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## **An exploratory study to identify services that will aid foster parents in San Bernardino County and potentially reduce the frequency of multiple placements**

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY TO IDENTIFY SERVICES  
THAT WILL AID FOSTER PARENTS IN SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY  
AND POTENTIALLY REDUCE THE FREQUENCY OF MULTIPLE PLACEMENTS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Michelle Terez Navarro  
Cody Marie Dawkins

September 2000

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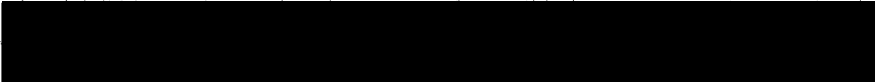
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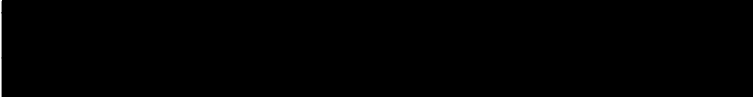
by  
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September 2000

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the needs of foster parents and sought to identify services that may aid them and potentially reduce the frequency of multiple placements. Using a cross-sectional survey design, twenty-four foster parents were recruited from two separate foster parents' association meetings, in San Bernardino County, to participate in a 15 minute telephone survey. The foster parents ranged in age from 27 to 70 years. The amount of foster parenting experience ranged from 8 months to 32 years. Findings indicate that foster parents would benefit from consistent social worker response, respite services, reimbursement in a timely manner, increased wages and thorough instruction on child behavior.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the foster parents who participated in this study as well as foster parents all over the world who have opened their hearts and homes to our children. They have taken on an important task that is crucial to the well-being of so many young people. Yet, they are rarely acknowledged for their efforts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
PROBLEM STATEMENT .....	1
PROBLEM FOCUS .....	5
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	6
METHOD .....	13
RESULTS .....	18
DISCUSSION .....	38
APPENDIX A: Questionnaire .....	44
APPENDIX B: Agency Letter to Participants .....	45
APPENDIX C: Script for Interviewers .....	46
APPENDIX D: Informed Consent Form .....	47
APPENDIX E: Debriefing Statement .....	48
REFERENCES .....	49

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

America has a three hundred-year history in the public care of her children. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, children were placed in almshouses when their parents were unable to provide for them. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, foster family care was thought to be a more humane approach to childcare (Peebles-Wilkins, 1999). The Children Act of 1948 stressed foster care as the substitute arrangement for children who cannot be cared for by their own families; it also emphasized the responsibility of the state to provide good alternative homes where necessary (Wilson & Petrie, 1998). By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, small-group care for older children and residential treatment institutions for disturbed children were established (Peebles-Wilkins, 1999).

As years have passed, placement opportunities for children have changed. The criteria dictating the necessity for the removal of children from their homes have also changed. With the Social Security Act of 1932, the government took on a more supportive role in helping families stay together by providing financial assistance to families with dependent children. However, in 1996, with the new welfare reform laws, the government appears to be regressing

into a more punitive approach. "Certain aspects of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families resemble the Elizabethan Poor Laws of Colonial America, and early measures proposed by (Newt) Gingrich resembled the pre-Charles Loring Brace era when needy children were placed in orphanages (Peebles-Wilkins, 1999, p. 120)."

The new child welfare reform laws are taking a more punitive approach to parents who have lost custody of their children. The federal government has imposed sanctions against parents who do not meet the criteria, which is required to regain custody of their children, in stipulated time frames. The federal government has opted for permanent plans for the children who are not returned to the custody of their parents as indicated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. From one perspective, these measures would appear to be in the best interest of the child. However, if the children are not being placed into stable living environments, then this goal is not being achieved.

Therefore, the other side of this punitive coin requires that the enforcers of such measures be held to higher standards of compliance than the biological parents who have been deemed



unsuitable because they are unable to provide such an environment.

In America today, there are approximately 500,000 children removed from their families each year and placed into foster care (Child Welfare League of America, 1994). Once this intrusive action has been deemed necessary and executed, the children become wards of the court. As a result, the court, which falls under the jurisdiction of the state, is held accountable and is required by law to provide a safe, alternative living environment which insures permanency, and the well-being of each child (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997). As stated earlier, America has a vested interest in her children spanning over a 300-year period (Peebles-Wilkins, 1999). With the new welfare laws, it is more important than ever that children who are removed from their families experience quality care in stable living environments.

The facts indicate that more than 50 percent of the children that enter foster care will spend their lives in out-of-home placement (Stein, Gambrill, & Wiltse, 1978). Many of these children will experience numerous placements. It is inherent that multiple placements violate the

possibility of the child experiencing a stable living environment. Numerous disruptions may make it difficult for the child to develop a secure attachment to his/her primary caretaker which is essential to healthy human development (Bowlby, 1988). Children who experience multiple placements are at greater risk of physical, emotional and educational problems. Therefore, it is vital to the child's well being that, if at all possible, the number of placements she experiences be minimized.

Children who are afforded the opportunity to achieve normal psychosocial development are apt to exercise better coping skills and social functioning and demonstrate higher personal functioning than children who are deprived of the same opportunity. No doubt, it is in the best interest of society, that foster children be given the opportunity to achieve normal development fostered by a healthy and stable living environment. This could potentially lead to offsets in social and medical costs through lower crime rates, less substance abuse, and lower hospitalization rates (Bengen-Seltzer, 1999). Despite these compelling factors, the problem remains; most children placed into foster care experience multiple placements.

## PROBLEM FOCUS

The focus of this study was to identify services that could aid foster parents and lead to a reduction in the frequency of multiple placements. By using a grassroots approach, the study identified services that will prepare and equip foster parents in the County of San Bernardino to better understand and serve the children placed in their care. This study was designed to ask the people on the front lines, foster parents, how could the problem be fixed? How can multiple placements be limited? What services can be provided to you, which will enable you to keep foster children in your home until either they are returned home, adopted, placed under guardianship or until they age-out of the system?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Foster Care has moved through many phases. Between 1909 through the 1960's, the main goal of out-of-home placement was to provide a safe, nurturing environment for children who could not live at home because of child abuse or neglect (Downs, Costin & McFadden, 1996). Researchers (e.g., Downs et al., 1996) have pointed out that the focus during this phase was to help the child acclimate to the foster family and the foster family with the child's development. No efforts were made towards family reunification.

In 1959, Maas and Engler recognized that foster care, which had been originally thought of as a temporary substitution, had turned out to be anything but that for some children. In fact, they reported that many children remained in foster care for years and that they also experienced multiple placements. According to Downs et al. (1996), with the work of Bowlby (1969), Geiser (1973), and Littner, (1975) came a new awareness of the importance of emotional attachment and the damage that separation and disruption could cause children. Fenster (1997) reported that between the 1960's and 1970's the number of children in foster care increased to 503,000. By 1977, the number of children in

foster care had increased to 520,000 (Downs et al. 1996). Pelton (1989) attributed this to the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (as cited in Fenster, 1997). This act instituted mandated reporting by health professionals and teachers that suspected child abuse or neglect. These contributing factors brought on the next phase of child welfare, "Permanency Planning."

According to Maluccio and Fein (1983), permanency planning is defined as "the systematic process of carrying out, within a limited period, a set of goal directed activities designed to help children and youths live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers, and the opportunity to offer lifetime relationships (p. 197)." The main goal for child welfare agencies became to move children out of foster care into adoption. Many steps were taken by the states to provide permanent homes for foster children. Some state statues were even revised to clarify the grounds for termination of parental rights (Downs et al., 1996). In 1977, Pike et al. identified the main responsibility of the child welfare system as placing children into permanent families (as cited in Downs et al., 1996). The idea behind

this was to decrease the number of children remaining in foster care for long and limitless periods, improve their legal standing through permanent arrangements, and provide them the opportunity to attach to an entrusted caregiver, be it natural parent or a substitute (Fenster, 1977).

The mandated reporting which yielded more children in the child welfare system led to a large backlog of cases. Some professionals recognized and argued that in some of these cases, had the families been provided support services, the children would not have needed to be removed (Downs et al., 1996). As a result, the late 1970's and early 1980's gave rise to family preservation. With the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 and the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, funding was made available to the states by the federal government to promote family preservation over foster care (Ratterman, Dobson, & Hardin, 1987).

The past ten years has seen an escalation in the number of children in out-of-home care, the number of infants entering care, and the number of children experiencing lengthy stays in out-of-home care (Goerge et al., 1994; Barth 1997; Spar, 1997 as cited in Jamieson & Bodonyi, 1999). These increases have intensified budget strains and prompted

calls for accountability (Jamieson & Bodonyi, 1999). In response to this requirement, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 was instituted. It mandates the implementation of a system to rate the efficiency and effectiveness of state child welfare programs (Usher et al., 1999). The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 "establishes unequivocally that the national goals for children in the child welfare system are safety, permanency, and well-being (Barbell & Wright, 1999)."

Kamen & Gewirtz (1989) defined foster care as follows: Foster care is always a temporary solution to a crisis of family disruption. The worker plans for a permanent home situation for the child either by reunification with the natural family or through initiating the steps to free the child for adoption (p. 190).

However, Fenster (1997) points out that this is not the case for thousands of children in foster care. Noble (1997) states that "the average child remains in care just over three years and is moved from foster family to foster family an average of three times (p. 27)." Too many children that remain in foster care experience multiple placements for social workers not to be concerned.

Looking at the goals of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 recently signed by President Clinton, one would think that it is in the best interest of our children. However, how are these goals achieved? The current child welfare programs are unable to meet these goals and accommodate the increased number of children requiring services. Fernster (1997) identifies weaknesses in each of the following programs: Family Preservation, Family Reunification, and Adoption.

There is evidence that indicates that family preservation efforts have helped reduce the number of children in foster care for the five years following its implementation. However, Pelton (1989) attributes this to agencies returning children to their homes more quickly rather than preventing them from entering long term foster care. Rzepnicki (1994) found evidence to support Pelton's assessment. Therefore, the goal of placement prevention was not achieved. According to Rzepnicki (1994), "comparison group placement rates are typically similar to those of the family preservation programs" (cited in Fernster, 1997).

Although Pecora, Whittaker, and Maluccio (1992) reported that two-thirds of the foster children are reunited with



their families, Tatara (1992, 1993) found that 25% of these children enter, exit and re-enter the foster care system within a single year (Fernster, 1997). Although the authors have not reviewed information on the effects this could have on the children, general knowledge would predict that disruption, disappointment and distrust resulting from this action, has to have a negative effect on the child's emotional state of mind (Fernster, 1997).

In a recent study, McGowan (1991) reported that only 8% of the children in foster care are adopted (cited in Fernster, 1997). This can be attributed to the increase in the number of children requiring services and the decrease in available adoptive parents. Fernster (1997) also identifies systemic problems leading to this small percent.

Wilson and Conroy (1999) conducted a four-year study on the "Satisfaction of Children in Out-of-Home Care" in the State of Illinois. Their findings indicate that "Illinois' out-of-home care system is received favorably by most of the children served, especially children living in family foster care (in contrast to children living in other types of out-of-home placements e.g. as group homes)." Benedict and Zuravin (1996) found that children placed in kin foster homes

were more likely to remain in their first setting throughout their stay in care than did the children placed with nonrelatives. Also, these children were significantly less likely to have developmental or behavioral problems that were reported in the social services record before out-of-home care placement. Children living in kinship foster homes have a greater chance of remaining in the first out-of-home setting throughout their placement which results in better personal functioning than children who are placed in foster care with nonrelatives (Benedict & Zuravin, 1996).

Benedict & Zuravin's (1996) study provides some support to the authors' position, which is that children who remain in the first out-of-home setting throughout their placement have a greater chance to develop a healthy attachment to their primary caretaker, which in turn, fosters normal psychosocial development. Also, Fernster, (1997) presents a strong argument for Permanent Foster Care which this study hoped to parallel to some degree.

## METHOD

### *Study Design*

The purpose of this study was to explore the needs of foster parents and to identify services that may be provided which will enable them to better serve the children entrusted in their care. The founding assumption for this project was as follows: If foster parents are provided adequate services and effective support, then multiple placements for foster children can be minimized. By increasing the possibility of a stable living environment, which fosters a sense of permanence, the children have a better chance of developing into well-adjusted contributing members in society.

Using a cross-sectional survey, a telephone interview was conducted to obtain data from the participants. This method was chosen to increase the response rate. Telephone interviews allowed the researchers to "sell" the project and increase participation. A survey using open-ended questions is an optimal tool when seeking information on a subject when there is little information known (Grinnell, 1997). In this case, the literature reviewed revealed limited information on what foster parents identified as their needs. The majority of literature reviewed presented a top-down approach in which

the foster parents were recipients of and not contributors to solutions. This study was designed to ask foster parents how could the problem be fixed? What services can be provided to you, which will enable you to keep foster children in your home until either they are returned home, adopted, placed under guardianship or until they age-out of the system?

This study proved beneficial by providing preliminary information that can lead to the development of future studies that will investigate and test services that decrease the need for multiple placements. This project was just the beginning step towards achieving this goal. Additional research and implementation of services are needed to take place before the accuracy of this assumption can be evaluated.

### *Sampling*

The goal of this project was to obtain a sample that was reflective of all foster parents employed by the County of San Bernardino. Therefore ethnic background, income and the sex of the foster parents varied accordingly. This was achieved. As a result, the data can be generalized back to this specific population.

In cooperation with the Department of Children's Services, twenty-four certified foster homes employed by the County of San Bernardino agreed to participate in a cross-sectional survey.

Once the sample had been obtained, a list was generated consisting of names, addresses, and phone numbers, of the twenty-four certified foster homes. It was used for contact and coding purposes only. Each participant on the list was assigned a number and the number used to code their survey. The list was retained in the event that a participant would want to withdraw their data from the study. It was kept separate from the raw data in order to maintain confidentiality.

#### *Data Collection and Instrument*

A qualitative approach was employed. This study used a self-designed questionnaire consisting of a few demographic but primarily open-ended questions to obtain data. The instrument was constructed and given to colleagues employed by the Department of Children Services for their review and input. A copy of the questionnaire is attached (see APPENDIX A). Once the instrument had been reviewed and adjustments made, it was given to the project's advisor for her review

and approval. A formal pretest was not possible because of time constraints.

### *Procedure*

Each participant received a letter from the Department of Children's Services (see APPENDIX B) identifying the researcher and the purpose of the study along with a copy of the questionnaire. A follow-up call was made by one of the researchers in which she introduced herself and scheduled a convenient time to conduct the survey via phone (see APPENDIX C). At that time, participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw their participation as well as their data at any time. The researcher then followed-up as agreed. During this second call, the researcher began by reading to the participant the informed consent form (see APPENDIX D). Once the participant's consent had been obtained, the researcher proceeded with the questionnaire. After all the questions had been answered, the debriefing statement was read and a copy sent to each participant (see APPENDIX E).

### *Protection of Human Subjects*

The nature of this study was to elicit information from adult participants that they deemed to be helpful. The

survey was presented in a non-threatening manner and participation was voluntary. The data collected were kept separate from participants' names and reported in group form only. As a result, there was no foreseeable risk.

## RESULTS

### *Demographics*

The foster parents ranged in age from 27 to 70 years. The amount of foster parenting experience ranged from 8 months to 32 years. Of the 24 foster parents, 13 foster parents identified themselves as white or Caucasian, 7 identified themselves as African-American or Black, 2 identified themselves as Hispanic, 1 as American Indian and 1 foster parent declined to state their ethnicity. Seventeen foster parents stated that they were married, 2 were divorced, 2 widowed, one separated and 2 were single. The levels of education attained ranged from not completing high school to having obtained a Master's degree.

The income levels of nine of the foster parents surveyed fell in the range of \$18,000 to \$30,000 per year. Five foster parent's income levels were in the range of \$33,000 to \$44,000 per year. Five other foster parents' income level fell in the range of \$48,000 to \$60,000 per year. Four foster parents' income levels ranged from \$70,000 to \$100,000 per year and 1 foster parent reported an annual income of over \$100,000 per year. Sixteen of the surveyed foster parents did not work outside of the home; of the 8 foster



parents that worked outside of the home, 6 foster parents worked full-time and 2 foster parents work part-time.

Fifteen foster parents out of the 24 have natural children living in the home. The remaining 9 foster parents did not have any of their own children in the home. Of the foster parents that have natural children in the home, 10 reported that their own children reacted positively to their decision to become a foster parent. The foster parents used phrases such as "happy about it," "thought it was great" and "excited" to describe their children's reactions. Five other foster parents reported that their children had mixed emotions regarding their decision to become foster parents.

### *Experience*

Twenty-one of the 24 foster parents surveyed reported having gone through 12 hours or more of formal training prior to becoming foster parents while 3 of the foster parents reported having had practical experience only. However, all 24 participants reported that they are currently receiving ongoing monthly training at the foster parent association meetings.

When asked, "did the formal training adequately prepare you to become a foster parent," 8 out of the 21 answered NO.

"Not enough background on the paperwork and the legalities of the system." There is a "world of difference between what they teach and reality." "Nothing does actually (prepare you) because these are different children that we are dealing with. They are passed from home to home and must adjust to your home." "Nothing can adequately prepare you for emotionally and physically abused children until you do them-live with them." "Foster children, the whole concept, they don't tell you how to deal with the whole systematic court system, the biological family."

Six of the 21 foster parents that received formal training reported that the training was adequate. "Very good training." "Can't possibly cover all variables, (but) were informed about the difficulty and we were prepared for it. (It) was not a shock to us." "It helped me. The training helped me with a lot that I didn't know." Five who received formal training reported that the training was marginal. "They do their best but are you ever prepared to become a mother? Every child has a different personality; every child has a different problem that we have to deal with." "About as well as you can do it without just jumping in and doing it. Every child is different and they can't give you all the

backgrounds (in training).” Only one foster parent who received formal training noted that the “information is overwhelming until you become self confident over time.”

Another foster parent that received formal training did not address the question directly but spoke highly of the ongoing training she receives through the association meetings. “It keeps you motivated and keeps you informed of what’s going on. It helps because you get feedback from different foster parents that is helpful. Different speakers give speeches that are helpful.”

It is imperative to note, an overwhelming majority of the foster parents surveyed indicated that more information on child behavior should be included in the training.

When asked to describe their role as a foster parent, 50% of the participants identified themselves as parents and nurturers. One foster parent responded, “treat and do for them as if they were a biological child.” Another foster parent stated, “ (I) act as a father to the children.” While yet another responded, “I’m a mother to all my children.” Twenty-five percent of the foster parents identified their role as meeting the children’s emotional and psychological needs but did not mention being a parent. Some of their

responses included, "provide understanding, provide nurture and help them feel that they're okay despite (their) negative background." The remaining 25% were more goal-oriented and used their duties and responsibilities to define their role as a foster parent. One response characteristic of this group included, "taxi cab driver, take to appointments, administrative work, communicate with outside parties (doctors, etc.)."

Twenty-three of the foster parents surveyed are currently fostering children while one is not. Of the 23, only four foster parents reported fostering children that were related to them while 20 of the 23 reported fostering children that were non-related. Nine foster parents indicated they were fostering 4 or more children while the remaining 14 foster parents were fostering 3 or less. Of the four foster parents fostering children related, 3 are currently fostering 4 or more children. The fourth foster parent is fostering one related child and three that are non-related. Therefore, indicative of this sample, there appears to be an overrepresentation of relative foster parents who foster four or more children versus those who foster non-related children.

When asked how many children have you fostered over the years, of the 24 participants, 11 foster parents indicated that they had fostered between 1-20 foster children, 6 reported having fostered between 20-40 while 5 noted that they had fostered over 50 children, three of which had fostered over 100 children. Two participants failed to answer this question.

Together these 22 foster parents have opened their homes to over 880 children. Seventeen of the 22 stated that they have cared for at least one foster child for two years or more. However all report having cared for foster children who resided with them for less than a year that remained in the system. In other words, more foster children have experienced multiple placements than those who have not.

### *Opinions*

In this section of the survey, we asked foster parents their opinion of the foster care system with regard to service provision, social worker responsiveness, satisfaction with the amount and type of social worker contact and overall satisfaction with the foster care system. The purpose of this section of the survey was to determine how the foster care system could be improved to help decrease the number of

placements for foster children. Another purpose of this section was to discover services identified by foster parents that they felt would help to make their jobs easier.

When asked what they believed to be the needs of the children in their care, the foster parents' responses ranged from emotional needs such as love, attention, reassurance, security and stability to basic needs such as clothing, food, shelter and medical needs. Other needs identified were psychological needs met via the provision of counseling services.

The majority of the foster parents surveyed included love in their response with regard to the needs of foster children. One foster parent stated, "Most come to us so starved for love its unreal. Yet, when you give it to them, they don't know how to act. Most are used to being yelled at, hit at and cursed at that they don't know how to act." Another foster parent stated that foster children "...need to be held, loved and made to feel like they are needed, and wanted. They need to know that they are a great person and that they have a place in the home."

In general, the needs of foster children identified by foster parents fell under four main categories: basic needs,

the need for nurturance normally provided by a mother or father, emotional and psychological needs and the need for stability, structure, discipline and guidance.

When questioned as to whether or not the social worker has regular contact with the foster parent and the children in their care, half of the foster parents surveyed indicated that the amount of contact generally depends on the social worker. These foster parents stated that their experiences have differed depending on the social worker. Some experiences described included a social worker who was assigned to one child in a foster parent's home in November of 1999 and had only seen the child once between November 1999 and April 2000. Yet, another child in the home assigned to a different social worker received a call once a month and a visit every other month from their social worker. Another foster parent stated that one social worker had never been to her home, had never seen the child nor had ever had contact with the foster parent. This foster child's case was then transferred to another social worker who never had contact with the child either. All of this occurred within a span of 2 years according to the foster parent. This foster parent also stated that it is common for cases to be transferred

from social worker to social worker. This same foster parent further stated that contact once every 6 months is not enough. She states, "I could be a bad person and the social worker wouldn't know it." Another foster parent stated, "The social worker comes once a month or they're supposed to. Some do, some don't." Still another foster parent stated, with regard to social workers having regular contact, "When they feel like it. When they want to boss you. Some of them I don't have a problem with. It all depends on the social worker."

The other half of the foster parents surveyed reported satisfaction with the amount of social worker contact. Many indicated that the social worker does have regular contact with them and the children in their care at a rate of about once a month. One foster parent reported with regard to the social worker having regular contact, "Yes, once a month. If you have problems, you can contact the social worker or contact the hotline if there is an emergency and the office is closed." Another stated that they hadn't had any problems with the social worker having regular contact. "There has been no problems with contacting the social worker or their supervisor. County social workers are wonderful people who



provide excellent moral support when you are confused and unsure." Finally, one foster parent indicated that visits once every 6 months is good because, "We don't need them in and out of the house. Social workers constantly contacting the child keeps the child from feeling like a part of the family."

Foster parents were asked whether or not the social worker follows through with needed services for the child(ren), whether or not the social worker is responsive to the foster parents requests/needs and if not, what could they improve upon. Half of the foster parents surveyed reported that whether or not the social worker follows through and is responsive depends on the particular assigned social worker. According to the foster parents responding, all social workers do not provide the same type and amount of service or responsiveness. Some foster parents attributed this inconsistency in service provision and responsiveness to social workers having too many children on their caseloads or the social worker possibly being new on the job and/or simply not knowing their job. One foster parent stated that "some social workers do their jobs very well and there are others that do not follow through on anything. The county needs to

monitor employees more to see if they're doing their jobs. If social workers are not doing their jobs such as coming when they're supposed to and returning calls, then it is harder to do your job as a foster parent." Another foster parent stated, "Some are credible, others are not. We try to give credence to the fact that they are working in a large system with lots of children." Another foster parent stated, "I have had some that did and some that didn't. One kid needed counseling (and) the social worker was going to get everything together to provide the kid with counseling but she never did. Before I knew anything, she was off the case. Another worker came in and took care of it...got the services needed." Finally, another foster parent stated, "(It) depends on the social worker. They have a lot of children that they deal with so sometimes you have to wait for needs to be met and when you call they say 'Oh I forgot.' Sometimes a social worker can follow through with A-Z depending on your needs."

The other half of the remaining foster parents surveyed were evenly split between those that responded affirmatively to the question of whether or not the social worker follows through and is responsive and those that responded negatively

to this question. Of the foster parents that responded affirmatively, they gave examples of social workers being responsive and following through such as being provided with clothing allowances, counseling services and special monetary increments for special needs children. One foster parent stated that, "The social workers are just great to me." Another foster parent stated, "These workers do the best that they can do." Still another foster parent responded that she "feels like she has been a team with the social worker."

Of the foster parents that responded negatively to the question of whether or not the social worker is responsive and provides needed services, some stated that the caseload size of social workers prevents them from being responsive. One foster parent stated that "(It would) be better if they had smaller caseloads so that they could spend more time with the kids to (get to) know them better. It's more of what we tell them. They don't have the opportunity to see for themselves." Another foster parent stated, "They need to give fewer cases to workers so that they can spend quality time with dealing with the children."

Another foster parent indicated that only after much persistence on her part was the social worker responsive.

She stated, "I almost want to say only after the point of harassment. I have to work to get them on following through (but) only after a number of calls...almost to the point of harassment." Another foster parent cites a specific example of a social worker not following through and even putting the responsibility of obtaining the needed service off on the foster parent. "I had a child who I thought had been sexually abused and requested a psychological evaluation yet, the social worker stated if I found someone then she would sign the papers."

Foster parents were asked about the types of services that could be provided to them to make their jobs as foster parents easier. Respite care was indicated most often as a service that is greatly needed but is not currently provided to foster parents. This service, many stated, is desired to reduce stress and give necessary breaks. One foster parent stated, "We need respite care which we don't get. A lot of the mothers in Los Angeles get it but we don't get it out here. When I asked, I was told they don't offer it out here." Another foster parent stated, "I have the kids 24/7. I have to pay out of my own pocket (for help with the kids). If they paid more, maybe I could pay for a babysitter. But,

the things you have to do for the kids is done 24/7. Many days I have suffered from stress: go to bed with it and wake up with a headache. It takes a lot of time and patience to work with them (children). (I need) respite care and a list of approved babysitters and compensation for when I need a break." Another foster parent stated that respite care once a month to give her a break would be helpful. She states, "Foster parents need breaks, an hour or two here and there." This foster parent stated that she currently pays a babysitter \$5 per hour, when necessary, to care for her foster children.

Working foster parents stated that the provision of daycare funds would help to make their jobs easier. One foster parent stated, "It seems that the system is looking for people that can stay at home but the resource requirement requires that we both work out of the home in order to meet requirements and provide for the children. Daycare while we work...this money comes and goes and currently there are no funds available. Then you're required to pay childcare out of your own resources. Foster care payments don't cover everything."

Many foster parents reported a need for quality psychological services and counseling for the children. "More direct access to quality psychological services" would be helpful," stated one foster parent. Another foster parent stated that, "A directory of qualified medical, mental health and dental providers would be useful."

Other services that foster parents reported would make their jobs easier are increases in foster care payments and the provision of foster care benefits sooner than 30 days after the child's placement in their home. One foster parent stated that, "Since some foster parents are on limited resources, they cannot afford to provide clothing and other needs without assistance." Another foster parent stated that they "...wish things would go through a little faster sometimes as far as getting the child's needs met." One foster parent stated, "If we need a Medi-Cal card, we need it now. I have experienced many delays in getting the Medi-Cal cards."

Foster parents also indicated that often, the social workers have too many children on their caseloads. This causes delays in the provision of services as well as the social worker's ability to take care of the needs of the foster parents. Another foster parent stated that their jobs

could be made easier by "...social workers not so overloaded that they can't respond...getting concerns resolved faster which can be done by a social worker not so overloaded. Social workers should be able to resolve issues within a few days." This foster parent also reported that "being able to reach the social worker and standardized departmental procedures" would also be helpful.

When foster parents were asked to suggest improvements in the foster care system as a whole, a large majority of the foster parents reported that when a child makes an allegation of abuse against a foster parent, and most often a false allegation, the investigation is poorly conducted. Foster parents reported that the foster parent is often made to feel as if they are guilty until proven innocent. One foster parent stated, "Too much of the time they jump to conclusions...too much (is) put on what a child says. They, investigators, social workers, teachers, need to get the whole story before things get blown out of proportion."

Another foster parent stated that, "some social workers go overboard when allegations are made against the foster parents. Be a little kinder to the foster parents until evidence can be gathered. They should be kinder to foster

parents during the investigation until the allegations are founded because a lot of the times, the investigator acts as if they are guilty until proven."

Foster parents also indicated that matching children with appropriate foster homes needs to be done more by social workers. One foster parent stated that social workers need to "look for a home not a bed! Don't just call to see if I have an open bed. Match the child to the home, not just to the bed. Have an assessment center where all kids get assessed like Orangewood to know what kind of home will meet the kid's needs."

Another factor foster parents reported useful for improving the foster care system was using better judgement when considering giving children back to their parents. Foster parents seemed to feel that social workers tended to give children back to the parents prematurely. They felt that the biological parents often had not done enough to have their children returned to their custody.

Foster parents also stated that factors such as improving the communication between foster parents and social workers, decreasing social worker caseloads, increasing foster care payments, and providing better training initially



are important for improving the foster care system as a whole. In addition, foster parents mentioned that more foster parent recruitment and full disclosure by the social worker to the foster parent about the type of child they are placing during the placement process are also important for improving the foster care system.

One foster parent stated that "we really should be paid more. Although it's not their money, they act like it's their money. They appear to keep it from you...what you can get. They (social workers) don't let you know what you're entitled to. Specifically services that are available." Another foster parent stated, "Cut loose with more money. Pay us better and hire more social workers. Each social worker has about 60 kids and has 25 days to see all the kids. That's not possible." This same foster parent also stated, "we calculated it and we make approximately a dollar an hour. There is not too many people that would work for such wages." Other foster parents stated that services need to be provided more quickly (for example, medications for the children) and social workers need to "...return calls to see what you want and attempt to answer your questions."

When asked to give a few items "the system" or social workers seem to do right most of the time, most foster parents surveyed could point to a few items. For example, foster parents gave responses such as social workers showing genuine concern for the children on their caseloads. Foster parents reported that things like calling about the child to see if the child is alright and making sure the child's needs are taken care of are indicative of concern on the part of the social worker. One foster parent stated, "they seem to have genuine concern for the children. Some workers have the ability to make you feel they're willing to help if they know how." A few foster parents stated that social workers and "the system" seem to be supportive and appreciative of foster parents. These foster parents used words such as patient, cordial and attentive to describe some of the social workers that they have had contact with.

Other foster parents pointed to receiving financial reimbursements for out of pocket expenses and obtaining valuable information from foster parent meetings once a month as things that "the system" or social workers do right.

Other foster parents gave responses either with regard to what they believe social workers or "the system" could do

right, or don't do right at all. For example, one foster parent stated that, "One social worker acted like she was God with her own rules despite agency rules. (She) called (at the) last minute to schedule appointments and make requests...showed up one time at 9p.m. for an unscheduled visit." Another foster parent stated that, "We need to be treated more professional than we are. We are professional parents." Finally, another foster parent stated, "Listen. That's the most important thing that they can do. Listen to the child and to the foster parent."

## DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to explore how a three hundred year old foster care system could better serve foster children all over San Bernardino County. Specifically, this study attempted to identify services that could aid foster parents and subsequently reduce the frequency of multiple placements for children in the foster care system. More than 500,000 children are currently serviced by the foster care system and many of these children experience numerous placements. Undoubtedly, experiencing multiple placements disrupts a child's sense of stability, as well as their ability to develop healthy attachments to others. Therefore, the findings of this study are important to the well being of the many children entrusted to the care of foster parents in the County of San Bernardino. Social Workers, administrators, medical professionals, mental health professionals, teachers and foster parents will all benefit from the information obtained in this small excursion into the world of foster parenting.

Findings indicate that foster parents would benefit from consistent service provision, consistent social worker responsiveness, respite services, financial reimbursements in

a timely manner, increased wages and better training including thorough information regarding child development. More importantly, training needs to include what foster parents should expect to see from children who have suffered from abuse. Foster parents would like to be fully informed of what types of behaviors they can expect from a child at the time the child is being placed in their home. This, they felt, would allow them to better serve the children in their care as well as help to reduce unnecessary stress. If foster parents are better informed and more knowledgeable, then they are better prepared to handle the various types of situations foster children present. When foster parents feel better prepared and better equipped, the number of calls to social workers requesting that children be moved may decrease. Along with this, receiving support and appropriate services when needed from social workers and the foster care system in general is imperative. Foster parents feel that the need for support, timely service provision and social worker responsiveness is important for their success in caring for the children entrusted in their care.

Foster parents suggested that children be matched to homes during the placement process. They want social workers

to attempt to place a child in a home suitable to the child's needs. Some foster parents suggested that social workers "look for a home and not just a bed."

While some foster parents in this study report feeling happy with the foster care system and social workers in general, many foster parents didn't seem to feel supported in their jobs by the system and social workers. Foster parent satisfaction or dissatisfaction was contingent upon the particular social worker they were working with at the time or had worked with in the past. Many foster parents related that their experiences varied. Foster parents attributed these variations to differences in social workers' methods of service provisions. The inconsistency in service provision from social worker to social worker contributed to foster parent dissatisfaction with the foster care system as a whole. This inconsistency in service provision becomes especially evident when cases were transferred from one social worker to another. Foster parents reported receiving better or worse service provision and social worker responsiveness after the transfer of a child's case from one social worker to another.

The frequent transference of cases between social workers was also reported to be a source of frustration for foster parents. Undoubtedly, the constant reassignment of cases between social workers decreases the possibility of the social worker and foster parent establishing rapport and building a working relationship. Many foster parents want to feel as if they were working as a team in conjunction with the social worker. Foster parents need to be able to feel as if they can communicate with the social worker in order to meet the needs of the children in their care.

The foster parents surveyed were genuinely interested in providing the best possible care for the children entrusted to them. Yet, they seemed to experience frustration with such a large responsibility, inconsistent service provision and the lack of social worker responsiveness; foster parents appreciate when social workers respond in a timely manner. Also reported to be frustrating for foster parents are the delays in receiving needed services such as Medi-Cal stickers, medicine or quality counseling referrals. Indeed these are services, which contribute to foster parents' ability to provide quality for foster children. Therefore, these services need to be provided in a timely manner.

Foster parents expressed a measure of sensitivity to the plight of the overloaded, overworked social worker. Many stated that they realize that social workers have large caseloads with many children to service. The need for a reduction in social worker caseloads is glaringly evident.

Foster parents request for respite care appears logical. Just as any other parent needs a break, foster parents also need breaks and opportunities to get away. The foster care system must acknowledge the amount of stress involved in parenting abused children and respond with alternatives when foster parents express a need for a break. In addition, daycare funds need to be made available to working foster parents. Many foster parents pointed out the irony in the requirement that they be able to support themselves financially yet are provided with no childcare resources when they must work. Foster parents also pointed out that foster care payments are not enough to cover all childcare expenses especially with all of a child's other needs.

Considering the findings of this study, it is imperative that the foster care system seek to provide foster parents with timely service provision, some form of respite care, daycare funding, consistency and responsiveness. After all,



if the foster care system cannot provide quality services for their foster parents, how can the system expect the foster parents to provide quality services to the children they care for?

There is no doubt that the duties of social workers and foster parents are both extremely difficult and stressful. In the interest of the children that both foster parents and social workers serve, it is necessary that both work as a team. Foster parents, social workers and the entire foster care system must unite under the common goal of preventing multiple placements for children in the foster care system.

## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

### QUESTIONNAIRE

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION/DEMOGRAPHICS:

1. What is your marital status?
2. What is your age?
  - a. What is your spouse's age?
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - a. What is your spouse's ethnicity?
4. What is the highest level of education you completed?
  - a. What is the highest level of education your spouse completed?
5. Do you work outside of the home? If so,
  - a. How many hours per week?
  - b. Between what hours are you at work?
6. Does your spouse work outside of the home? If so,
  - a. How many hours per week?
  - b. Between what hours is your spouse at work?
7. What is your total household income?
8. Do you have any children of your own that live in the home? If so,
  - a. How many?
  - b. Please indicate the sex and age for each child.
  - c. What were their reactions to your decision to become a foster parent?

#### YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A FOSTER PARENT

1. Describe your role as a foster parent.
2. How many years have you been a foster parent?
3. What type of training did you receive before becoming a foster parent?
4. Did it adequately prepare you to become a foster parent? Can you explain.
5. Are you currently fostering children?
  - a. If so, how many?
  - b. Are they related to you?
    1. If so, what is their relationship to you?
6. How many children have you've fostered over the years?
7. What was the average length of time they lived in your care?  
Did any of the children live in your home for more than 2 years? How many?  
Did any of the children live in your home for less than 1 year and remain in the system?  
How many?

#### YOUR OPINION OF FOSTER CARE

1. How would you describe the needs of foster children?
2. Does the Social Worker have regular contact with you and the child(ren) in your care?
3. Does the Social Worker follow through with needed services for the child(ren)?
4. Is the Social Worker responsive to your requests/needs? If not, what could they improve upon?
5. What services could be provided to you that would make your job as a foster parent easier?
6. Looking at the foster care system as a whole, what improvements can you suggest?
7. Can you list a few items that "The System" or Social Workers seem to do right most of the time?

APPENDIX B: AGENCY LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

April 7, 2000

Dear Foster Parent:

This letter is to confirm that you have signed-up to participate in a volunteer study. With the consent of the Department of Children Services in the County of San Bernardino, Cody Dawkins and Michelle T. Navarro, both graduate students in the Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino, will be conducting an exploratory research project. They are interested in your opinion regarding services that may aid foster parents in better serving children entrusted in their care.

We are excited about your decision to participate in the study, which consists of a telephone survey. You will be providing helpful information that may improve services to foster parents in the future. Information obtained will be kept confidential. Results will be reported in group form only and at no time ever will your name be reported along with the data. If at anytime you choose not to participate, know that there is no penalty associated with your decision.

Either Ms. Dawkins or Ms. Navarro will contact you within the next two weeks during which time you can inform either of them whether or not you still wish to participate. This initial contact will allow them to re-introduce themselves and give you the opportunity to schedule a time that is convenient for you to answer the enclosed questionnaire.

Thank you for your time and kind consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Arline H. Edwards, M.S.W.  
Supervising Social Services Practitioner  
Foster Home Services, DCS

APPENDIX C: SCRIPT FOR INTERVIEWERS

**Exploratory Study: Foster Parents  
Script for Interviewers**

Hi this is \_\_\_\_\_. May I speak with \_\_\_\_\_.

Option 1. Okay, I'll call back later. Thank you.

Option 2. Hi Mrs. Or Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. This is \_\_\_\_\_. We met at the Foster Parents Association meeting. I'm calling regarding the research project that you volunteered to participate in. I was wondering, if now would be a good time for you to complete the telephone survey or would you prefer to schedule for a later time this week.

Option 1. Okay. What would be a good day and time for me to call you back?

Option 2. Great. I will begin by reading the informed consent. After I finish reading it, you can decide whether or not you want to continue with the telephone survey. Please remember your participation is greatly needed.

**---READ THE INFORMED CONSENT VERBATIM---**

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Now we can move on to the questions.

**READ EACH QUESTION AND RECORD THE ANSWERS ON THE  
ANSWERSHEET**

You have just completed the survey.

**READ THE DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

Thank you so much for your time and participation. I will be sending you a copy of the Debriefing Statement that I just read. This will confirm your participation in the study and provide you with a **CODE NUMBER**. The code number is being used to conceal individual identities while allowing participants to withdraw their data should they choose to at a later date.

Once again I would like to thank you for your time. Have a good day (evening).

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Code \_\_\_\_\_

Informed Consent

The study in which you are about to participate is designed to identify services that can aid foster parents by providing the necessary support that will enable them to better serve the children entrusted in their care. Cody Dawkins and Michelle T. Navarro, graduate students in the Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) are conducting this research project under the supervision of Ms. Zoila Gordon, L.C.S.W. Ms. Gordon is a faculty member in the Social Work Department at CSUSB and can be reached at (909) 880-7222. The Institutional Review Board of California State University, San Bernardino has approved this study.

In this study, you will be asked to answer demographic questions and other questions directly related to your needs and responsibilities as a foster parent. We asked that you answer the questions as frankly and as honestly as possible. It should only require ten to fifteen minutes of your time. Please be assured that the information received will be kept confidential. Any information obtained in connection with this project will be reported in group-form only. At no time will your name be reported along with the data. This study will not hinder or impact your relationship with the Department of Children's Services in any way.

Please understand that your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your participation and your data at anytime during the study without penalty. At the conclusion of the study you may request a report of the results or view the results at the Department of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino.

Do you acknowledge that you have been informed of, and understand the nature and purpose of this study, and that you freely consent to participate? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you also acknowledge that you are a foster parent employed by the Department of Children's Services in the County of San Bernardino? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

The researcher's signature below indicates verbal approval by the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX E: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Code \_\_\_\_\_

Debriefing Statement

The study in which you have just participated is designed to explore the needs of foster parents and to identify services that may be provided which will enable them to better serve the children entrusted in their care. The purpose of this project is as follows: If foster parents are provided adequate services and proper support then, multiple placements for foster children may be decreased. By increasing the possibility of a stable living environment, the children have a better chance of developing into well-adjusted contributing members in society. This project is just the beginning step towards achieving this goal. However, more research and implementation of services will need to take place before the accuracy of this assumption can be evaluated.

Thank you for your participation. Upon completion of the project, a summary of the findings will automatically be mailed to you.

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