

Foster Parent Peer Support Networks

A CHAMPS Guide for State Legislators and Other Policymakers

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that support to foster parents is associated with improved foster parent retention and decreased placement disruptions for children. Foster parents commonly report that the single most important factor in their ability to care for children (and the factor that most influences their desire to continue fostering) is the ability to connect with someone they trust to discuss how best to meet the needs of children in their care. The people who can best fill that role are often other experienced, successful foster parents.

This guide is intended to assist public policymakers as well as private providers of foster care services in creating new Foster Parent Peer Support Networks or strengthening existing networks in ways that are tailored to jurisdictions' and agencies' 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 POLICY ON A FOSTER PARENT PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

- What formal or informal peer support networks already exist in the jurisdiction? How well are they meeting foster parents' needs? How could policy support and build on these networks and what lessons can policymakers learn from them?
- What would be the goals of a peer support network? Examples include:
 - Improve retention of foster parents;
 - Improve placement stability and children's well-being;
 - Improve partnerships among caseworkers, birth parents and foster parents;
 - Improve foster parent recruitment.
- How do we identify foster parents' unmet support needs? Possible methods include:
 - Focus groups;
 - Written or telephone surveys;
 - Community forums;
 - Community needs assessments;
 - Data from foster parent exit surveys;
 - Legislative hearings.
- How do we educate and obtain buy-in from caseworkers and other members of the child-serving community? Agency leaders need to ensure that these individuals understand the role of peer support providers and how they will benefit children and foster families.

DETERMINING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOSTER PARENT PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

- What kinds of services will be provided? Examples include:
 - Crisis prevention and intervention;
 - Emotional support, mentoring and advice;
 - Assistance and support during investigation of allegations;
 - Connecting foster parents with community support services;
 - Planned and emergency respite care;
 - Participation in case conferences, school meetings and court hearings;
 - Provision of information about laws, policies and rules affecting foster parents;
 - Helping prospective foster parents navigate the licensing process.
- How will services be delivered? Methods include regular phone calls, home visits, online and in-person support groups, and the like.
- What qualifications should be required of peer support providers? In general, peer support providers are licensed, experienced foster parents with no history of placement disruptions or agency investigations. Required experience and skills should be relevant to foster parent needs, such as ability to support families with teens or sibling groups.
- Who will be eligible for support services? Policymakers may want to consider giving priority to newly licensed foster parents and foster parents with placements at risk of disruption.
- How will peer support providers be recruited, screened, selected, trained and supervised? Will peer support workers themselves be supported?
- Will peer support workers receive financial compensation or serve as volunteers?
- What kind of oversight and administrative/financial support will the program receive?
- How will we know if the program is successful? Will there be an outcome evaluation?