

## Foster Parent Advisory Councils

### A CHAMPS Guide for State Legislators and Other Policymakers

#### Introduction

Foster parents spend more time with children in foster care than do any other professional partners. Foster parents also have first-hand experience of the effects of foster care laws, policies and procedures, including policies governing training and licensing, recruitment and retention, and foster parent support. Foster parent advisory councils are a vehicle for foster parents to be active participants in policy development and refinement at the agency as well as legislative levels. Advisory boards also serve to raise public awareness of the important service that foster parents provide, promote foster parent involvement in local child welfare-related planning, and promote the statewide exchange of information.

This guide is intended to assist policymakers in creating, through legislation or administrative policy, Foster Parent Advisory Councils that are tailored to jurisdictions' unique needs, circumstances and existing resources. It identifies key decision points in the policymaking process and poses clarifying questions to help with decision-making.

#### DETERMINING THE NEED FOR A FOSTER PARENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

- Do child welfare agency leaders and policymakers currently value and include foster parent voices in the policymaking process?
- What methods currently exist to solicit and obtain policy input from foster parents (e.g., legislative testimony, community forums, agency planning meetings, input from foster parent associations, etc.)?
- Do these methods allow for systematic and deliberative development and communication of policy recommendations or are they ad hoc and informal? Do these methods allow foster parents to be informed of the results of their recommendations?
- Is the jurisdiction willing to commit resources to the council, such as reimbursement for member travel to meetings and administrative support and subject matter expertise from the child welfare agency?
- Will there be one statewide council, a number of regional councils, or both?
- Will the council be established in legislation, by administrative rule or in agency policy? State law ensures that changes in agency leadership or policy priorities will not affect councils' duties, authority and independence. Legislation can also require agencies to formally respond to the council's recommendations.

#### DETERMINING THE DUTIES OF A FOSTER PARENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

- Will the council be permanent, with authority to advise and make recommendations on general matters relating to foster care, or time-limited for purposes of considering a specific issue? If permanent, some possible duties include:

- Reviewing and making recommendations on agency policies, practices, guidelines and procedures affecting foster care and child welfare service delivery.
- Identifying, analyzing and recommending solutions to problems or issues related to foster care services, including any unintended consequences of policies governing and regulating foster care.
- Studying and developing recommendations concerning the following:
  - Best practices for identifying, recruiting and retaining foster parents;
  - Additional supports needed by foster parents in order to care for sibling groups, teens, and children and youth with complex medical or behavioral needs;
  - Improvements to foster parent pre-service and in-service training;
  - Improving agency responsiveness to current and prospective foster parents;
  - Options to streamline the licensing process, particularly for relative foster parents, while maintaining quality, safety and accountability.
- Participating and promoting foster parent involvement in planning and implementation of new foster care initiatives.
- Reviewing and advising the agency on pending or enacted legislation concerning foster care.
- Educating the general public about the need for foster care and the important service that foster parents provide.

#### DETERMINING MEMBERSHIP OF A FOSTER PARENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

- Will the council be limited to representing the interests and concerns of foster parents or will it also include other resource families, i.e., adoptive and kinship caregivers?
- How and by whom will prospective members be identified, nominated and approved? How will the jurisdiction ensure that foster parents approved for membership reflect a diversity of views and about the child welfare agency and also reflect the jurisdiction's racial, ethnic and geographic diversity?
- In addition to foster parents, who else should be on the council? Options include the current president of the state foster parent association; the executive director of the state association of private child placement agencies; and representatives from academia, the mental health community, the judiciary and the child advocacy community.
- How long will members be eligible to serve on the council?

#### DETERMINING ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

- What officer positions (e.g., Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, etc.) will be created and how will officers be nominated and selected? What will be their terms of office?
- What administrative support will the council receive?
- How often will the council meet?
- What reports will the council be expected to produce? To whom will those reports be distributed?

For more information about foster parent advisory councils, see the CHAMPS Policy Playbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition at [www.fosteringchamps.org](http://www.fosteringchamps.org).