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**FOSTER PARENT
RECRUITMENT, RETENTION,
AND RATE SETTING**

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for

Santa Clara County Department of Family & Children's Services

August 1997

BAY AREA SOCIAL SERVICES CONSORTIUM RESEARCH RESPONSE TEAM

The Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) was founded in 1987 and is composed of the directors of Bay Area county social service and human service agencies, deans of Bay Area graduate social work departments, and foundation representatives. BASSC has the objective of directing educational programs, conducting applied research, and developing policy.

Housed at the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) at the University of California at Berkeley, the BASSC Research Response Team was organized in 1995 to respond rapidly to the emerging needs of county social service agencies for information about their changing environments. Small-scale research projects are undertaken in close collaboration with agency administrators and program staff.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services and the BASSC Research Response Team of the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California School of Social Welfare wish to thank numerous individuals for their contributions to this report. The following research assistants provided valuable support with many different facets of this report namely, Spencer Bolles, Emily Bruce, Caroline Harmon, and Niaz Murtaza. We would especially like to extend our appreciation to Jill Duerr Berrick for her comprehensive reviews of the report and instrument and for her constructive feedback throughout the project. Finally, we offer our gratitude to the interview respondents for their time, energy, and candor in participating in this study.

FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND RATE SETTING

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the exploratory investigation conducted by the Bay Area Social Services Consortium-Research Response Team for the Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services on the issues of foster care recruitment, retention, and rate setting. The purpose of this study is to provide background information on foster care policy pertaining to rate setting and the recruitment and retention of foster parents in nine states, namely California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. For this report, we queried state and county foster care representatives from the nine states about their state's efforts towards recruiting and retaining foster parents. In addition we gathered contextual information on the methods employed by the states for setting the reimbursement rates to foster parents. A secondary component of the study was to furnish a broad literature review on the background and history of foster care, recruitment and retention of foster parents, and the rate setting structure of reimbursements to foster parents.

In the past decade, our nation has witnessed a tremendous surge in the number of youth who are being removed from biological families due to abuse and neglect by caregivers. Concomitant with child abuse and the subsequent removal of children from biological parents are numerous complex societal influences--poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and AIDS--which greatly impede reunification opportunities for children with their biological parents. Thus, the need for substitute care facilities, particularly family foster homes, is immense. Yet, it appears that the number of effective and active foster homes has not kept pace with the rising foster care caseload. Several studies document the decreasing numbers of available foster homes. One study notes that the number of foster homes nationwide plummeted by 32% between 1987 and 1990 (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). How can the child welfare system account for this trend? Part of the problem may lie with difficulties in the recruitment of foster parents. Locating suitable individuals who are willing to care for increasingly problematic foster

youth is a daunting task. In addition to improving recruitment efforts, it is also challenging to retain an active population of foster parents. In one survey of San Francisco Bay Area counties, researchers note that close to 50% of new foster parents--licensed for less than two years--surrendered their positions (Anderson, 1988). Though some of the reasons for such high attrition may be beyond the control of child welfare workers, others may have amenable solutions.

Several societal trends are associated with deterring individuals from becoming foster parents. Most notably, issues such as increased economic stress on families and more single-parent families preclude individuals from having time and energy to care for other children (Tatara, 1994; CWLA, 1991; Pasztor & Burgess, 1982). Factors hindering retention of foster parents, however, relate to the policies and practices of social service agencies. Of primary concern is the inadequate financial compensation that foster parents receive for the services that they perform (Simon, 1975; GAO, 1989). Along with financial stipends, there are other considerations limiting the retention of an adequate pool of foster parents. Chamberlain, Moreland, and Reid (1992) report on the impact of increased support from social workers and financial stipends on attrition rates of foster parents. In the course of their two-year study, they uncovered that foster parents who receive more services and additional stipends are less likely than those who receive only additional stipends and those who did not receive anything additional to discontinue their fostering roles. Many professionals of child welfare point to problems such as lack of respite care, insufficient training and preparation for becoming foster parents, poor communication and working relationships with social workers and welfare agencies, feelings of disenpowerment in foster youths' proceedings, and foster parents feeling undervalued for the services that they provide as contributing to the attrition rates of foster parents (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995; Tucker & Hurl, 1992; GAO, 1989).

Overview of the Study

States were compared and contrasted according to several criteria: demographics of foster care population; methodologies used for determining rate setting structures for foster care

payments; supplemental services provided to foster parents; recruitment and licensing of foster parents; efforts towards retaining foster parents; utilization of private foster care agencies; and respondents' personal beliefs and recommendations for improving the foster care system. Of the nine states in our sample, five contained state administered child welfare systems--Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, and Texas--while the other four states--California, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin--had county supervised systems.

Highlights of the Findings

There was wide variation in how states addressed the issues of foster parent retention, recruitment, and rate setting. Overall, respondents indicated that their states were experiencing shortages of effective and stable foster homes. The following are highlights of the research findings:

Demographic trends in foster care

- Texas has the lowest rate of children in substitute care (2.2 per 1,000 children); Illinois has the highest (16.7 per 1,000 children).
- In all nine states, African American children are over-represented in the foster care population. Latino children were also over-represented in California, New York, and Pennsylvania.
- Only four states track placements in kinship homes. Of these states, kinship homes are utilized with considerable frequency.
- With respect to the high turnover of foster parents, three states (California, Illinois, and Texas) reported moderate rates of foster parents who adopt their foster children therefore discontinuing their role as foster parents.

Overall comparison of states' foster care systems

- Four out of five state administered states cover the entire cost of foster care for Title IV-E eligible foster youth. All of the county administered states share this cost with the counties.

- Three county administered states--California, New York, and Pennsylvania--have the largest numbers of children in IV-E foster care among all of the states studied.
- State administered child welfare systems utilize two key guidelines for determining foster care payments: the USDA poverty standards and the USDA standards for middle income families. On average, the states' foster care payments were approximately 40% to 50% of the USDA standards.
- States with county administered child welfare systems appear to not utilize USDA standards in their calculations of foster care payments.

Rate setting for foster parent payments

- Procedures for determining rates vary across all of the states and are principally determined by state legislatures.
- Five states--Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Texas--have had rate increases in the past three years. Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania increase their rates annually according to cost of living adjustments.
- California and Florida have not increased their rates since 1990.
- New York decreased their rates in 1995 due to state budget cuts.
- Most states categorize the payments according to the age of the child and/or the medical and emotional needs of the child, although New York also considers the geographic location of the foster home.
- California has different rates for relative care providers.
- Wisconsin solely relies on the age of the child and does not have any distinguishing categories for health or emotional functioning.
- There is tremendous variation in the payments and supplements to foster families among counties in county administered states. It is not clear if counties pay comparable rates to one another.

Utilization of private foster care agencies

- Several states do not track the specific utilization rates of privately administered foster

homes.

- All of the states except Missouri have had increases in the number of private foster homes, particularly in cases involving children with special care needs.
- A recent trend in some states would empower private agencies to oversee the entire removal and placement process of foster youth.
- Several states have county “review boards” that oversee the decision making process through which foster children are placed in private foster agency homes.

Recruitment of foster parents

- Recruitment, particularly of families of color, is a priority for all of the states.
- Several states have designated county or district recruitment officers to oversee recruitment regardless of whether the foster care system is state or county administered.
- Recruitment efforts focus on widespread publicity to the general public serving as a vehicle for enhancing the pool of available foster parents and influencing the public’s perception.

Foster parent licensing

- Mandates for pre-licensing training vary according to state versus county administration of child welfare services. Three county administered states--California, New York, and Pennsylvania--have state mandates for pre-licensing training, although New York does not specify the number of hours required.
- Four state administered states--Florida, Illinois, Missouri, and Texas--have state mandates requiring pre-licensing training, specifying the number of hours.
- Several states--California, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, and Texas--are pilot testing innovative training programs such as, MAPP, PRIDE, and NOVA.

Foster parent retention

- Retention was stated as a primary concern by all the representatives interviewed.
- To address retention, respondents spoke of: increasing training (pre and post licensing),

expanding the availability of social workers, increasing contact with and support from social services, and initiating formal grievance procedures.

- In Missouri and Texas, social workers provide foster parents with their home phone numbers and are available 24-hours a day.
- Caseload sizes of social workers are similar among the states with most states reporting average size to be 24 and 30 cases.
- Diaper and clothing allowances are frequently considered part of the payment package (i.e., part of the base rate) to foster parents.
- Supplemental services and payments are generally distributed by counties, and vary greatly.

Policy Considerations

This study reveals that the decrease in the availability of foster families is a tremendous concern in all of the states investigated. Many state and county agencies have implemented strategies for enhancing the pool of prospective families as well as increasing their rates of retention. States presented varying practices for determining the rates of reimbursement for family foster care. Based on study findings, we propose the following policy considerations:

- **State and county governments need to address the issue of financial compensation to foster parents, including an investigation of foster parents' actual expenditures on the foster youth in their care.**

Inadequate financial compensation disregards the burden that is placed on foster parents when caring for foster youth and has been found to be a significant factor in the declining numbers of foster parents. Studies have shown that foster care payments do not cover the expenses associated with this task. In addition, the lack of liability insurance--and the fact that in many locales foster parents are penalized by their homeowners insurance plans in caring for foster youth--leaves foster parents feeling vulnerable and isolated from child welfare agencies.

Supplying liability insurance and/or assistance in legal matters regarding allegations of abuse towards the foster youth in their care would help foster parents feel supported by social services.

- **States and social service agencies need to investigate the impact of private foster care agencies on the supply of public foster homes.**

The impact of private agencies on the supply of public foster homes was largely unknown in the states in our study. Yet, because private agencies can provide enhanced services and financial resources to foster families, it is assumed that public homes are adversely affected by the increased prevalence of private agency homes. It is crucial to understand this new trajectory in foster care and the market forces influencing the movement from public to private foster care.

- **Social service agencies need to assess and evaluate the quality of care being provided in relative homes.**

As the placement of children in relative homes continues to rise, questions about the licensure and care provided in these foster homes need to be addressed. Although placement with relatives is set as a priority in the legislature, philosophical issues around foster care payments to relatives is still an area of controversy. In addition, more research is needed to determine the outcomes for children who are placed with their relatives.

- **Social service agencies need to explore options to offer enhanced financial or service support incentives for foster parents who are willing to care to difficult to place children.**

Since children with complex health and mental health problems are the most difficult to place and often have poor chances at stability in foster care, efforts need to be made to reward parents who are open to accepting this added responsibility. Incentives may include: more social worker support, advanced training, respite care resources, and special recognition of their services.

- **State governments need to mandate and oversee the pre-and-post licensing requirements of foster parents.**

Required hours of pre- and post- placement training vary in many states leaving the counties in charge of training guidelines. Some states and counties have no post-licensing training requirements. States regulating these procedures and demanding comparability throughout the state will facilitate foster parents' efficacy in their roles.

- **Social service agencies need to utilize more effectively the services of foster parents and work harder to incorporate them as “team members.”**

Findings from the literature suggest that retention of foster parents is hampered by feelings of disempowerment regarding the placement of the youth in their care and the isolation from child welfare workers and social service agencies. Study respondents noted that foster parents are underutilized and underappreciated for their parenting skills and it is ideal when they work in partnership with social workers to serve as role models and mentors to the biological parents.

- **Social service agencies need to initiate research investigations of the reasons why foster parents leave their positions.**

Comprehensive studies are needed to assess the various rationales for foster parents surrendering their positions including the inadequacy of reimbursement rates to cover the cost of family foster care. This research demonstrates that foster parents frequently discontinue their positions for positive reasons (e.g., to adopt the foster child in their care). Follow-up contact with former foster parents is needed so that negative and positive feedback can be incorporated into innovative strategies for recruiting foster families.

- **Outcomes of current foster parent recruitment efforts need to be evaluated.**

Currently, social service agencies conduct various recruitment techniques without

determining the efficacy of these methods. Successful recruitment could be measured by the number of prospective parents who respond to invitations and subsequently become licensed and receive placements. Funding for future recruitment should focus on those methods which produced the most success.

Conclusion

There are numerous problems faced by social service agencies in recruiting and retaining foster families. Foster youth caseloads are increasingly complex and difficult to care for and are also remaining in foster care for extended lengths of time. In addition there are demographic and societal changes that interfere with individuals' abilities to care for foster youth. Accompanying these dilemmas, are shifts in the structure of the foster care system. For example, the increasing availability of private foster agencies is pushing the public foster home market into new directions. The proliferation of private agency homes is important since they are able to provide larger stipends and extra services to foster care providers compared with public foster homes. The inadequacy of the payments is a crucial component of the nationwide attrition of foster parents. The rates that the states in this study provide to foster parents are substantially below the USDA determined standards for the cost of raising children in low income homes and do not cover the additional expenses that foster children may incur. Moreover, in several states, the payments to foster parents in public homes have not increased since 1990. As a consequence of these events, social service agencies will need to create innovative tactics to contend with the enormous problem of increasing foster care caseloads and the dwindling supply of foster homes.