



George E. Pataki
Governor

NEW YORK STATE
OFFICE OF CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES
52 WASHINGTON STREET
RENSSELAER, NY 12144

John A. Johnson
Commissioner

Informational Letter

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To:	Local District Commissioners Executive Directors of Voluntary Agencies
Issuing Division/Office:	Division of Development and Prevention Services
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Subject:	Supporting the Needs of Foster Parents: Recommendations
Suggested Distribution:	Directors of Services Foster Care Supervisors Homefinding Supervisors Adoption Supervisors Staff Development Coordinators
Contact Person(s):	Any programmatic questions concerning this release should be directed to the appropriate Regional Office, Division of Development and Prevention Services: BRO – Linda Brown (716) 847-3145 User ID: Linda.Brown@ocfs.state.ny.us RRO – Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8201 User ID: Linda.Kurtz@ocfs.state.ny.us SRO – Jack Klump (315) 423-1200 User ID: Jack.Klump@ocfs.state.ny.us ARO – Glenn Humphreys (518) 486-7078 User ID: Glenn.Humphreys@ocfs.state.ny.us YRO – Pat Sheehy (914) 377-2080 User ID: Patricia.Sheehy@ocfs.state.ny.us NYCRO -- Fred Levitan (212) 383-1788 User ID: Fred.Levitan@ocfs.state.ny.us
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I. Purpose

The role of foster parents is critical to improving outcomes for children in foster care. The purpose of this informational letter is to inform social services districts and voluntary agencies of the recommendations that have been developed by a workgroup of stakeholders, which included foster parents, to support the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency and well-being for the children entrusted to their care. These recommendations resulted from the analysis of the findings from the Foster Parent Training and Support Assessment that was recently conducted with foster parents and foster care workers statewide. The recommendations are intended to assist local districts and voluntary agencies in assessing and supporting their partnerships with foster parents. Many districts and voluntary agencies are already aware of these issues and are currently involved in initiatives to improve practice related to supporting the role of foster parents.

In an effort to promote best practices, districts and voluntary agencies are asked to share with OCFS the practices that they have implemented that address any of the areas noted in the findings. OCFS is interested in compiling these best practices, and sharing them with all districts and voluntary agencies as a way to support foster parents in the critical role they play in the child welfare system.

II. Background

The federal Administration for Children and Families conducted a Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in June 2001, and in April of 2003 approved New York State's CFSR Program Improvement Plan (PIP). One of the thirteen (13) integrated core strategies to improve child and family outcomes is "Promoting the Role of Foster Parents in Promoting Safety, Permanency and Well-being" (Strategy 1G). A workgroup, which included foster parents, was formed to identify a set of supports that would enhance the ability of foster parents, including kinship foster parents, to provide safe, stable, and permanency focused placements.

The workgroup focused on identifying the unmet services/supports and training needs of foster parents. To that end, a survey was designed and distributed statewide. A total of 1,780 foster parent surveys were mailed to foster parents throughout New York State. In addition, surveys were distributed to foster parents at trainings and conferences held by the Center for the Development of Human Services (CDHS) and Professional Development Program (PDP) during 2003. A total of 787 completed surveys were returned by foster parents who were currently fostering a child, and 87 completed surveys were returned by foster parents who were in an inactive status. Additionally, each district and voluntary agency received 10 foster care caseworker surveys. A total of 542 completed surveys were returned by foster care caseworkers. All completed surveys were sent to CDHS, the results were aggregated, and a report was sent to OCFS in 2004.

Workgroup members analyzed the survey findings and recommendations were formulated. In May 2004, the findings were presented at the New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children conference and workshop attendees suggested several other recommendations. This informational letter highlights the recommendations that pertain

to local districts and voluntary agencies and that can be implemented with minimal or no additional resources.

III. Program Implications

These recommendations place a focus on the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency and well being for the children entrusted to their care. Each local district and voluntary agency will need to assess its current relationship with its foster parents to determine if the foster parents are seen as full members of each of their foster child's teams and are included in key aspects of each case. To support the role foster parents play in each foster child's life, a district or voluntary agency may need to assess its readiness to implement some of the strategies noted in this informational letter. Any district or voluntary agency that would like technical assistance is asked to contact its Regional Office. For those districts and voluntary agencies that have already incorporated many of these recommendations, OCFS is interested in the strategies you have used and would encourage you to contact your Regional Office and share them with OCFS.

Recommendations for Local District and Voluntary Agencies

Listed below are the recommendations that resulted from the workgroup's analysis of the foster parent survey findings.

Manuals

Provide the NYS Foster Parent Manual and NYS Foster Parent's Guide to Adoption to all foster care caseworkers and foster parents. Foster parents want and need access to information about their role, rights and responsibilities. They want to have this information available to them as an ongoing resource. Districts and voluntary agencies can obtain additional copies from the Regional Office or by going to OCFS' website at www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/fostercare/resources.asp and selecting publication 5011.

Training

Inform foster parents of all training opportunities that are available in your community on an on-going basis. This will afford them the opportunity to enhance their knowledge on other topics, such as alcohol and substance abuse, developmental disabilities, and mental health issues. Invite foster parents to teleconferences sponsored by OCFS. Look to other agencies and community supports to offer trainings for foster parents.

Offer as many ways to involve foster parents in their own professional development as possible. Consider using foster parents as co-trainers at pre-service and in-service trainings.

Foster parents suggest leaving more time at the end of training sessions for discussion so that foster parents can apply the training to their own situation and they can leave with a plan of action.

Consistently look to foster/adoptive parents for feedback on your training program. Foster Parents would like districts and agencies to allow for evaluation of trainers.

Examine the degree to which foster care caseworkers and supervisors have the same understanding as foster parents as it pertains to the role and responsibilities of foster parents. Foster parents have requested that caseworkers and supervisors attend the same training along with foster parents so mutual understanding can be strengthened.

Conduct a similar assessment of the understanding of foster/adoptive parenting roles, responsibilities and performance needs and expectations with other district/agency staff outside the foster care unit. Provide foster care issues training to all district and agency staff, even those not in the foster care unit.

Casework contacts and support

Foster parents want a timely response to their telephone calls, questions and concerns. They would like to see districts and agencies work to eliminate telephone messages that tell foster parents that a caseworker's voice mail is full, and therefore foster parents cannot leave a message for the caseworker.

Foster parents would like districts and agencies to consider staff work hour flexibility so caseworkers can be available to meet with working foster parents during early evening hours.

Foster parents expressed concern about not feeling supported by the district or agency when they have been reported to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment. Foster parents would like caseworkers to be available to them during this stressful time. Establish a protocol or policy for the support of foster parents by caseworkers and supervisors that takes into consideration both the foster parents' and the child's needs along with the district or agency's foster care and child protective responsibilities.

Permanency Planning

Maximize foster parent participation in permanency planning. Many foster parents want to be included in all aspects of permanency planning for each foster child in their care. This includes inviting foster parents to participate in family meetings, case planning meetings, service plan reviews, permanency hearings, and visitation planning and letting the foster parents know their contributions are valued. Foster parents want to be seen as partners and a resource to the child's family and the caseworker. Use of conference calling should be explored to include foster parents who are not able to attend meetings in person.

Services

Provide needed information on resources so that foster/adoptive parents can carry out their responsibilities. Foster parents want a list of participating doctors, clinics, dentists, counselors, etc. in their community that are available to meet the needs of the children in their care. These lists need to be updated periodically and updates should be sent to foster parents.

Facilitate access to services for foster children. Foster parents want assistance in addressing barriers to services through activities such as caseworker assistance in initiating contact with the service providers, arranging appointments, and arranging transportation.

Provide foster parents with written information about reimbursement and the required processing of forms when they have provided transportation for a child.

Foster Parent Support Groups

Facilitate access to peer support. For districts and agencies that do not currently have an active foster parent support group, foster parents would like assistance from the district/agency to survey all foster parents to see if there is an interest in forming a group. Foster parents would like the district/agency to encourage all foster parents to join a group or an association and provide current and new foster parents with information about existing groups.

Support foster parent associations in concrete ways. Foster parents would like districts and agencies to make available to them the necessary meeting space for a foster parent support group.

Encourage networking among foster parents. Foster parents request that they be provided with the names and telephone numbers of the other foster parents in their county as a means of supporting each other.

Conclusion

While many districts and agency may already be actively engaged in many of these recommendations, we would encourage each district and agency to share with its Regional Office those practices that highlight how your district or agency helps support the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency and well-being of the children entrusted to their care.

Larry G. Brown s/s

Issued By:

Name: Larry G. Brown

Title: Deputy Commissioner

Division/Office: Development and Prevention Services