

Department of Health and Human Services

**OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**Recruiting
Foster Parents**



**JANET REHNQUIST
Inspector General**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

To assess States' efforts to recruit foster parents.

BACKGROUND

State child welfare agencies are tasked with the responsibility of protecting children from abuse and neglect, which sometimes requires that children be removed from their homes and placed in foster care. Based on information reported to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) via the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), as of March 31, 2000, there were 581,000 children in foster care. Forty-seven percent of those children were cared for in non-relative foster family homes.

The ACF has regulatory oversight of the Title IV-E foster care program. The Title IV-E foster care program is designed to assist States in covering the costs for children in foster care by providing States with unlimited matching funds for children who meet income eligibility and other program requirements. Federal expenditures for the Title IV-E foster care program totaled \$4 billion in fiscal year (FY) 1999 and \$4.3 billion in FY 2000. Federal funding for the Title IV-E foster care program totalled \$4.4 billion in FY 2001. Estimated Federal funding for the program is \$5.1 billion in FY 2002.

This report focuses on States' efforts to recruit foster care families. A separate report, "Retaining Foster Parents," (OEI-07-00-00601), addresses the issues associated with the retention of these families. We used two mechanisms to conduct this inspection. We used a mail survey to obtain information from the foster care program managers in the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands to determine their efforts to recruit foster care families. We also conducted focus group discussions with child welfare staff and foster parents in five States.

FINDINGS

Recruitment Efforts do not Focus on Families Willing and Able to Care for the Most Challenging Children

The foster care agencies use recruiting methods designed to cast a wide net and recruit a large volume of prospective foster parents. However, many families recruited in this manner are unwilling to care for school-age children, teenagers, and children with special needs. These children constitute the largest portion of children in foster care, thus

creating an urgent need to recruit families who are willing and able to provide them with care.

States are Underutilizing Their Most Effective Recruitment Tool - Foster Parents

Only 7 States are using foster parents regularly in their recruitment efforts even though survey respondents in 20 States said they find foster parents to be one of the most successful recruitment tools. Foster parents are effective recruiters because they share information about the need for foster parents through word-of-mouth contact and can promote the idea of fostering just by their presence in the community.

Poor Public Perceptions of Foster Care and Cumbersome Requirements Have a Negative Impact on Recruitment

Poor public perceptions of foster care discourage prospective foster parents. Unfavorable media portrayals depicting tragedies and abuses endured by foster children perpetuate negative perceptions about the current foster care system. Delayed responses to inquiries about becoming a foster parent, stringent requirements, and the length of time involved in becoming a foster parent also adversely effect States' recruitment efforts and reinforce existing reservations about fostering.

States are Unable to Measure the Success of Their Recruitment Efforts

The lack of performance indicators and information about recruitment expenditures renders many States unable to measure the success of their recruitment efforts. States lack the tools necessary to identify which methods of recruitment are most beneficial and cost effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our review allowed us to take a retrospective look at the effectiveness of foster care recruitment efforts. This review indicates that it may be time to rethink some aspects of the recruitment process. Clearly, substantial progress can be made towards improving recruitment efforts through the combined efforts of States, ACF, and national organizations, with particular emphasis on:

- ! targeting recruitment efforts on parents for children who are the most difficult to place;
- ! promoting positive public perceptions of foster care; and
- ! improving information sharing about effective practices among key stakeholders and increasing technical assistance for program managers.

We offer numerous suggestions that we believe will assist in efforts to strengthen the recruitment process.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We received comments on this report from ACF. The ACF concurs with our findings and recommendations, stating that the information presented in this report will be useful to them in their continued efforts to meet the needs of children in need of care. Their comments emphasize ACF's continued focus on the importance of children's issues. In addition, ACF provided important contextual information and suggestions which served to enhance the report. We have made revisions to the report based on ACF's comments. The full text of their comments is contained in the appendix.

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

To assess States' efforts to recruit foster parents.

BACKGROUND

For a variety of reasons, some families are unable to provide safe environments for children. To protect these children, State child welfare agencies are tasked with the responsibility for removing children considered to be at-risk of abuse or neglect from their homes and placing them in foster care. In other instances, families voluntarily choose to have children removed from their homes and placed in foster care. In either situation, foster care placements provide children with temporary living arrangements, physical care, emotional support, and other services intended to protect and promote their growth and development until they can be reunited with their families or receive an alternative permanent placement (i.e., adoption or guardianship).

The majority of children in the foster care system are cared for in foster family homes; the remainder are cared for in institutions, group homes, or other group settings. Based on information reported to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) by 43 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, via the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for the semi-annual reporting period March 31, 2000, there were approximately 581,000 children in foster care. Forty-seven percent of those children were cared for in non-relative foster family homes. The remaining 53 percent were cared for in a variety of foster care settings as outlined in Table 1 on the following page. Between April 1, 1998, and March 31, 1999, the number of children in foster care increased by 38,000. The mean length of time a child remained in foster care was 32 months.

The ideal foster care system would have a sufficient number of foster care families with the skills to meet the needs of the children removed from their homes. However, States are experiencing a shortage of families willing and able to provide foster care and a shortage of foster care families willing or able to meet the specific needs of the children in care (e.g., children with disabilities).

This report focuses on States' efforts to recruit foster care families. A separate report, "Retaining Foster Parents," (OEI-07-00-00601), addresses the issues associated with the retention of these families.

Table 1
Placement Settings of Children in Foster Care
During Fiscal Year 2000

Placement Setting	Children in Placement	
	Percent of Foster Children	Number of Foster Children
Foster Family Homes (Non-Relative)	47	274,100
Foster Family Homes (Relative)	26	151,864
Institutions	10	57,590
Group Homes	8	46,279
Pre-Adoptive Homes	4	22,484
Trial Home Visits (with own families)	2.7	15,818
Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelters	1.4	7,886
Supervised Independent Living Facilities	.9	4,979
Total Number of Children in Foster Care	100	581,000

Source: AFCARS 2000

<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/june2001.pdf>

Federal Role in Foster Care

Federal assistance for children and families began with implementation of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, Title IV-A of the Social Security Act, in 1935. The Federal role in foster care began in 1961, when Federal funds were made available to provide maintenance payments for children removed from AFDC eligible families in accordance with Federal requirements.

The Federal role was further expanded with implementation of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272). This Act amended child welfare services laws to institute financial incentives for States to provide certain protections for children in foster care under Section 427 of the Social Security Act (Title IV-B) and established the Title IV-E foster care program. As a result, the foster care component of the AFDC program was transferred to the new Title IV-E foster care program in October 1982, and Federal Title IV-E foster care program funds became available to provide maintenance payments for children removed from AFDC eligible families in accordance with Federal requirements. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 provides States with the necessary tools and incentives to achieve the safety, permanency, and well-being goals of Public Law 96-272. Many States have chosen to recruit jointly for adoptive and foster families.

The Title IV-E foster care program is designed to assist States in providing safe and appropriate care for children in placements outside their homes, whether in foster family homes or residential child care facilities. The program provides unlimited matching funds to States to assist with the cost of certain foster care payments for children who meet income eligibility requirements and have been removed from their home as the result of a judicial determination that continuation in the home would be contrary to the welfare of the child. Funds are also available to cover certain administrative and training costs associated with the provision of foster care.

The ACF has regulatory oversight of the Title IV-E foster care program, including approval of State plans to ensure State foster care programs are operating within Federal guidelines. States administer their Title IV-E foster care programs in accordance with the approved State plans. The ACF recently began to monitor States' conformity with their State plans through Children and Family Services reviews and Title IV-E foster care program eligibility reviews.

The ACF also provides limited technical assistance to States through the Children's Bureau Training and Technical Assistance Network. The network comprises National Resource Centers, Clearinghouses, and Technical Assistance Support Systems. However, most of the technical assistance provided through the network is focused on safety and permanency placements of children who enter the child welfare system. While States can request onsite training and technical assistance from the Network, they have received minimal technical assistance to assist them in their recruitment efforts.

Funding for Foster Care

Title IV-E is an entitlement program, therefore States can claim Federal reimbursement for foster care maintenance payments made on behalf of all children whose families meet the income eligibility criteria for program participation under Section 472 of the Social Security Act. The ACF provides States with Federal funds by reimbursing a certain percentage of each State's own expenditures for foster care. The rates at which the Federal government reimburses the States' Title IV-E foster care program expenditures for the cost of foster care itself are the same rates at which the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services matches State expenditures for medical assistance (Medicaid), and range between 50 and 78 percent. The Federal match rates for administrative and training costs for State personnel associated with the Title IV-E foster care program are set at 50 and 75 percent respectively. As an allowable administrative cost, expenditures for the recruitment of foster homes and institutions is matched at 50 percent.

Because the Title IV-E foster care program is an entitlement program, Federal expenditures for all Title IV-E foster care program expenses are open-ended, and will increase in accordance with State expenditures for Title IV-E eligible children. Federal expenditures for Title IV-E foster care program totaled \$4 billion in fiscal year (FY) 1999 and \$4.3 billion in FY 2000. Federal funding for the Title IV-E program

totalled \$4.4 billion in FY 2001. Estimated Federal funding for the program is \$5.1 billion in FY 2002.

METHODOLOGY

We used two mechanisms to conduct this inspection. We used a mail survey to solicit information from the foster care program managers for the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands to determine their efforts to recruit foster care families. Through this survey, we gathered information regarding State policies, practices, and processes for recruitment, and the barriers they are encountering in the effective recruitment and retention of families. We received completed surveys from 41 foster care program managers. We did not receive completed surveys from the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Washington, or Wisconsin. The completed survey from Kentucky was received after our analysis was completed. However, these 12 entities account for only 19 percent of the children in non-relative foster care homes and 9 percent of the total number of the children in foster care.

We judgementally selected a sample of five States (California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas) for additional data collection. Based on FY 1999 AFCARS data reported to ACF, approximately 53 percent of the nation's foster children reside in these 5 States. In addition to geographic diversity, the five States provided a mix of both county administered (California and New York) and State administered (Florida, Illinois, and Texas) foster care programs.

In the five States, we collected more in-depth information about State recruitment methods through personal interviews with State foster care program managers, and focus group interviews with foster parents and child welfare staff. Child welfare staff interviewed included caseworkers, caseworker supervisors, foster care recruitment specialists, and staff from private foster care agencies with whom the State foster care agency contracts. At a minimum, we conducted one foster parent and one foster care program staff focus group interview in both an urban and rural location in each of the five States. In total, we conducted 14 foster parent and 11 child welfare staff focus groups in the 5 States, interviewing 115 foster parents and 107 child welfare staff respectively.

Even though some States have chosen to recruit jointly for adoptive and foster families as a result of ASFA, it should be noted that we made no attempt to address the impact of adoption on foster care recruitment. We also made no attempt to assess the impact of the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) on the recruitment of foster families. The MEPA requires that agencies recruit foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State in need of placement.

We conducted this inspection in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

FINDINGS

Our methodology offered us the unique opportunity to talk with many people involved in the foster care system. We discovered diverse approaches used to recruit foster families. We talked with veteran child welfare and private agency staff who provided us with a historical perspective of the foster care system as well as new caseworkers eager to present us with creative ideas for the future. We held children and we talked with their foster parents about what it was like to care for them. By listening to foster parents and child welfare agency personnel, we came to realize that joint recruitment for foster care and adoptive parents has become the norm. We learned about permanency planning and reunification goals, and that private agencies currently provide an appreciable proportion of our nation's foster care services, including recruitment.

Through focus groups, we encountered foster parents from many different walks of life who became involved with foster parenting for a variety of reasons. Several of them had known other foster parents and felt compelled to become involved; some had been looking for a way to give back to their community; others were unable to have children; and a few had been foster children themselves. Some parents had only recently begun to foster; others considered themselves "seasoned" foster parents who, over the years, had cared for hundreds of foster children.

Throughout this inspection we detected a common theme - one of continuous struggle to meet the needs of the children coming into the foster care system. As such, our goal was to identify relevant problems associated with recruiting families to care for these children and offer recommendations for improvement.

Recruitment Efforts do not Focus on Families Willing and Able to Care for the Most Challenging Children

Needs of Foster Children are Changing

Foster care program managers and child welfare staff said they are finding it increasingly difficult to find families for the foster children now entering the foster care system. In every focus group we conducted, we were told that the children coming into foster care today need more assistance than foster children of the past, and therefore are more difficult to place. They noted that children entering the foster care system are older and often have more mental, behavioral, and emotional challenges than in the past. They are often the victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Virtually all survey respondents indicate that it is difficult to place troubled adolescents and teens.

Of the 41 States responding to our survey question about the "most-difficult-to-place groups" of children, foster care program managers identified adolescents with psychological or mental disabilities as the most difficult to place (31 percent).

Furthermore, foster care program managers said adolescents in general comprised 71 percent of the selections for “most-difficult-to-place” foster children. Other children for which finding foster care placements are difficult include sibling groups and children with mental, behavioral, and emotional challenges and children with physical and special needs (e.g., HIV positive children, babies addicted to drugs, babies with “shaken baby syndrome”). Twenty-four program managers responding to our survey said they have sometimes been forced to place children in residential or institutional foster care facilities because no appropriate family foster home was available. Eleven of those managers say this is a practice that is increasing, in spite of the fact that it is significantly more expensive.

The System has not Adapted to Changing Foster Care Needs

Overall, child welfare workers and foster parents alike expressed concern with the foster care system’s failure to change recruitment strategies to keep pace with changing foster care needs. One case worker said recruiting agencies continue to “lead families to believe they can make a difference in a child’s life by simply providing them with love and a home . . . most of the children in foster care need much more than that.” Child welfare staff indicate this type of general recruitment brings in a lot of foster families, so the issue is not one of numbers. They say the result, however, is that their agencies are spending a lot of time and money licensing foster family homes which may never receive a child because these families are unwilling to accept adolescents, sibling groups, or children with severe psychological or medical needs. Child welfare staff and foster parents believe that to meet the needs of children coming into care, they must actively target their recruitment efforts to find homes capable and willing to accept these children. They caution that recruitment “should be tied to reality,” and expressed concern regarding the licensing of foster families unlikely to ever receive a child.

General Recruitment Practices are Unable to Meet the Needs of Children in Care

Child welfare workers and foster parents alike believe that continued general recruitment will result in the licensing of an ever increasing number of homes unwilling or unable to accept many of the children in need of care. Child welfare workers said this results in licensed foster care families becoming frustrated when no children are placed in their homes. Child welfare workers and foster parents both said it also sends a message to others that the foster care system has a sufficient number of foster families to care for the children coming into care, when in fact there simply are not enough licensed homes willing to take the types of children in need of care. The result is underutilization of available foster care placements.

Thirty-six (88 percent) of the 41 foster care program managers responding to our survey said they had licensed foster care families who were not currently caring for children. Child welfare workers and foster parents expressed great concern with the negative connotation associated with vacant beds in licensed foster homes. They said one of the reasons licensed families may not be caring for children is that the families had been

licensed but were unwilling or unable to care for the children currently in need of care. Other reasons licensed foster families may not be caring for children included changes in family circumstances, families taking a break from fostering, families licensed only to provide respite care, or families under investigation for allegations of abuse.

To address other factors agencies encounter in placing specific types of children, two States we visited have encouraged agency collaboration and resource sharing among various counties. By pooling their resources, agencies are able to commit more staff to locate and recruit families with the necessary skills who are willing to foster “more difficult” to place children. In addition, agencies are able to refer prospective foster families to the agencies responsible for serving children in their community.

States are Underutilizing Their Most Effective Recruitment Tool - Foster Parents

States are underutilizing the recruitment method foster parents and child welfare staff said was most effective -- foster parents. In every focus group interview conducted, both child welfare staff and foster parents said that it was not the billboards, television advertisements, public service announcements, or event booths that inspired people to become foster parents. Both said that foster parents themselves are a highly effective and valuable tool in encouraging others to pursue fostering. In their experience, people inquire about foster parenting based on personal needs and desires. While nine foster parents interviewed said they had in fact seen a billboard or a newspaper advertisement for foster care, they pursued fostering for a variety of other reasons. Those reasons included their inability to have children, the loss of a biological child, the desire for more children, the need to become a licensed caregiver for grandchildren or children already residing in their home, or because they knew and admired someone (e.g., their parents, a neighbor) who had been a foster parent. They all noted the decision to become a foster parent was not made based on a single advertisement or brochure. It was made over time. The encouragement from an existing foster parent can be instrumental in choosing to become a foster parent.

Foster Parents are the Most Effective Recruitment Tool

Despite a lack of benchmarks or performance indicators to track successful recruitment practices, program managers in 20 States said they find foster parents to be one of the most successful methods of recruiting new foster families, 10 of which listed foster parents as their most cost effective recruitment tool. Child welfare staff in 1 State said that over half their successful recruits are referred to them by other foster parents, in contrast to a 10 percent recruitment rate for general recruiting. Child welfare staff said foster parents recruited by other foster parents are more likely to complete the pre-service training and become licensed. Other States report similar results. Yet, only seven States indicated they are using foster parents on a regular basis in their recruitment efforts.

Although we did not collect information as to why States did not use foster parents more frequently, we did find that some States as well as private agencies are taking steps to increase the use of foster parents as recruiters. One of the five States we visited reports paying foster parents \$10 per hour to staff recruitment booths at local events and fairs. Another State recently passed legislation which will enable them to use State funds to pay a \$300 stipend for each successful referral from a foster parent. Child welfare staff interviewed said some private agencies offer recruitment stipends to foster parents, but the number that offer stipends is unknown. Despite these efforts, child welfare staff and foster parents said foster parents continue to be a resource that is highly underutilized.

States Concentrate Efforts on Costly Recruitment Methods

States report focusing on a variety of other methods to recruit foster families, many of which are very costly. Of the 41 foster care program managers who responded to our survey, 38 said they use a combination of media (i.e., television public service announcements, radio campaigns, newspaper advertisements, magazine advertisements), 38 use brochures, and 24 use billboards to recruit foster families. States also utilize a number of other recruitment tools which have printed agency names and telephone numbers. Those recruitment tools include magnets, bookmarks, coffee mugs, T-shirts, pins, rubber balls, grocery bags, calendars, and lapel pins. Other recruitment endeavors include making presentations to local civic and religious organizations and booths at State and county fairs, malls, school events, and health fairs. Program managers and child welfare workers believe the use of a variety of recruitment tools not only plants the seed about becoming a foster parent, but also reinforces those thoughts.

In response to a question asking which recruitment methods they use most often, 14 foster care program managers said they use television and public service announcements. Foster care program managers in 8 of these 14 States said they believe television is one of the most successful recruitment methods, and 7 said television advertisements had proven to be the most successful recruitment method for the dollars expended. However, the eight States in which the program managers said television was the most successful recruitment tool had not developed benchmarks or performance indicators to measure the success of their recruitment efforts. Likewise, only two of the seven States that reported finding television advertisements the most cost-effective recruitment method had established benchmarks or performance indicators and three of the seven did not provide information on recruitment expenditures. As such, we question these States' abilities to determine which recruitment methods are successful and which were in fact most cost effective.

Poor Public Perceptions of Foster Care and Cumbersome Requirements Have a Negative Impact on Recruitment

Virtually everyone we talked with said that poor public perceptions of foster care can discourage prospective foster parents. They also said the length of time between an individual's first inquiry about becoming a foster parent and when they actually begin fostering is often a deterrent and greatly impacts State recruitment efforts. Cumbersome licensing and training requirements are frustrating as well. Both child welfare workers and foster parents said the longer the time between inquiry and placement, the more likely they are to lose potential recruits.

Of the 41 foster care program managers responding to our survey, 14 (34 percent) said the length of time between submission of an application and placement had a negative effect on recruitment in their States. However, program managers in only 9 States (22 percent) said they had data available regarding barriers to recruitment in their State. Of those 9 States, only 2 were among the States that had established performance indicators to measure the success of their recruitment efforts.

Public Perceptions

When asked to choose from a list of potential recruitment barriers, 37 (90 percent) of the 41 foster care program managers responding to our survey said poor perceptions and a lack of public understanding of foster care needs were barriers to effective recruitment. Child welfare staff and foster parents interviewed echoed those concerns. They said the media tends to portray foster parenting in a negative light, focusing on extreme cases of abuse, neglect, or death. They realize the media's responsibility to report the news, but feel there is a disproportional amount of attention given to negative reporting on foster children and foster parenting, and that such reporting hinders recruitment efforts. They suggested that a national campaign be undertaken to promote the positive aspects of fostering.

Response to Inquiries

Foster parents interviewed expressed frustration with the number of calls they placed to the recruiting agency before receiving a response. One foster parent said she placed 8 phone calls to a recruiting agency's 800 number before receiving a response from the recruiting agency, and several months followed before she was enrolled in a foster parent training class. Other foster parents report similar experiences and stressed the importance of acting on an individual's enthusiasm. Virtually everyone interviewed expressed concern with the number of prospective foster parents that may be lost as the result of failed or untimely responses to initial inquiries.

Foster parents, program managers, and child welfare staff agree that timely responses to prospective foster parent inquiries are important for successful recruitment. However, all

note that the workloads of staff responsible for foster parent recruitment often make it difficult to respond to inquiries in a timely manner and even more difficult to respond to inquiries generated as the result of more intense recruitment campaigns. Survey respondents in 27 States indicate their recruitment efforts are “seasonal” and more intense during certain months (e.g., May is National Foster Parent month). Other States report more intense recruitment during the spring and fall, in September at back-to-school events, and at ongoing children’s sporting events. To accommodate higher than normal volume of inquiries during these campaigns, State foster care program managers and child welfare workers said they reassign staff and ask them to work together in an attempt to handle increased workloads.

One of the five States we visited has established a foster care and adoption Internet website from which they have received an overwhelming response. In fact, the response has been so good, child welfare workers said they are “drowning in Internet inquiries” and expressed concern with their inability to respond to all inquiries. They said posting information on the website about healthy infants and children requiring minimal care has contributed to a high volume of inquiries, yet may be providing an incorrect picture of most children in need of care. Child welfare workers responsible for responding to these Internet inquiries said “recruitment is only as good as your response system,” and believe their inability to respond to calls or to respond in a timely manner also sends a message to the public that no new foster homes are needed.

Licensing Requirements

The licensing requirements are a very important component of every State’s foster care program. The requirements ensure safety and compliance, and serve as a great opportunity to enhance foster parent and caseworker training and education. However, licensing requirements can become burdensome on foster parents.

Despite that 31 (76 percent) of the 41 foster care program managers who said their States provide prospective foster parents with licensing assistance, child welfare staff and foster parents said stringent licensing requirements still hinder the recruitment process. Application forms to initiate the foster parent licensing process are

lengthy, and completion of the application and other required paperwork often contributes to a significant amount of time between application and becoming licensed. While foster parents acknowledge the importance of licensing and safety requirements, they expressed

Examples of Licensing Frustrations

Other frustrations related to licensing include one State’s requirement that foster parents be “re-licensed” each year, a process which requires annual completion of a new application and home inspection. In another State, child welfare workers said a new medical form, soon to be implemented, may be a detriment to the licensing process. This new form requires the applying foster parent’s physician to speculate on the future health of the applicant by asking whether or not they will be healthy enough to care for children in 5 years and if they will be able to lift 40 pounds 2 years from now. They expressed concern with physicians being able or willing to speculate on someone’s future health.

frustration with the length of time between application and licensure. Child welfare workers echo those concerns and said it is not unusual for applicants to become so discouraged during this phase of the process that they decide not to foster.

The costs associated with licensing may prove too high for some foster parents, making it difficult or impossible for some families to foster. Foster parents may be required to pay for things like physical examinations, finger printing, drug screening, background checks, radon testing, and water testing. These parents may also be unable to pay for the home safety improvements (e.g. fire extinguishers, first aid kits, refrigerator thermometers) necessary to bring them into compliance with licensing standards. Child welfare workers and foster parents alike noted that, while some licensing requirements are fairly significant (e.g., fencing a swimming pool or body of water), “one-size-fits-all” (e.g., only one child per bedroom) type requirements aren’t always necessary and can prove too costly for prospective foster parents, and are especially problematic when caring for sibling groups or difficult to place children. As a result, even though some States may offer assistance to help with the cost of some of these necessities, the cost of becoming a foster parent remains an obstacle for many families.

Training Requirements

While foster care program managers, caseworkers, and foster parents agree that training is important and helpful, training requirements were reported to be a barrier to successful recruitment by 13 (32 percent) of the 41 foster care program managers responding to our survey. Training requirements were also of concern to foster parents in all 5 States visited. Prospective foster parents must commit to several weeks in training and must meet State training requirements before they can obtain their license. Foster care program managers in 13 States said prospective foster parents spend between 9 and 12 weeks in training. In 12 States, the length of time spent in training exceeds 12 weeks. In addition to the time prospective foster parents must devote to meeting training requirements, they are expected to pay the costs associated with training (e.g., child care for their own children while they attend classes). Training foster parents in rural areas poses additional concerns regarding the availability of training classes, the distance prospective parents must travel to attend, and the cost of transportation to attend.

Child welfare workers and foster parents also noted that training obligations often draw child welfare staff away from their other responsibilities, making it more difficult for them to respond to foster parents and the needs of the children in care. To ensure an effective investment of time spent in licensing and training for families and caseworkers, States suggest developing or enhancing the pre-screening process of prospective foster parents to allow them to remove themselves if they determine they cannot meet the standards. They said this could reduce the number of training and licensing commitments for child welfare staff.

States are Unable to Measure the Success of Their Recruitment Efforts

The lack of performance indicators and information about recruitment expenditures renders many States unable to measure the success of their recruitment efforts. Not only had many States not developed recruitment goals and established performance indicators, they were unable to track their expenditures for recruitment activities.

Eighteen of the 41 foster care program managers responding to our survey said they had not developed goals for the recruitment of foster care families. Of the 21 program managers that said their States had developed recruitment goals, only 13 said their States had established benchmarks or performance indicators to measure the success of their recruitment efforts. Two States indicated they have established benchmarks or performance indicators but not recruitment goals. Two States provided no response to questions about recruitment goals or performance indicators.

Further, of the States that established performance indicators, only two have developed indicators related to a targeted portion of the foster care population (i.e., teens and sibling groups), goals both of these States have been unable to meet. The recruitment goals most commonly reported are based on increasing the overall number of foster parents in an attempt to attract families willing to foster teens and adolescents with emotional or developmental disabilities, and children with psychological problems. In one State, the foster care program manager said it is left up to local offices to develop their own recruitment goals and objectives.

In addition to the lack of recruitment goals and performance indicators, only 21 of the State foster care program managers responding to our survey were able to tell us how much of their Title IV-E foster care program administrative funds were spent on efforts to recruit foster care families in 1999. States have the discretion to appropriate a portion of their Title IV-E foster care program administrative funds to recruitment activities. When asked about county and local funds expended for recruitment, only 4 of the 11 States with county administered foster care programs could provide the information. States may be limited in their ability to assess the cost effectiveness of recruitment efforts if they cannot specifically report recruitment expenditures. Due to the limited responses and the variance of those responses, information regarding recruitment expenditures is not included in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

States are using a variety of methods to recruit foster parents. However, they may be spending a significant amount on less effective endeavors and overlooking successful, less costly recruitment methods. To publicize the most cost effective recruitment campaigns, States, ACF, and national organizations should work in concert towards disseminating information focused on enhancing the effectiveness of foster care recruitment strategies, especially those targeting the needs of the children in care.

RECRUITMENT METHODS

State and local agencies should review their current recruitment efforts. Based on information provided by State foster care program managers, child welfare staff, and foster parents, more successful recruiting could occur within existing resources. Although we did not assess the effectiveness of these suggestions, we offer several to elevate the discussion of cost-effective recruitment efforts.

- ! Target recruitment efforts on parents for children who are the most difficult to place in foster care by tailoring recruitment campaigns to recruit families willing and able to care for these children;
- ! Offer incentives to foster parents for successfully recruiting other foster families;
- ! Use foster parents as facilitators during pre-service foster parent training classes;
- ! Work collaboratively among foster care agencies to develop innovative recruitment methods;
- ! Develop partnerships with community and faith-based organizations to heighten awareness of foster care needs and foster parenting opportunities;
- ! Determine future foster care trends and needs and link to targeted recruitment strategies;
- ! Determine recruitment goals necessary to meet the current and future needs of children in foster care (e.g., adolescents, teenagers, and physically or mentally disabled);
- ! Develop methods to assess the effectiveness of recruitment efforts (e.g., survey foster parents and establish benchmarks and tracking data);
- ! Strive to sustain recruitment campaign efforts throughout the year;

- ! Allow foster care agencies to recruit outside of their communities to maintain a steady influx of new prospective foster families;
- ! Examine State licensing standards to identify barriers to recruitment; and
- ! Develop or enhance the pre-screening process of prospective foster parents.

Improve Public Perceptions

The ACF and State foster care program managers should collaborate with national organizations focused on the welfare of children to promote more positive media coverage of foster care. These positive depictions can be augmented through local foster care program postings, newsletters, and partnerships with community based organizations, businesses, churches, and civic groups.

Enhance Technical Assistance

Despite the successes that may be achieved through information sharing among the States, ACF should use its position as a Federal partner in the foster care system to enhance information sharing and assessment of recruitment efforts. Towards this end, we recommend the ACF provide State foster care program managers with guidance focused on enhancing the effectiveness of States' recruitment efforts. Such guidance should include information to assist them in:

- ! enhancing and implementing targeted recruitment efforts for difficult to place children;
- ! utilizing foster parents as recruiters;
- ! identifying unmet and future recruitment needs;
- ! establishing recruitment goals;
- ! developing outcome-based recruitment plans;
- ! identifying sources and using data to monitor and track recruitment outcomes; and
- ! determining what recruitment methods are most cost-effective and gather data to calculate recruitment expenditures.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We received comments on this report from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The ACF concurs with our findings and recommendations, stating that the information presented in this report will be useful to them in their continued efforts to meet the needs of children in need of care. Their comments emphasize ACF's continued focus on the importance of children's issues. In addition, ACF provided important contextual information and suggestions which served to enhance the report. We made revisions to the report based on ACF's comments. The full text of their comments is contained in the appendix.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Office of the Assistant Secretary, Suite 600
370 L'Enfant Promenade, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20447

MAR 14 2002

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OFFICE OF INSPECTOR
GENERAL

To: Janet Rehnquist
Inspector General

From: Wade F. Horn, Ph.D. *Wade F. Horn*
Assistant Secretary
for Children and Families

Subject: Comments on the Office of Inspector General's Draft Report: "Recruitment of
Foster Care Families" (OEI-07-00600)
-cc-

Attached are the Administration for Children and Families' comments on the Inspector General's
Draft Report: "Recruitment on Foster Care Families"(OEI-07-00600).

If you have any questions regarding our comments, please call me at (202) 401-2337.

Attachment

**COMMENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ON
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL'S DRAFT REPORT, "RECRUITMENT OF
FOSTER CARE FAMILIES," (OEI-07-00-00600)**

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the above-captioned report. This Office of Inspector General's (OIG) report will assist ACF as we continue our efforts to work with States and communities to meet the needs of children at risk of harm and their families.

OIG Recommendation:

States are using a variety of methods to recruit foster parents. However, they may be spending a significant amount on less effective endeavors and overlooking successful, less costly recruitment methods. To publicize the most cost effective recruitment campaigns, States, ACF, and national organizations should work in concert towards disseminating information focused on enhancing the effectiveness of foster care recruitment strategies, especially those targeting the needs of the children in care.

Agency Comment:

The recommendation that coordinated efforts be made in the dissemination of effective recruitment strategies supports the activities of the Children's Bureau in collaborating with other national organizations to achieve this goal. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Casey Family Program and the Child Welfare League of America have developed extensive materials on foster care recruitment, which have been made available to the States in cooperation with the Children's Bureau at conferences including the biannual Child Welfare Conference and the annual Permanency Partnership Forum. These materials detail effective practices that can help States improve their recruitment efforts. Many states are in the process of developing child welfare performance measures. Some are including measures related to identifying recruitment efforts that will effectively lead to a pool of foster care parents who meet the needs of children in care. Information obtained from such initiatives could lead to a better foundation of knowledge as to the most cost-effective strategies to use in recruitment.

It has long been known in the field of foster care that the best recruiters are foster parents who have had a positive experience with foster parenting. When foster families talk on a personal level about their experiences, their friends and acquaintances begin to see fostering as a viable activity for their own families. However, recruiting foster parents has become increasingly difficult, since foster parents adopt approximately two-thirds of available children from the foster care system. This means that available placements in existing foster homes are continually decreasing as foster families add to their families through adoption, making less space available for new foster children.

OIG Recommendation:

Recruitment Methods

State and local agencies should review their current recruitment efforts. Based on information provided by State foster care program managers, child welfare staff, and foster parents, we believe more successful recruiting could occur within existing resources. Although we did not assess the effectiveness of these suggestions, we offer several to elevate the discussion of cost-effective recruitment efforts.

- Target recruitment efforts on parents for children who are over-represented by the population of children in foster care by tailoring recruitment campaigns to accommodate different ethnicities;
- Offer stipends to foster parents for successfully recruiting other foster families;
- Use foster parents as facilitators during pre-service foster parent training classes;
- Work collaboratively among foster care agencies to develop innovative recruitment methods;
- Develop partnerships with faith-based organizations to heighten community awareness of foster care needs and foster parenting opportunities;
- Determine future foster care trends and needs;
- Determine recruitment goals necessary to meet the current and future needs of children in foster care (e.g., adolescents, teenagers, and physically or mentally disabled);
- Develop methods to assess the success and effectiveness of recruitment efforts (e.g., survey foster parents and establish benchmarks and tracking data);
- Strive to sustain recruitment campaign efforts throughout the year; and
- Allow foster care agencies to recruit outside of their communities to maintain a steady influx of new prospective foster families.

Agency Comment:

The recommendations are consistent with effective recruitment strategy. Many of these strategies are a part of the information and materials available through the organizations mentioned in our response to the first recommendation. In addition, the States are required by the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act passed in 1994 to provide for the diligent recruitment of potential foster families and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the state for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

The Children's Bureau strongly supports efforts by State and local agencies to work in partnership with faith-based organizations. Such efforts when pursued by local agencies have proven very fruitful. Some locales have recognized the value of utilizing a model for recruitment of foster families based on "One Church One Child" which has been extremely effective in the adoption arena. For example, collaborative efforts with one church in Texas resulted in 80 children being placed for adoption with the congregation over a five-year period. The Children's Bureau believes creative partnerships in the arena of foster parent recruitment can achieve similar outcomes.

OIG Recommendation:

Improve Public Perceptions

The ACF and State foster care program managers should collaborate with national organizations focused on the welfare of children (e.g., National Foster Parent Association, Child Welfare League of America, American Public Human Services Association, and the Children's Defense Fund) to promote more positive media coverage of foster care. These positive depictions can be augmented through foster care program postings, newsletters, and partnerships with community based organizations, businesses, churches, and civic groups.

Agency Comment:

The Children's Bureau supports the recommendation that more positive media coverage of foster care be promoted. This is a key concept in attracting more families to serve their community through volunteering as foster parents. In the past, the Children's Bureau has worked with The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Casey Family Program and the Child Welfare League of America in disseminating information to state agencies on the "Take this Heart" campaign. This initiative included a documentary on the successes that many families enjoyed in their capacity as foster parents. A discussion guide about the documentary was made available for agencies to use with prospective foster parents. The documentary was presented on many public television stations throughout the country. Local agencies, which license foster parents, were encouraged to develop recruitment campaigns associated with the "Take this Heart" presentation." This initiative provides communities with a toolbox for educating the public about the value and importance of foster parenting.

The media focuses on foster care when there is a crisis, painting a negative portrait of the foster care system and foster parents. The Children's Bureau believes an on-going strategy with involvement from national, State and local levels could positively impact perceptions of foster care by the media and the public. This strategy should include the regular dissemination of positive features with a variety of perspectives. Stories could be publicized about foster care as a service to families, supporting them in addressing the problems that contributed to abuse and neglect of children. States have featured public interest stories about the many people who were served by the foster care system as children and youth and are now contributing members of society. Local agencies have long been encouraged to provide periodic stories to their town newspapers about the outstanding volunteer spirit of foster families in opening their own homes and lives to provide a safe environment to specific populations of children.

OIG Recommendation:

Enhance Technical Assistance

Despite the successes that may be achieved through information sharing among the States, ACF should use its position as a Federal partner in the foster care system to enhance information sharing and assessment of recruitment efforts. Towards this end, we recommend the ACF provide State foster care program managers with guidance focused on enhancing the effectiveness of States' recruitment efforts. Guidance should include information to assist them in:

- implementing targeted recruitment efforts for difficult to place children;
- utilizing foster parents as recruiters;
- identifying unmet and future recruitment needs;
- establishing recruitment goals;
- developing outcome-based recruitment plans;
- identifying sources and using data to monitor and track recruitment outcomes; and
- determining what recruitment methods are most cost-effective and gather data to calculate recruitment expenditures.

Agency Comment:

The recommendation regarding the importance of ACF in providing current information about recruitment efforts to the States is essential to successfully building the capacity of State agencies to attract foster families. Through the Child and Family Services (CFS) reviews, the Children's Bureau is identifying best practices in the area of recruitment as well as other areas, and plans to inform states and localities about these exemplary programs. In addition, the Children's Bureau has featured State recruitment programs that targeted specific populations of children at national conferences for State foster care managers. Additionally, the fall/winter 2000 newsletter from the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning (funded by the Children's Bureau) featured articles on recruitment and retention of foster parents. This information continues to be available to download from the Resource Center's website. The Children's Bureau is committed to providing information about all aspects of recruitment through the provision of technical assistance from its network of Resource Centers and at national and regional conferences.

At this year's National Conference in March, the Children's Bureau has identified a number of States and county agencies that have developed targeted recruitment materials focused on underserved child populations. Targeted recruitment has proven to be a very important tool in

expanding homes in needed areas. Materials from three separate locations have been identified to share at the conference, which is attended by child welfare professionals throughout the country and grantees of the Children's Bureau.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was prepared under the direction of Brian T. Pattison, Regional Inspector General for Evaluation and Inspections in Kansas City. Other principal Office of Evaluation and Inspections staff who contributed include:

Deborah Walden, *Project Leader*

Linda Hall, *Program Specialist*

Mike Craig, *Program Analyst*

Steve Milas, *Program Analyst*

Gary Reese, *Program Analyst*

Technical Assistance

Barbara Tedesco, *Technical Support Staff*