Data-Driven Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention:
A CHAMPS Guide for State Legislators and Other Policymakers

This Guide is intended to assist state legislators, child welfare agency leaders and interested stakeholders in examining information needs and crafting policy to support data-driven foster parent recruitment and retention tailored to jurisdictions' unique needs, circumstances and existing resources. It suggests general principles, poses clarifying questions and identifies decision points to facilitate thoughtful policy discussion and decision-making.

BACKGROUND

Rising foster care caseloads have made recruiting and retaining qualified foster families a policy priority in many states. Child welfare agencies are finding it particularly challenging to find families for teens, sibling groups and children with complex physical and behavioral health needs. High rates of foster parent turnover only compound the problem of foster family shortages.

Strengthening foster care systems to meet increased demand for quality foster parenting starts with and builds on combining data on children in foster care with data on the current pool of foster families to identify system capacity, resource gaps and recruitment needs. Data are also needed to understand the experience of prospective foster parents from initial inquiry to licensure, including delays and inefficiencies that lead families to drop out of the process.

Although relative caregivers are identified and recruited differently than non-relative foster parents, data are no less important to making the best use of relatives as placement resources. States are increasingly relying on kin to meet placement needs. Nationally, the percentage of children in foster care placed with kin increased from 25 percent to 32 percent over the past ten years. In some states, the increase was much larger. States need data to assess the effectiveness of their efforts to place children with relatives, to identify barriers to licensure of kin as foster parents and to understand the unique support needs of relative caregivers.

Although states generally have good data on children in care, they often lack data on prospective and current foster families and on why foster families leave. As a result, agencies may not be making the best use of existing placement resources, may not be adequately matching children's needs with foster parents' skills and abilities, and too often are placing children away from their home communities and schools. Poor placement decisions, in turn, often result in placement disruptions, prolonged stays in foster care and other poor child experiences and outcomes. In addition to its effect on placement decision-making, lack of relevant data also makes it difficult for agencies to target recruitment efforts in the communities most in need of foster families and to potential foster families most likely to be successful. Having this crucial data can also help child welfare systems make more strategic use of limited resources for both recruitment and retention.

While using data to inform decision making is a key foundation of effective recruitment and retention of foster parents, it is but one element of a comprehensive recruitment and retention plan. As a condition of receiving federal child welfare funding, each state is required by law to have an approved five-year Child and Family Services Plan, which includes a plan that "provides for the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.[1]" These Foster and Adoptive Parent Diligent Recruitment Plans must include eight elements, one of which is a "description of the characteristics of children for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed." While federally required Diligent Recruitment Plans must include data on *children* in need of foster and adoptive homes, there is no requirement for data on the current pool of licensed foster *families*.[2]

Drawing on innovation and best practice in the field, the CHAMPS campaign believes there is a timely opportunity for state policymakers and child welfare agency leaders to implement policies and practices that result in more data-driven decision making on foster parent recruitment and retention. Working with their agency directors, state legislators can enact laws that frame broad policy goals and provide specific guidance without being overly prescriptive.

GETTING STARTED: CLARIFYING VISION AND GOALS

Before tackling the intricacies of data issues, policymakers should have a clear understanding of the importance of quality foster parenting and maintain a focus on achieveing the best possible outcomes for children in out-of-home care. CHAMPS therefore recommends that policymakers keep the following in mind when developing policy on data-driven recruitment and retention of foster families:

- All children need and do best in families. When a child needs foster care, quality foster parenting must be a priority. Key to quality foster parenting is placement stability, making the first placement the best placement, so that children are not moved from home to home.
- Research has established that, overall, children in foster care experience more stability and better outcomes when they are placed with relative caregivers.
- Keeping children in their home communities allows them to stay in their neighborhood schools and promotes educational success.

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[1] 42 U.S.C. 622, Section 422(b)(7) of the Social Security Act.

[2] Although data on foster parents is not required in Diligent Recruitment Plans, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has acknowledged that "procedures for ongoing analysis of the current pool of available foster and adoptive placement resources" should be part of a comprehensive diligent recruitment program. See Funding Opportunity Announcement for AdoptUSKids, HHS-2012-ACF-ACYF-CQ-0269 (April 25, 2012).

- Sibling bonds are critically important for many children in foster care. Therefore, foster care systems should have adequate capacity to accommodate sibling groups.
- Supportive, child-centered relationships between foster parents and birth parents can help mitigate the trauma experienced by children who are removed from home, provide birth parents with parenting support and facilitate successful reunification.
- Research has shown that effective support from agencies and peers is associated with improved foster parent retention and more stable placements.
- Many children in foster care have experienced significant trauma and have complex health care needs. Policy should therefore ensure that foster parents are able to obtain needed physical and mental health services for the children in their care.

TURNING TO THE DATA: KEY QUESTIONS

A first step in using data to inform foster parent recruitment and retention is to have a clear idea of what questions to ask of the data. Information about what's working well and where there are challenges will help agencies and policymakers develop and implement effective recruitment and retention plans.

- What types of family-based placements are the most stable?
- Who are the children and youth for whom it is most challenging to find family-based placements?
- What aspects of foster parent recruitment and retention are most challenging for us?
- Is the current pool of foster parents being fully utilized? If not, why not?
- What is our foster care system's current capacity, based on the number of children that families are willing and able to care for? How does this differ, if at all, from the system's licensed capacity?[3]
- What are our current and projected placement needs? Which communities have the greatest needs?
- How effective are our current recruitment and retention strategies?
    - How effective are we at placing siblings together when safe and appropriate?
    - How effective are we at placing children with relatives as a first placement?

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[3] Foster families are often licensed for the maximum number of children allowed by law with few, if any, restrictions based on children's age or service needs. A foster family, however, may choose to care for fewer children and/or children within a certain age range or service level. A licensed kinship foster family is likely to be unavailable for children who are not family members. For a myriad of reasons, a foster family may be unavailable for placement for an extended period. On the other hand, shortages of foster families can lead to overplacing children in some homes, exceeding those homes' actual capacity.

- How effective are we at placing children in their home communities and ensuring children's educational stability?
- How is our foster home licensing process working? Do we know where in the process and why families withdraw? Are there barriers requiring a change in policy or practice, particularly regarding licensing of relative caregivers?
- What mechanisms are in place to receive input and feedback from kinship and non-relative foster parents about what contributes to placement stability?

INTO THE WEEDS: A LOOK AT DATA ELEMENTS

In determining what data are needed to answer the questions posed above, policymakers should be mindful that collection and analysis of new data can be challenging for already overburdened child welfare agencies and caseworkers. Therefore, any new data elements required by policy should be carefully chosen and prioritized to address the jurisdiction's most pressing recruitment and retention challenges. A state child welfare agency will likely have many of the following data elements related to children in care, but will be less likely to have data related to foster families:

- Total number of children and youth in out-of-home care;
- Characteristics of children and youth in care, e.g., age, race, gender, sibling status, special needs, LGBTQ, home communities, by number and percent of total children in care;
- Type, location and duration of placement settings of children in care: kin/relative, unrelated foster home, therapeutic foster home, group home, residential treatment;
- Number of placement changes by placement type, age of children;
- Age ranges of children in each placement setting, by number and percent of total children in care;
- Percentage of children in care who are able to remain in their schools of origin;
- Percentage of children placed with siblings;
- Characteristics and home communities of children and youth most in need of family-based foster care;
- Placement trends, e.g., increase, decrease, stable;
- Number and location of licensed homes, their licensed capacity, true capacity and currently available beds;
- Foster homes that have not had a placement for at least six months and reasons why;
- Number of foster families that have never accepted a child for placement;
- Race/ethnicity of current foster parents;
- Placement preferences of current foster parents and willingness to accept children with special needs;
- Number of families engaged at each stage of the licensing process from initial inquiry to approval, including the number of families that drop out at each stage, and the average time between each stage;

- Number of relatives who are identified as potential placements but who are unable to meet licensing requirements;
- Average tenure of foster families and reasons for leaving.

DETERMINING ADEQUACY OF EXISTING DATA SOURCES

The following questions are intended to help policymakers assess agencies' current capacity for data collection and analysis, identify data gaps and explore options for enhancing information systems. Certain data on children in out-of-home care are required to be collected and reported to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS also requires collection of certain limited data about each child's foster family, namely family structure, age of foster parents and race/ethnicity of foster parents.

- Which data, if any, are not currently being collected?
  - Are there any legal or policy impediments to collection of this data?
- Are there data that are being collected informally, e.g., on spreadsheets, that could be integrated into the child welfare information system?
- What data are being collected by private child placement agencies that are engaged in foster parent recruitment and retention?
  - What, if any, data sharing arrangements are in place between the public child welfare agency and private child placement agencies?
- Are there sources of information other than data systems that should be explored, e.g., foster parent surveys, focus groups or exit interviews?
- Are the data that are being collected accurate and complete?
- Do we have the capacity to analyze, interpret and report data for purposes of improving policy and practice related to recruitment and retention of foster parents?
- What changes, if any, to law, policy, information technology, private agency contracts or allocation of personnel resources would have to be made in order to obtain and analyze needed data?
  - What are the costs associated with these changes?
  - How would these changes affect county-administered child welfare systems?
  - What funding sources could be tapped to cover these costs?
  - Would these costs be offset by savings resulting from improvements to foster parent recruitment, licensing and support?
- Has the state opted to develop a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) pursuant to federal regulations at 45 CFR § 1355.52-1355.55?[4] Does the state's CCWIS status

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[4] For more information about CCWIS, see: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/ccwis_nprm_faq.pdf

provide an opportunity to incorporate new data elements related to foster parent recruitment and retention?

DEVELOPING POLICY TO SUPPORT DATA-DRIVEN RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The foregoing sections are intended to lay the groundwork for policy supporting data-driven foster parent recruitment and retention. To recap, these sections are intended to help policymakers understand the importance of data to recruitment and retention of foster parents, frame questions to ask of the data, identify potential data elements to consider and assess their current capacity for data collection and analysis. Armed with this information, policymakers can consider a wide range of policy options, including the following:

- Develop a phased approach to enhancing information system capacity to address the highest-priority data elements first and have subsequent phases address additional important data elements;
- Allocate resources such as funding and staff support to strengthen aspects of the recruitment and retention program that data indicate are most in need of improvement;
- Change laws and policies to streamline the foster parent licensing process, remove barriers identified by the data and make the process more responsive to prospective foster parents;
- Require that foster family recruitment and retention data be integrated into the state's Foster and Adoptive Parent Diligent Recruitment Plan and Annual Progress and Services Reports submitted to the federal government;
- In states with county-administered child welfare systems, require county agencies to develop local data-driven foster parent recruitment and retention plans;
- Create grant programs to support or incentivize innovative, evidence-based recruitment and retention pilot projects in areas of the jurisdiction that data indicate are most in need of placement resources;
- Require contracts with private child placement agencies to contain provisions that promote consistent collection and sharing of information on foster families;
- Promote placement of children with relatives by creating or strengthening family-finding and kinship navigator programs;
- Establish foster parent advisory councils to engage foster parents in policy development;
- Establish ongoing oversight mechanisms to monitor progress on building system capacity and improving foster parent support.

For more information on policy options to strengthen data-driven foster parent recruitment, support and retention, see the CHAMPS Policy Playbook, 2nd edition, at www.fosteringchamps.org.