, founder of the Mockingbird Society.

- **SKILL-BUILDING CURRICULA.** A Second Chance, Inc.⁵ — the only private child welfare agency dedicated solely to working with kinship foster families — has created approaches to address the unique needs and perspectives of kin, including Standards for Assessing and Recognizing Kinship Strengths (SARKS), a kin-specific training and skill-building curriculum. The Oregon Social Learning Center’s KEEP⁶ is a 16-week training designed to build caregivers’ ability to parent children with difficult behaviors and teach children behavior management and coping skills. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s training curriculum, *Caring for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma*,⁷ focuses on educating foster parents about the impact of trauma on child development.

Nothing, and I mean nothing, can prepare a foster parent for what it means to have a child in your home, even if you already have children. Until that time, it is only abstract. It’s the first night the child sleeps in your home and every moment thereafter that is the real learning experience. That’s where the rubber hits the road.

— Foster Parent

model, which has been adapted for children in regular foster care, since they make up the vast majority of kids in out-of-home placements. These approaches take into account the latest research on adolescent development and provide guidance on how to respond appropriately to age-appropriate behavioral challenges, especially for young people who have experienced trauma.

- *Opportunities to hear the perspectives of youth, foster parents and birth parents.* Increasingly, agencies incorporate the perspectives of youth, seasoned foster parents and birth parents into the development and delivery of training and education programs. Alumni of foster care can share their thoughts about what amazing foster parents are already doing to support healthy child development, as well as some of the “dos” and “don’ts” of foster parenting. Seasoned foster parents can also be supported to train and mentor new foster parents. And birth parents can help foster parents understand what it’s like to have a child in foster care and how they can effectively support reunification. Many agencies provide stipends for youth, foster parents and birth parents when they participate in training to communicate that their time and experiences are valuable.

DEVELOP A STRONG NETWORK OF SUPPORT FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Foster parents must feel that there are many people in their corner who want them to succeed in providing the best outcomes for children. Building a foster parent community that focuses on children means providing multiple opportunities for foster parents to connect with one another, the agency and the broader public. These include:

- *Dedicated foster parent support staff.* Foster parents need support specialists who are dedicated solely to helping them work through their caregiving challenges and help them celebrate their successes. While the structure of these positions varies across jurisdictions, key components of successful foster care units include smaller caseloads to allow for individual and regular monthly home visits, 24/7 availability, an “on-call” system to respond to urgent requests for help with children and frequent interaction with other members of the child’s support team. Agencies also need separate staff who can help foster parents through licensing and recertification.
- *Access to trauma-informed interventions.* A strong foster parent support system provides foster parents with access to expertise in trauma-informed interventions and parenting. Child welfare agencies can contract for evidence-based or evidence-informed interventions and curricula designed to prevent placement disruptions. They can provide foster parents with specialized skills to help children regulate behavior and address trauma and attachment-related behavioral issues.
- *Support for grief and loss.* Foster parents have dual roles as caregivers to the child and as the agency’s partner in reunification. This can be a difficult balancing act. Even if they are committed to returning a child to his parents, the separation can be heartbreaking for the foster parent and other children in the home. Given these inherent challenges, child welfare agencies have a responsibility to help foster families navigate grief and loss as effectively as possible so they have the strength and energy to

Profile: A Foster Parent’s Experience

When Kelley Fluette became a foster parent in Rhode Island 13 years ago, she felt like she was floundering. She had little information about the baby placed in her care and no idea how to advocate with the foster care system for the baby’s needs — or for her own as a caregiver.

“I was new and I thought I was supposed to shut my mouth,” she recalls. “But I was committed to helping reunite families who were struggling, and giving love and support to children who needed it.”

Four years later, she had a complicated situation with a child placed in her home. Out of desperation, she attended her first foster parent support group. She had found a lifeboat.

“I completely disagreed with the plan that the department had laid out for the child and my opinion wasn’t valued,” she says. “The other foster parents helped me work through those challenges.”

As an experienced foster parent who has had 20 children placed in her home, Fluette still feels she has to ask for help repeatedly and isn’t always taken seriously.

But she no longer feels alone. This year, Fluette and several other foster parents formed The Village, which helps foster parents advocate for children, face the daily emotional challenges of caregiving and form positive relationships with other foster parents.

“We know the difference it makes to have a stable, loving home while in foster care,” Fluette says. “But we just can’t do it alone.”

take care of themselves, their family and other children in need.

- *Help in making decisions about adoption and guardianship.* When children can't return home safely, foster parents are often the first candidates to adopt or become guardians for the child. Child welfare agencies should help foster parents decide whether they want to provide a permanent home for the child and explore what the agency can do to help the family meet the child's ongoing needs. If the foster parents can't provide a permanent home, they can still help with the transition to a permanent family and be ongoing connections for the child in the future.
- *Peer mentoring networks.* Some agencies pair seasoned foster parents with new foster parents who can help them learn the ropes, access community resources, troubleshoot questions and concerns about the child and provide emotional support. Examples include the New Jersey Heart to Heart Mentoring Program, run by the New Jersey Foster and Adoptive Family Services, and QPI Florida, which requires mentors to have at least three years of experience before they can work with new foster parents. Strong peer networks can assist foster parents in coping with individual children while also learning from one another about effective partnerships with the agency and birth parents.
- *Respite care.* Some foster parents say they stopped fostering because they rarely had an opportunity to "take a break" from the intensity of their roles. In addition to providing reliable and affordable child care, agencies should offer regular respite care for every foster parent so they can get needed rest and attend to work or

People don't understand we're not getting rich off this. We chose to be at the doorstep for these kids. I don't have a Ferrari parked in my garage. I have a 15-passenger van that has balding tires and, you know, completely embarrasses my three seniors in high school when I pull up to get them.

— *Michelle Brunette, Foster Parent, interviewed on NPR's Talk of the Nation, March 21, 2013*

other personal commitments. While agencies can and should provide foster parents with access to safe and reliable respite care, foster parents should also be able to make their own arrangements with trusted and reliable adults just as they would for their children.

- *Kin and non-kin support groups.* Foster parents gain enormous strength from one another when they can share common struggles and brainstorm solutions. Support groups designed specifically for relatives allow kin to express frustrations or concerns about the impact of family dynamics on children without fear of judgment.
- *Social events and public recognition.* Regular social events that are organized by the agency and its partners can help foster parents and children connect and communicate that they are valued partners in the child welfare community. Honoring foster parents and the achievements of children in their care at well-attended community celebrations like parades, fairs and athletic events also acknowledges foster parent commitment and encourages others to consider fostering.

ENSURE ADEQUATE FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

In addition to the emotional and time commitment foster parents make, raising children is expensive. Failing to provide foster parents with sufficient resources hurts children and is a major deterrent to effective recruitment and retention. It also sends a signal that foster parents are not valued. At minimum, child welfare agencies should commit to providing children and their foster parent partners with:

- *Adequate financial support to meet children's needs.* Government has a basic responsibility to provide adequate reimbursement rates for the cost of raising children, including the high costs of child care for foster parents who work outside the home. One way to ensure that children in foster care receive sufficient financial support is to create statutory requirements that foster care board rates be re-evaluated at periodic intervals or to index them directly to inflation rates.

- *Access to basic services for children.* One of the most common complaints among foster parents is that they often have trouble accessing basic benefits and services for the children in their care. Even though the child welfare agency has delegated daily decision-making authority to them, foster parents often face challenges accessing health and mental health services; making education and special education decisions; and affording and obtaining the equipment children need for sports and artistic activities and other critical resources. Child welfare systems must work hand in hand with foster parents and the other government and community agencies to ensure that children's needs are met in a comprehensive, timely way.
- *Equitable support for kin and non-kin foster parents.* Kinship families, especially those caring for children of color, are often left out of the foster parent reimbursement system because they are not licensed, which is required for federal foster care funding. Child welfare agencies must prioritize equitable financial and other resources for kin to address disparities in outcomes for children of color.
- *Funding for age-appropriate activities and unexpected expenses.* Foster parent reimbursement policies should take into consideration the new federal requirement that children in foster care have access to age-appropriate activities. Additionally, agencies should have clear policies and procedures for requesting reimbursement for costs not covered by the financial subsidy, such as clothing allowances, school and athletic fees, music lessons, mileage to children's appointments and other expenses.
- *Information about tax benefits.* The IRS permits foster parents to claim children as dependents on their tax returns if the child has lived in the home for more than six months and meets the other requirements of a "qualifying child." Child welfare agencies should provide clear and easily accessible information to all foster parents about the dependent exemption, child tax credit, Earned Income Tax Credit and other available benefits to help offset the costs of children in their care.
- *Eligibility for Family and Medical Leave.* The first few weeks of a child's transition into a foster parents' home are consumed by doctor's appointments, school visits and meetings with birth parents and caseworkers. States should incorporate provisions in their family medical leave policies to allow foster parents to take time from their jobs to help children transition into their new homes.
- *Access to liability insurance.* The reasonable and prudent parenting standard has raised questions about the need to provide foster parents with liability insurance to mitigate the risks they assume when they care for children. Liability insurance that is purchased by the agency can also cover damage to a foster parents' home or property that is not otherwise covered by their homeowners' insurance.



The federal normalcy provisions are a huge step forward. They allow foster parents to actually parent by using their judgment and knowledge of individual children and youth in their care to decide what is right for them.

— Patrick McCarthy, President and CEO, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

2 Forge strong relationships with foster parents

To create strong relationships with individual foster parents and build a healthy network of caring adults, child welfare agencies must do three things:

- Communicate that the foster parent partnership is fundamental to the agency's efforts to improve outcomes for children.
- Prioritize the partnership in staffing, funding and other administrative decisions.
- Promote the partnership's importance with external stakeholders, such as private agency contractors, funders, policymakers, the media and the broader community.

As one foster care supervisor puts it, “we need a message from the top that says the relationship with foster parents should matter as much as your relationship with the child or with your supervisors. You’ve got to change people’s attitudes toward the work.”

A true partnership culture means helping staff throughout the organization learn concrete ways to operationalize this philosophy using

a true customer service mentality — returning phone calls on time, listening carefully to foster parents’ opinions about what a child needs, responding in a timely way to requests for services and asking for feedback about what more the agency can do to support children in their care.

Performance evaluations should measure staff on their actions and behaviors toward foster parents and reward staff whose daily actions and attitudes consistently demonstrate respect for their roles. Strong supervision models are also needed to reinforce the foster parent-agency partnership and ensure that staff have regular opportunities to discuss and develop a plan to address any concerns about foster parents.

“When it comes to promotions, I pay attention to the workers who really get to know their foster parents,” explains Tricia Howell, deputy director of Child Welfare Services at the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. “I also talk to my veteran foster parents, and I know pretty quickly who feels supported and who doesn’t.”

ENGAGING FOSTER PARENTS AS FULL AND RESPECTED PARTNERS IN CHILD-CENTERED DECISION MAKING

In making daily decisions for children in their care, foster parents are the child welfare agency's frontline practitioners — their most important eyes and ears on the ground. Foster parents get to know a child's strengths and challenges, learn what caregiving approaches work best and help reinforce positive parenting strategies with birth parents. To build on these insights, child welfare agencies must include foster parents in critical decisions by:

- *Treating them as full members of the child's foster care team.* Foster parents should have an equal opportunity to actively participate in discussions with caseworkers, supervisors and treatment providers about what services the child should receive, how to interact with the child's birth parents and how to achieve the child's permanency plan.
- *Ensuring that foster parent voices are heard in children's court proceedings.* Federal law requires that foster parents be given notice and an opportunity to be heard at any legal review or hearing for children in their care. Child welfare agencies should make sure that foster parents are notified well in advance of upcoming hearings, have the information and preparation they need to interact with judges and stay informed of agency recommendations to the court.

- *Emphasizing "partnership culture" in joint staff and foster parent trainings.* Child welfare agencies use trainings as the primary vehicle to communicate their philosophy and priorities to senior leadership, supervisors, frontline staff and foster parents. Child welfare agencies should ensure that existing training goals, materials and facilitation underscore the importance of the agency-foster parent partnership and conduct joint training to reinforce the partnership's value.
- *Supporting foster parents' judgment and decision making.* Child welfare agencies should invite foster parents to play a key role in implementing new federal requirements for a reasonable and prudent parenting standard. The requirement gives

foster parents greater autonomy in and legal protection for decisions about a child's daily activities, such as sleepovers and after-school programs. In addition, foster parents need clear and simple guidance on appropriate day-to-day decisions, including how to involve birth parents in some of the bigger-picture choices for the child.

If the powers that be don't understand why a strong partnership matters, then the rest is just lip service. You can't just say "oh yeah, everyone has a role to play." Agency leaders have to make sure foster parents stay at the top of the list.

— *Foster Parent Unit Supervisor*

EXPANDING THE FOSTER PARENT VOICE TO IMPROVE AGENCY POLICIES AND PRACTICES

To build on foster parents' unique insights and skills, child welfare agencies must find new ways to incorporate their opinions into system improvement efforts. A growing number of child welfare agencies are including foster parents in internal decision-making processes by:

- *Establishing foster parent advisory boards and expanding participation in agency work groups.* Child welfare agencies use foster parent advisory boards to elicit and incorporate foster parents' suggestions into the development of new policies and programs, including efforts to improve foster parent training and education, recruitment and retention and supportive programs, resources and services. Foster parent representation on internal agency work groups, traditionally limited only to staff, also helps agencies improve overall performance for children and families and encourage foster parents' investment in system-wide changes.
- *Encouraging foster parent advocacy and leadership opportunities.* Recent efforts to encourage foster parent advocacy and organizing have helped to increase foster parent
- *Updating foster parents on critical decisions that affect the child welfare agency.* Foster parents should be included in general agency communications on significant policy

influence both within agencies and with outside influencers such as legislators, foundations and the media. Child welfare agencies and foster parent associations should be encouraged to continue identifying, training and supporting foster parent leaders who can help to influence policy and change laws at the state and federal levels. While agency leaders may not always agree with the priorities developed by foster parent leaders, a commitment to negotiating these priorities is a true reflection of the partnership.

The Foster Parent's Voice in Well-Being

Foster parents' primary job is to understand how a child is really doing. To answer this question, the Casey Foundation and The Duke Endowment are partnering with Kids Insight to develop and test the Treatment Outcome Package (TOP)⁸, a proven assessment tool recently adapted to help child welfare agencies gauge a child's social and emotional well-being. TOP uses statistically valid questions to identify children's strengths and challenges and track their progress over time using simple web-based tools, including a short checklist completed by the child and those close to her, such as her foster parents. By allowing foster parents to report on and track how the child is doing, the TOP tool translates foster parent voices directly into useful information that helps them care and advocate for children.

When I was with my grandmother in foster care, she knew a lot more about what was going on than my social worker ever did. She was there when I was acting out, when I didn't want to talk to anyone. She even knew stuff I didn't want her to know.

– Young Adult Formerly in Foster Care

Should Foster Parents Be Volunteers or Paid Professionals?

Child welfare agencies have traditionally regarded foster parents as mission-driven volunteers willing to be trained and licensed to provide temporary care because they want to help children. In this model of foster parenting, the monthly foster care stipend is intended only to reimburse foster parents for costs related to a child's care. Despite abundant evidence that foster parents spend much more on children in their care than they receive from the government, many — including the media and the public — doubt foster parents' altruism and question their motivations. To help stem negative perceptions and alleviate foster parent shortages, some advocates support professionalizing the role. In other words, pay foster parents for skilled labor and time, plus the cost of room and board to quantify respect for their efforts and help with recruiting and retaining a reliable pool of qualified caregivers.

The Casey Foundation, however, believes that broadly professionalizing foster parenting would do more harm than good — except in the limited case of foster parents who care for high-needs children. Based on discussions with caregivers and youth who spent time in foster care, Casey is convinced professionalizing the role would

undermine the fundamental purpose of foster parenting.

A small number of children, such as those who are medically fragile or have severe behavioral or developmental needs and require caregivers with specialized skills who are available around-the-clock and are not employed outside the home. In such cases, agencies may want to consider a more “professional” model. Professional foster parents are full-time caregivers whose primary income is based on their specialized skills, whether clinical or medical. They are paid a fee for their skills in addition to the stipend they receive to meet the child's needs and for typical caregiving responsibilities provided by all parents. In many states, therapeutic or medically fragile foster care falls within this category.

Alternatively, many jurisdictions pay a difficulty-of-care supplement that is added to the regular stipend, compensating foster parents for extra time required to meet the parenting needs of some children and youth. Supplements may compensate foster parents of children with significant, time-consuming needs, such as school problems or developmental or behavioral management needs.

These difficulty-of-care supplements are not considered professional fees for services. They compensate parents for providing extra parenting skills and time while a child is also receiving professional, clinical supports from the custodial or child-placing agency.

Beyond the limited number of children who need parents with very specialized skills, professionalizing foster parenting risks marginalizing many of the families that agencies are trying to attract but who lack professional training, such as kin, families of color and caregivers who live in or near the same communities as children in foster care. Foster parents need to be recognized by caseworkers as skilled and trauma-informed caregivers. But, in general, foster parents should be volunteers who are supported and trained to provide high-quality care and who are reimbursed for the cost of care and any extra time needed to meet children's basic needs.

Children and youth in foster care want to believe and feel that the people caring for them do so out of love — not because it's just a job they are being paid to do.

changes, staffing updates and budget developments. They should also be able to access new research, data and information about community services and resources.

- *Promoting broader community understanding of foster parent authority.* Child welfare agencies have a responsibility to reach out and educate the broader public about the critical role foster parents play as daily caregivers for children, making sure to reach teachers, doctors, religious leaders, coaches, therapists and other adults involved in children's lives.

PROMOTING THE AGENCY-FOSTER PARENT PARTNERSHIP WITH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Foster parents often report that they feel undervalued, disrespected and isolated, not just by child welfare agencies and their private agency partners, but also by the broader community, which does not always understand their role and is often influenced by negative media coverage of high-profile cases. "Foster parents are

often seen as the enemy," says Judith Cope, a foster parent from Oklahoma. "People forget that foster parents volunteer for this role and want to make a difference in the lives of children and their parents. We are more mentors than adversaries and agencies could do more to help biological families understand that most foster parents want to support them and see them succeed."

In partnership with other child welfare stakeholders, agencies can proactively communicate the value of foster parents in all of their community interactions. This can be accomplished by publicizing success stories, working with outside partners to publicly recognize foster parents' commitment and giving the public ideas about how they can help local foster families. Agency leaders can help cultivate foster parent leaders as spokespeople who can communicate with legislators, the governor and the media about the important role they play in children's lives.

Finally, because public agencies routinely contract with private providers to recruit, retain and support foster parents, the guiding philosophy of foster parent partnerships should be clear in all public-private interactions and contractual arrangements. Public agencies can hold providers accountable for having strong foster parent partnerships through performance-based contracting and other mechanisms. Public and private partners can also collaborate on trainings, data analysis and the development of foster parent leaders.



I feel like they need to go deeper into the criminal background check and not just write people off because they had a situation in the past. If they've done things to better their lives, then it should be taken into consideration. I have people in my life who are great mentors because they learned from their mistakes and can tell me what not to do.

– Alumnus of Foster Care

3 Find and keep more amazing caregivers

The quality and sustainability of a strong and diverse foster family network ultimately rests on the caregiving abilities and motivations of individual foster families and the services and resources child welfare agencies and local communities wrap around them. “Some people ask, ‘where are we going to find all these great parents?’ I tell them that I really do believe that there are more great foster parents out there,” explains one state child welfare director, “but they’ve been frightened off by agencies that aren’t responsive or respectful of their role.” As a key component in transforming their relationships with foster parents, some child welfare agencies are beginning to identify the common characteristics of extraordinary caregivers, how and where to find them, which messages and recruiting techniques work best and how to tap into the natural ability of satisfied foster parents to recruit others.

Despite progress, many agency recruitment efforts still focus on attracting “enough” families to meet the current level of need instead of finding families with the best potential to succeed over the long term. Without effective ways to support and retain foster parents, identify those who are not a good fit and fully integrate more tailored recruiting approaches,

child welfare agencies continue to rely on billboards, radio ads and other antiquated techniques that fail to meet the current demand for caring foster homes. Finding enough foster families for children of color is particularly urgent given their over-representation in group care.⁹

Children deserve to be matched with foster parents who have been recruited using the same cutting-edge marketing, technology and data-driven approaches that business institutions, human resource departments and the military are using to understand their audiences and communicate and connect with them. These sophisticated approaches require child welfare leaders to prioritize and invest in ongoing research and development efforts and reach out to learn from other industries. These investments will not only improve their recruitment efforts, but also allow them to use that knowledge to match children with the foster parents who are best suited for them.

Some promising approaches child welfare agencies are employing include:

- *Having a better understanding of the needs of children in foster care.* To develop effective recruitment plans,

child welfare agencies must understand the needs of children coming into care and the characteristics of existing foster parents. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services found that using simple data collection tools helped them answer basic questions about children so they could better identify and fill existing gaps and target foster families that can care for children near their families, schools and neighborhoods. Additionally, agencies that have been struggling to find families willing to take children of certain races, ages and populations can use this information to focus their recruitment strategies.

- *Creating more accurate foster parent inventories.* Many agencies report that when they take time to review their current pool of foster homes, the list includes foster parents who are no longer caring for children, whether because these caregivers lack the requisite skills, or don't accept certain children. When the Connecticut Department of Children and Families sought to assess the availability of foster parents, it found that some homes were underutilized, on hold or had never taken a placement. Conducting such an inventory can help child welfare agencies understand the demographics, skills and interests of existing foster parents to make strategic decisions about how to expand their existing supply.
- *Using child-specific recruitment efforts.* Based on the success of Wendy's Wonderful Kids in recruiting adoptive parents among community members and families who already know a child, an increasing number of agencies are working to encourage kin, extended family and friends to become licensed foster families for a particular child. While these families are motivated by

a commitment to a specific child or sibling group they already know, they may be willing to foster other children in the future.

- *Conducting targeted recruitment for foster parents interested in working with specialized populations.* Child welfare agencies are exploring new ways to support and match children with foster families interested in working with specialized populations of children, such as victims of sex trafficking, youth who identify as LGBTQ, children with disabilities, pregnant and parenting teens or medically fragile children. Each of these populations requires foster parents to be keenly aware of childrens' unique needs, accepting of their circumstances and committed to learning how to advocate effectively on their behalf.
- *Supporting foster parents and others as recruiters.* Most child welfare agencies agree that their most effective and satisfied foster parents are also the best recruiters for new foster families. Agencies should explore strategies to encourage foster parents to serve in this role, such as using incentive-based systems that reward their recruitment efforts. Leaders at Children's Community Programs of Connecticut, a private foster care agency, became frustrated after spending \$50,000 on recruitment ads and events that yielded only three foster families. A new recruitment strategy rewards existing foster parents with \$1,500 for each new foster family they recruit that makes it through the licensing process and commits to at least one year of service. New foster families also receive a reward once they are licensed. "After only six months we were able to license 17 new families for our children," says Brian Lynch, CEO of the agency. "It really proves that

Foster parents can be absolute game-changers in children's lives. Amazing foster parents are out there, and if we can help share their challenges and triumphs and convince people to join them we can really do something special here.

- Jeremy Kohomban, President and CEO, The Children's Village

our experienced foster parents know firsthand how to bring new families into the foster parent community.” Administrative staff, community partners and state leaders also have a role in communicating the rewards and benefits of being a foster parent.

- *Partnering with faith communities.* Many families interested in becoming foster parents are strongly motivated by their faith. One study found that two-thirds of foster parents attend religious services weekly, a rate that is 1.7 times that of the national average.¹⁰ The faith community has a long history of recruiting adoptive and foster families, both internationally and domestically. Examples include Wait No More®, a partnership between child welfare agencies and churches across the country that has led to over 3,000 families initiating the process of adoption from foster care.¹¹ The Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO) encourages a national network of local churches to inspire their members to become foster parents and support each other in their caregiving role. Their African American Church Initiative seeks to expand the number of homes for African-American children in the

foster care system.¹² Child welfare agencies should reach out to leaders of all faiths to discuss opportunities to enhance foster parent recruitment activities, particularly in communities where a large number of children are placed in foster care but agencies have had difficulty recruiting parents.

- *Investing in technological solutions for recruitment and matching.* Recruitment is not a one-time event, but a complex and ongoing process of determining children's needs and identifying which adults can best meet them. Child welfare agencies committed to innovative recruitment approaches should work together to leverage technological solutions that improve recruitment, support the application process and effectively match children with foster parents. Casebook, an innovative child welfare information system developed by Case Commons, has a placement matching module that matches children's characteristics and needs with foster parents who can support them. The ECAP (Every Child a Priority) system developed in Kansas is a web-based tool that supports decisions about the most appropriate match for a child and includes profiles of foster home qualities and

preferences. The information in this database helps placement staff find the best foster home for a child based on his or her needs. Research finds that children placed using ECAP experience fewer moves and spend less time in the system than other children.¹³

- *Acknowledging and rewarding experienced foster parents.* Everyone understands that retaining good foster parents is important. Having enough foster parents is critical, but retaining them is arguably even more important. Most experienced foster parents will admit that it took them at least a few years to develop the full array of skills and confidence to meet children's needs. As systems move away from relying on group placements for children, the need for highly experienced foster parents who are able to care for children with challenging behaviors or special medical needs will continue to grow. Agencies that reward tenured foster parents with special recognition, bonuses, funding to attend conferences, formalized responsibility to recruit or mentor new foster parents and other support services are more likely to retain the highly qualified and experienced foster families they need.

DEVELOPING A LICENSING PROCESS THAT PROMOTES SAFETY AND QUALITY CAREGIVING

Foster parent licensing is intended to ensure child safety, assess the suitability of a foster family's home, provide practical information to inform a plan of care and give foster families the knowledge and skills they need to be strong caregivers and partners. Unfortunately, many licensing

regulations currently impose standards largely unrelated to ensuring safety. "Too many requirements that have nothing to do with safety are excluding good potential foster families," says Rob Geen, Casey's director of Policy Reform and Advocacy. "Of course we need to rule out for safety, but we also need to rule in for high-quality caregivers." These antiquated licensing regulations disproportionately affect relative foster parents who often step in to care for children unexpectedly without time to adapt their homes to meet current requirements. Relatives are also more likely to step in to care for children of color who are disproportionately represented in foster care in many states.

To help strengthen foster parent partnerships, child welfare agencies can streamline licensing requirements by:

- *Creating more flexible licensing processes.* Some child welfare agencies are experimenting with substantially less burdensome licensing approaches. They are using mobile fingerprinting systems, designing more flexible home studies, developing flexible training programs that accommodate family work and child care needs and involving existing foster families to help new families navigate the licensing process.

- *Adopting model licensing standards.* To help ensure that licensing standards are more responsive to the needs of children and foster parents, several national organizations came together to develop Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards,¹⁴ which create a more common-sense licensing pathway. These new standards are designed to replace non-safety-related state rules focusing on room dimensions, English-language requirements and out-of-date criminal records that are significant obstacles to placing children with appropriate caregivers.

With good data and technology, child welfare agencies could really transform the way they meet the needs of foster parents and build better foster parent networks. LinkedIn matches people with jobs, eHarmony works for dating. Why can't we apply that knowledge to children and foster parents?

— Michael Shaver, CEO, Children's Home Society of Florida

Transforming Foster Parenting to Support Children in Care

Casey agrees that children and youth deserve the highest-quality caregiving our nation’s families can offer. With the right supports, foster parenting is a deeply rewarding experience that benefits children, supports birth parents and helps child welfare agencies fulfill their mission to keep children safe and help them thrive in families.

Resources spent on quality caregiving for children require consistent upfront investments by child welfare agencies and their partners but will more than pay off in fewer disruptions, shorter stays in foster care and reduced use of costly group placements when children do not require therapeutic care. Most important, these investments will result in better outcomes for children, the ultimate measure of success for child welfare systems.

To accomplish this for every child in foster care, child welfare agencies need to strengthen their partnership with foster parents and create relationships built on mutual trust, respect and support. Stronger partnerships are key not only to helping children and families thrive, but also to building a robust and sustainable pipeline of great foster parents for the future.

With the three themes described in this paper in mind — ensuring quality caregiving for children, forging strong relationships with foster parents and finding and keeping more amazing caregivers — Casey looks forward to working with other committed stakeholders to help propel a national movement to transform foster parenting.

Casey believes this can be accomplished using a three-step process that includes developing a collective understanding about what works, creating options for agencies and their partners and supporting, implementing and further evaluating these promising approaches.

The shift to stronger foster parent partnerships is already happening in pockets across the country, as indicated by examples cited in this paper. But this work needs more urgent and sustained attention to bring effective approaches to scale.

Building a National Movement to Transform Foster Parenting

GATHER INSIGHTS

- From the field about what works
- From the public and stakeholders on their views of foster parenting

DEVELOP OPTIONS

- Identify best practices and explore new policy and practice strategies
- Improve perceptions of foster parenting

IMPLEMENT AND SUSTAIN

- Increase and strengthen pool of foster parents
- Use data to learn, adapt, innovate and improve practice and policy and build public will

We hope that by joining national, state and local stakeholders in this movement we can identify and share more approaches that can make a difference for children and their foster parents. We hope to inspire veteran foster parents to continue their efforts and engage a new generation of amazing foster parents. Based on our research, we are convinced the field is more than ready to advance effective ideas with renewed energy.

Just as every child and family is unique, so too are the priorities, challenges and culture of each community. There is no universal recipe for foster parenting success, only common ingredients that can be adapted to meet unique local needs. Casey hopes this kind of national movement to transform foster parent partnerships will help communities figure out the path that is right for them and seek better outcomes for children and families.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015, May). *Every kid needs a family: Giving children in the child welfare system the best chance for success*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from www.aecf.org/resources/every-kid-needs-a-family
- ² For more information about Connect, visit <http://connectparentgroup.org>.
- ³ For more information about the Quality Parenting Initiative in California, visit www.QPI4kids.org.
- ⁴ For more information about the Mockingbird Project, visit <http://mockingbirdsociety.org/index.php/what-we-do/mockingbird-family-model>.
- ⁵ For more information about A Second Chance, Inc., visit www.asecondchance-kinship.com.
- ⁶ For more information about KEEP, visit www.oslc.org/projects/keep.
- ⁷ For more information about the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's training curriculum, visit <http://nctsn.org/products/caring-for-children-who-have-experienced-trauma>.
- ⁸ TOP was developed by Kids Insight. For more information, visit kidsinsight.org/how-we-help/top-assessment.
- ⁹ Wulzyn, F., Alpert, L., Martinez, Z., & Weiss, A. (2015, June). *Within and between state variation in the use of congregate care*. Chicago, IL: The Center for State Child Welfare Data, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- ¹⁰ Schreiber, J. (2010, August). *The role of religion in foster care*. Paper presented at the conference of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work, Raleigh-Durham, NC.
- ¹¹ For more information about Wait No More®, visit <http://icareaboutorphans.org/whatwedo/waitnomore>.
- ¹² For more information about the Christian Alliance for Orphans, visit <https://cafo.org>.
- ¹³ Moore, T. D., McDonald, T. P., & Cronbaugh, K. (n.d.). *Summary of ECAP research findings*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas School of Social Welfare. Retrieved from http://fostercaretech.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ECAP-Major-Research-Findings-REV_8_13_132.pdf
- ¹⁴ For more information about the Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards, visit www.naralicensing.org/nara-model-child-welfare-standards.



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