practice guide

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL RESOURCE FAMILIES

A guide for public agencies

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private, national philanthropy that creates better futures for the nation's children by strengthening families, building economic opportunities and transforming neighborhoods into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

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Appendices can be found online: www.aecf.org/ResourceFamilies

introduction

For nearly two decades, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has worked with a range of city and state human service departments to promote child welfare reform. While each jurisdiction has presented unique challenges, finding and keeping high-quality resource families has been a common struggle. Recent engagements in Connecticut, Virginia and Maryland have highlighted significant challenges with regard to recruitment, development and support of resource families. These challenges include short supply, lack of appropriate support and training, and the need for a systematic approach to building capacity in this important area.

The Foundation recognizes the critical role played by resource families who often function as a bridge to reunification, kinship care or adoption. In many instances, resource families have not received the institutional support needed to ensure that a pool of appropriate families is available to serve children in need in a given community. We have worked with jurisdictions in which 25 percent of resource families discontinue providing foster care each year, and estimates indicate that 40 percent of the families who leave foster parenting do so primarily because of inadequate agency support. We have partnered with national experts in designing systems to recruit, develop and support resource families.

The goal of this guide is to leverage our experience with different jurisdictions by sharing information and encouraging the use of best practices in working with resource families.

II

background

“Resource families” is an umbrella term that includes adoptive, kinship and foster families. These families provide a critical service within communities that spans a continuum of care from respite providers to short-term foster parents to longer-term foster/adoptive/kin families. Resource families are a valuable asset that must be systematically cultivated to ensure appropriate placements for all children in need of care.

Kinship families are an important and often neglected or misunderstood resource. The old adage “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” can impact how kinship families are treated. Child welfare staff must understand that kinship families are compelled to make decisions regarding caregiving within seconds. The crisis nature of placement impacts the families and they are forced to prepare to receive the children after the placement has been made. They have no time to put their “ducks in a row” and, consequently, their home studies may require additional efforts.

Recent research suggests that entering foster care may be more detrimental to children than remaining in homes where they experience some level of neglect or abuse.[1] It has become increasingly clear that removing children, rather than working with families to improve conditions in the home, should only be pursued as a last resort. Whenever possible, the primary goal for children in care is reunification with their family. When that is not possible, another permanent home must be secured. However, when children must be removed, placing them with caring relatives in a familiar environment may be the least disruptive option since family members potentially offer more stability than strangers. Given the frequent demand for appropriate placement options, it is important for caseworkers to explore potential relative caregivers.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: Resource families play a critical support role in any child welfare system, although many agencies fail to give them the respect, support and attention they deserve.

[1] Joseph J. Doyle, Jr. (March 2007). *Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effects of Foster Care.* MIT Sloan School of Management & NBER.

Across the country, child welfare systems suffer from a lack of suitable resource families due to inappropriate recruiting and inadequate support. This deficit has a broad impact on vulnerable children and families, including:

- **Overly restrictive placements.** Placements (particularly for teens) are often based on availability rather than level of need and this often results in inappropriate use of non-family care such as shelters, group homes and institutions.

- **Poor matches between children and resource families.** The matching process should consider the child's needs and community of origin to preserve family, friends, local schools and churches. In looking for an appropriate placement, it is important to consider a child's unique and special needs and identify a family who is best able to meet all the child's needs. A good match means that a child is more likely to fit into a family and neither the child nor the family will have to experience the trauma of disruption. Staff must also recognize that a child's first placement could become his permanent placement, should reunification not be an option.

- **Frequent and unnecessary disruptions.** With proper matching and support of families, systems can greatly reduce disruptions—to everyone's benefit. When a child continues to move from placement to placement, their level of care is likely to become more restrictive, making permanency more difficult to achieve.

- **Overcrowded homes.** Over-burdened resource families increase the risk of abuse or neglect allegations and licensing rule violations, which ultimately lead to the closing of homes. Overcrowding also leads to burn-out and increased attrition—when overloaded, great resource parents become mediocre resource parents and may eventually leave the system.

- **Negative word-of-mouth.** Recruitment becomes more difficult when there are negative perceptions of the system in the community. Without adequate resource family support and development, an agency's reputation will suffer and current resource families will discourage friends or family from stepping forward as potential resource families.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **Without a sufficient reserve of resource parents, we overtax the ones we have and not only risk losing them, but risk generating bad word-of-mouth that discourages individuals and couples from becoming resource parents. Alternatively, when we support our resource families they often recruit friends and family to also become resource parents.**

RESOURCE FAMILY OVERSIGHT MODELS

MODEL	BENEFITS	LIMITATIONS
The public agency contracts with a private agency to do recruitment. Public agency completes the home study and follow-up support with family.	Concentrated effort at recruitment. Can make contract performance-based with specific goals and outcomes identified for recruitment.	Prospective families could be lost in the transition from one agency to another. Contract agency may not be able to provide adequate information about how the public agency operates. In an effort to meet targeted numbers, quality of homes recruited may suffer.
Public agency contracts with private agency to recruit, license and train families on behalf of public agency. Families are turned over to public agency after licensure.	Families experience a seamless process from the first phone call through licensure.	Public agency lacks intimate knowledge of foster families, so inappropriate placements may be made and disruptions increase. Families have developed relationships with private agency staff and must start over with public agency. In an effort to meet targeted numbers, quality may suffer.
Both public and private agencies have their own pool of foster parents that have been recruited, trained and licensed by their respective agencies. Public agency places within its own system, as do private agencies.	Diverse pool of foster parents available for placement needs. Private agencies are able to provide more support to their foster families who may receive youth with higher needs.	Competition between agencies for recruitment hinders collaboration. Public agency lacks knowledge of private agency foster homes and must rely on private agency's judgment when placing children. A communication gap may exist between public and private agency staff , especially around homes that may have been closed by one or the other.
All resource parent services are privatized. Public agency contracts with private agencies to access foster/adoptive/kinship services.	Families are well supported from first contact through approval process and have a social worker assigned to meet their ongoing needs.	Public agency lacks knowledge of families and must rely on private agency's judgment when placing children. A communication gap may exist between public and private agency staff.

The recruitment, development and support functions can be done internally within the child welfare agency or they can be contracted to private providers. Let's take a look at the benefits and limitations of a few different models where functions are contracted.

There are pros and cons for each of these models. Even when resource parent services are provided in a public agency, how those services are provided may vary from agency to agency.

Large agencies may divide the tasks among specialized units, which separately undertake recruiting, training, licensing and support. Some agencies designate workers to carry a caseload of resource parents, just as they might be assigned a caseload of children. The caseload approach is highly effective since it enables resource parent caseworkers to advocate directly for resource families and avoid conflicts of interest, such as dealing with abuse allegations by children in care.

This guide will provide information on how to recruit, develop and support resource families and will outline best practices and specific tools that have been identified by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as effective in the field. Among these functions, agencies often cite family recruitment as the highest priority. However, understanding home development and the importance of supporting resource families is a prerequisite for success. New families need to feel welcome from the first phone call, and they require substantial ongoing support throughout the preparation process and when they become resource parents.

Why start with rebuilding the developmental system, focusing on support and not on recruitment?

Improving the developmental process can reap immediate results, such as increasing the yield of available resource families, while creating a more collaborative, supportive culture that improves the process from the prospective parents' viewpoint. A common mistake that many agencies make is launching a large recruitment campaign when their system will be incapable of completing the training and homestudy process in a timely and professional manner. This is counterproductive, as frustrated families drop out and spread a negative message about the agency in the community. With that in mind, the guide will begin with family resource development and then examine recruitment and support.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **It all starts with listening and collecting information from the relevant people within the system.**

III

development

BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RESOURCE FAMILIES

“Development” refers to the process of leading an interested person from their first contact with the system to becoming an approved (i.e., licensed or certified) resource parent. There are several steps that remain the same in any system, although the details will vary considerably. This guide will review each step in detail.

No parent begins the process of becoming a resource parent prepared for a placement. An important element of successful resource family development is the screening process, welcoming all prospective parents with the understanding that appropriate parents will self-select in, while unqualified parents will opt out as they learn what is expected of them. Currently, most systems try to quickly discourage (or screen out) applicants who appear to be weaker prospective parents in order to save time, improve efficiency and avoid legal problems that could emerge from excluding individuals later in the process. Moving a system toward a model of supportive, accessible approval is the goal, but this can be challenging because it means changing staff mindsets as well as their practices. However, a new approach to development can offer immediate results. For example, six months after reforming the development process in Richmond, Virginia, the locality had significant improvements in resource family intake, orientation and training.

The Case for Data Collection and Analysis

One of the most helpful tools in reforming the resource family development process is a data collection system. There are three important pieces of data that can assist any system in identifying where to begin:

1. *Who are the children most in need of homes?* Begin by gathering information about the age, race, gender, sibling status and special needs of the children who most often are placed out of their communities or into congregate care in order to inform your targeted recruitment campaign.

2. *What is the current composition of your pool of resource families?* Conduct a utilization review to determine gaps in your pool of families. These data include the family’s name, placement parameters (what kinds of children they will accept for placement), number of children the family is approved to care for, number of children currently placed in the home, and status (such as foster only, adopt only, foster/adopt). When this information is juxtaposed against the children’s information, it will become clear where your most urgent recruitment needs are.

3. *Where do resource families get stuck or lost in your system?* Many agencies rush to recruit but experience no gain or a net loss of families. This is often due to common bottlenecks or barriers in the process of becoming a resource family or poor support once children are placed in the home. Creating a tracking form that follows prospective families through each step of the process, from first contact to orientation through the training and licensing process, can help to pinpoint where prospective families are dropping out. In addition, reviewing closed homes and conducting exit interviews with these families can help to determine where supports are most needed to retain resource families.

Beyond identifying where to start reform efforts, data can also be quite helpful in tracking progress and change in the system.

Build an Effective Resource Family Team with Workgroups

The first step in building agency capacity is identifying an agency leader with strong frontline relationships, as well as decision-making authority, to lead the work. In addition to an internal champion, engaging a broader set of staff from different levels within the agency is needed to reach a "tipping point" and successfully spread knowledge and practice that will drive a new approach. One of the most challenging changes with the greatest impact is a change in staff attitudes toward resource parents. For this reason, the work should begin with a group of staff who can promote a positive and supportive attitude toward resource families.

Workgroups provide a helpful structure for assigning and coordinating tasks, while creating a sense of ownership and accountability among members. The structure will depend on how a particular system is organized, but in general cross-organizational workgroups designed around discrete tasks are an effective way to bring people into the process. Workgroup design varies depending on need and resources. Different options include:

- **Many (four or more) workgroups.** Each workgroup includes multiple levels of workers from different functional departments within the agency, as well as foster and adoptive parents. Each workgroup focuses on a single component of the reform work, with one group designated to provide oversight. This approach promotes buy-in by encouraging worker participation throughout the agency. It is most effective at the state level because workers from different geographic areas can be included in each workgroup. Examples of workgroups arranged by task would be: support workgroup, first phone call/orientation workgroup, recruitment workgroup, home study workgroup and training workgroup.

- **Two or three workgroups running concurrently.** This process uses a similar structure to the workgroups described above, but balances inclusion of workers (and building buy-in) with expediting the work.

- **One workgroup.** This model may be the most efficient, assuming the workgroup meets frequently, to work through the reform components quickly. While fewer staff participate, there is less buy-in across the agency because of less participation. This approach requires a strong communications plan to help explain changes to staff. Small, rural agencies with fewer staff and a less complex structure may find using one workgroup best.

The resource family development strategy should evaluate the entire home development process, from intake to certification. Larger agencies might support multiple workgroups where each one focuses on a specific component, while smaller agencies might use a single workgroup to address the entire process. In both instances, workgroups will drive the change process, and communications and training will be needed to implement the new approach across the system.

Again, it is important to stress that without attention to the process of receiving and developing families who express interest in becoming foster, adoptive or kinship families, it is fruitless to recruit. When not served well, families leave the process faster than they enter.

Development Starts with Assessment

Before considering reform, it is important to conduct an initial assessment to understand the existing process for managing resource families, and to establish baselines to evaluate progress. In addition to understanding the infrastructure, an assessment provides an overview of staffing strengths and needs. Appendix 1 provides an interview guide for an initial assessment based on focus groups with workers and supervisors, resource parents and some individual interviews with managers.

Additionally, a review of agency resource parent program materials, policies and protocols may reveal a need for updates and revision. Some agencies choose to use an independent consultant to conduct the assessment, which can provide a balanced and fair evaluation. This information provides a general understanding of the current approach and attitude toward resource families, while building awareness of the reform effort and trust among the various stakeholders.

Use Assessment Information to Structure Reform

Does your agency need to change how it does business? Once the information has been gathered, consider the following questions:

- Is the agency overly dependent on congregate care and out-of-jurisdiction placements for children and youth? Are there specific groups of children, like teens, who automatically are sent to group care? Are there a disproportionate number of children of color needing placement? Are siblings routinely split between multiple homes because there are no homes that can accommodate more than one or two children?

- Are there resource parents who are sitting idle because they desire children who are not available? Are some families being overused or overloaded?

- Is the agency receiving a high number of calls/contacts from interested people, only to have very few approved? Are prospective families coming forward for those children or youth who are most in need of families? Are families disproportionately being lost at a certain point in the process?

- Has the agency experienced no increase or a net loss of resource families over the past five years?

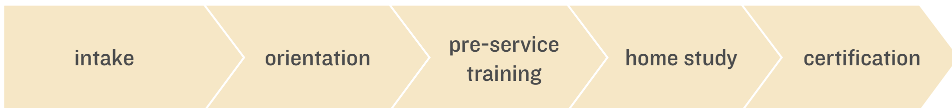
- How many resource parents quit within one year of certification? Two years? After their first placement? Why did they quit?

- Who are the children/youth in need of resource homes? Do current recruitment materials reflect the needs of these children/youth?

- Are policies/protocols inclusive and respectful of resource families?

Once the assessment demonstrates the need for reform, the following areas that compose a continuum of resource family development must be addressed.

RESOURCE FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



Specific interventions may include policy revision and development, program development, structural changes to the agency or unit(s) and operational changes. Questions to consider during planning for any resource family development project include:

- What is the time frame for reform (considering staff capacity)?

- Who will be included in the reform work?
  – What level of buy-in is desired or needed to achieve success?
  – What is the role of the state agency or regional, district or local offices?
  – What is the agency capacity to make the changes (both skills and time)?
  – Can training of trainers be used to provide ongoing technical assistance?
  – How will the rollout of the changed system to all staff or agency units be conducted?

- What outcomes are being sought? What are benchmarks that will indicate progress?

- What do we want the prospective parents' experience to be in our system?

Effective Intake Requires a "Big Tent" Approach

The development process begins when a prospective resource parent contacts the agency, usually by calling, although a prospective resource parent may also walk into an agency, provide a phone number to a recruiter or send an email or internet message. Although this sounds like a simple process, almost every agency screens out callers during the first contact. The experience of the first phone call often makes a difference in determining whether or not a prospective resource parent will continue with the process. The challenge is to help staff create an intake approach that is welcoming, supportive and responsive to ensure that viable prospective parents continue with the process after the initial contact.

We have found that developing an effective intake approach begins with a strong, dedicated workgroup composed of workers who conduct intake calls, as well as more senior staff and managers. The group should also include outside stakeholders who represent the interests of resource families and a few current resource parents, if possible. If there are trained customer service professionals elsewhere in the agency, they would also be a welcome resource for the workgroup.

Intake Overview

After developing workgroups in many different jurisdictions, we have compiled a set of best practices for intake (along with the rest of the resource family development process) structured through frequently asked questions, outlined below. For a summary of successful intake, see Appendix 2.

What is the purpose of the first phone call?

Agency staff often believe that the primary purpose of the first phone call is for them to gather information to screen out prospective parents. That mindset typically narrows the number of prospective parents who continue with the process, as prospects feel that they are being judged and screened out. Intake staffs' view of the purpose of the first call must be exactly the opposite. The intake phone call should be viewed as an opportunity to welcome and encourage callers to attend an orientation session without feeling pressured to commit to the entire certification process.

Remember that the prospective resource parent has called in response to your invitation to "get more information about becoming a foster or adoptive parent"—not to give information! The goal is to generate additional interest in becoming a resource parent, rather than intimidate prospective parents with extensive personal questions. In that spirit, workers in one jurisdiction changed the name of their unit from "screening line" to "welcome line."

It is important to assess the actual process that a prospective parent encounters. Does the agency use a single internet address or link? What phone numbers are included on the website or in other written materials? Do all of the phone numbers actually work? What will happen when a prospective parent Googles "foster parenting" and the name of the jurisdiction?

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **Assign a few agency staff to call all the phone numbers that are published on the website or in brochures to determine which ones are operational. This task should result in a single phone line that is either a 1-800 number or a memorable number such as 646-KIDS.**

Who answers the inquiries?

In addition to how calls are answered, it is important to assess who answers the calls during and after business hours. During business hours, are calls answered by assigned staff or by recorded messages? Is there voicemail? Who responds to email? How quickly? One approach is to create a rotation schedule for answering the calls, along with a plan for handling after-hours calls. Calls should be answered live by a staff member with whom they will continue to have contact throughout the certification process. All after-hours calls should be returned during the next business day.

If a statewide 1-800 number is used, it must have the capability to correctly route calls to the appropriate local office. There are 1-800 services that can identify a caller's location based on area code and route the call appropriately, although cell phones with varying area codes can complicate the process. It may be more effective to have a 1-800 number with a recording that asks callers to press a number based on their location, and then routes them to actual staff located in their immediate area.

What information is provided during the first call?
The initial contact with an agency often determines whether a prospective parent will continue to make the effort required to become a resource parent. After receiving an inquiry, agencies should consider the callers' experience. Do they feel appreciated and welcomed, or threatened by excessive personal questioning about criminal history, income, relationship status, race, etc.? Staff members often believe that they are saving time, or protecting callers from later disappointment, by screening out during the first phone call. However, in many instances potential resource parents discontinue with the process because they feel intimidated or uncomfortable.

It may be difficult to change staff members' approach to initial interactions with prospective resource parents. We often suggest "secret shopper calls," although they must be handled sensitively; the exercise is not meant to punish specific workers for their practice, so anonymity is required. Members of the intake workgroup pose as prospective parents to experience being a caller and then report on the experience. It is also helpful to interview recently certified resource parents (or parents currently in the certification process) to get their expert opinion about the intake process. It is important for all workgroup members to conduct these exercises to ensure a range of input. See Appendices 3 and 4 for a secret shopper call template and an interview guide for resource parents.

Finally, some workers feel the need for a script while others may be more comfortable letting the caller direct the conversation. Scripts can feel forced, so we have developed a set of talking points (see Appendix 5) that cover key intake issues in a positive, supportive manner. Most importantly, every caller should be invited to take the next step, which usually means attending an orientation. Callers should be told the date and location of the orientation, encouraged to attend, and asked to bring someone with them if they wish. Although an agency may prefer to have a headcount in advance of the orientation, requiring invitations and confirmations may undermine the effort to generate a large initial pool of prospective parents. In addition to intake, orientation offers an opportunity for an agency to represent itself and its work to the public in a positive light as a form of general outreach.

What questions should be asked during the initial call?
The structure of the initial call can help staff move from a mindset of screening out prospective parents toward a more productive screening-in approach. Most intake call forms are too detailed and lengthy, and redundant with questions on the application and home study documents. The only information needed for intake is the caller's name and contact information so they can be reached for follow up (see Appendix 6 for a sample intake form).

Intake workers often believe that by asking detailed personal questions initially, they are saving everyone time and resources. However, they should remember that callers are often making their first contact with the system and may feel reluctant to engage at that level or share very personal information at this point in the process, even though they might be good prospective parents.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **In addition to name and contact information, the screener may wish to ask, "How did you hear about us?" "Are you interested in foster care or adoption?" "What questions do you have?" "Would you like to hear about the children who need families?" It may also be helpful to ask callers if they are inquiring in reference to a specific child so that kinship or child-specific callers can be fast-tracked.**

What is the next step for callers after the intake call?

Every intake call should be logged in to facilitate timely follow-up, since prospective resource parents are frequently lost during the time between contacts. If an interested prospective parent receives an invitation to an orientation that will not occur for several weeks, he or she may lose track of the information about the date or location and may not want to call back. To keep prospective parents engaged, staff should reach out to them, especially during any lulls in the process.

The intake worker who responds to the first call should be responsible for mailing out a packet, letter or small brochure with a personal note thanking the caller, along with a reminder of the date and location of the orientation. This packet should be brief and welcoming, and only include the information needed for the next step. A bulky, comprehensive mailer with every detail about certification is expensive and may overwhelm prospective resource parents.

Another option for immediate follow-up information is to offer your agency's website address. This requires posting the materials included in your information packet to the website but provides callers with access to information instantaneously.

For two examples of actual follow-up communications used by different jurisdictions, see Appendix 7. Both pieces include a true/false quiz that assesses readiness for foster care or adoption. This type of evaluation encourages self-selection as prospective parents learn more about the process and their suitability to serve as resource families. The mailings also include a letter from agency leadership and a personal note from the intake worker who responded to the inquiry.

During this stage of the process, staff should focus on encouraging callers to take the next step. As prospective parents move further along through certification, they become more likely to follow through to become resource parents. They need support throughout the process to believe they can take on the difficult task of fostering or adopting a child. While social workers may fear they are failing to provide adequate safeguards, they should understand that appropriate screening will occur at the appropriate time, once prospective parents have formed a relationship with the agency and with specific workers, and they should trust agency staff enough to disclose and discuss difficult issues.

A transparent intake process should ensure that prospective parents understand what is required of resource parents; prospective parents can then make their own informed decision about moving forward without feeling pushed away by agency staff. An effective system provides prospective parents with the tools to self-screen in or out. When applicants are empowered to make their own decisions, they are more likely to speak positively about the agency to family, friends and co-workers.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **Developing brochure materials can be assigned to the intake workgroup. The workgroup should generate specific ideas for the brochure, including a true/false quiz or another attempt to encourage self-selection, as well as a welcoming letter and basic information about the local children in care.**

What kind of tracking occurs?

Many agencies fail to track resource family development from the first phone call through the approval process. An agency might maintain a big binder with separate pages for every caller, but it often lacks detail about participation in orientation or pre-service training. A simple spreadsheet can collect and organize critical data. Some jurisdictions have either created or purchased software that helps to track prospective parents through the process. Agencies rarely keep records of successful recruiting efforts that capture how prospective parents navigate the development process from intake through certification. A caller is not successfully recruited until a home study is completed and a child has been placed. Tracking applicants through the process will assist in identifying the recruitment strategies that are most effective in bringing families in and continuing through the process. See Appendix 8 for a sample monthly call tracking form that supervisors may submit to management to help prevent prospective resource families from falling through the cracks.

What happens to non-English speakers?

To cast a wide net in search of appropriate resource families, agencies must accommodate non-English speaking callers. Different jurisdictions might include populations that speak multiple languages, so it is important to collect accurate information about how many children from each community are entering the child welfare system, and how many resource parents from that community have already been approved. This information will enable workers to design effective targeted appeals, create materials, translate forms, record appropriate voicemail messages for prospects and have staff fluent in the language ready to receive and work with the identified population.

Orientation Overview

After a prospective resource parent has contacted an agency, the next step is to ensure that they attend an orientation or information session. As with intake, the orientation process reform can be conducted effectively through a dedicated workgroup. It may be a good idea to create a single workgroup for both intake and orientation because they are closely linked. This is particularly important in a large agency that separates these functions into different units.

Like intake, orientation is a continuation of recruitment. You have gotten the prospective family interested enough to call, now you must continue to recruit and support them throughout the process. The orientation should also emphasize screening-in applicants, welcoming all questions and presenting a positive public image of the agency. Orientation is an early step in the approval process, so prospective resource parents should not feel overwhelmed or discouraged from continuing by receiving excessive information about rules, regulations, restrictions, reimbursements or mental health diagnoses for children in care. Some agencies distribute the entire handout packet for their10-week pre-service training class along with all of their home study forms, documents and checklists during orientation. This means that prospective resource parents might receive a massive binder full of paperwork to complete—a daunting challenge that could turn away promising prospective parents.

Agencies should not make it difficult for prospective parents to meet the orientation requirement. If prospective parents are unable to attend a scheduled session, providing the information by appointment in the family's home or in the office is another option. Some agencies will conduct orientation over the phone or provide the family with a DVD. The idea is to reduce barriers for prospective parents, making it as easy as possible to complete the required steps.

What is the purpose of orientation?

As part of recruitment, orientation brings prospective resource parents into the agency to learn more about fostering and adopting so they can make informed decisions. Orientation should be considered a general introduction that explains the certification process and what it would be like to foster or adopt

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **Ask workgroup members to anonymously attend orientations in other localities (or visit private agencies) to learn about different approaches. They should also attend one of their own orientations and imagine how it would be experienced by a prospective resource parent.**

a child. It is also an opportunity for an agency to reassure prospective parents that they can become successful resource parents with support from the agency as an ongoing partner. Consider what specific information would be relevant to a prospective parent at this point in the process to help them continue in the process.

What information is covered during orientation?
Most agencies struggle to limit the amount of information presented at orientation and to make sure the right information is included. Although orientation time may count toward required pre-service training, sessions should last no more than two hours and ideally should be completed in about 90 minutes. Staff should be available after each session to follow up with individuals and answer questions. Effective orientation should include the following:

- Local information about the specific types of children in care such as ages, races, genders, sibling group sizes and special needs;

- Stories about actual children, along with pictures or videos;

- Friendly and welcoming content that clearly explains each step of the certification process;

- Information about eligibility that is presented respectfully;

- Roles of the resource parent, including working toward reunification in partnership with the birth parent;

- Foster/adoptive parent speakers, youth speakers to do a short presentation;

- Specific information about the next step in the process so prospective parents know what will happen once the orientation is over; and

- Language at no more than a seventh-grade reading level.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **In addition to limiting the total number of handouts, agencies should ensure that all paperwork is readable and up to date. Provide tools such as a "Roadmap to Certification" with the steps of the licensing process to help prospective applicants navigate their way through the process.**

What is required for orientation set up?

Creating a successful orientation involves more than distributing session materials. The orientation venue itself should be welcoming—preferably a clean, bright, accessible meeting space with easy parking where a staff member greets participants when they arrive. Workgroups can brainstorm ideas for creating a welcoming space and can interview current resource parents for additional input. The orientation room should be set up before prospective resource parents arrive to ensure that workers are not distracted.

Every orientation should include snacks and drinks for participants if possible. Nonperishable snacks can be bought in bulk to ensure adequate stock and reduce waste, since it may be difficult to estimate exact numbers for each session. There should be enough space and plenty of chairs so that everyone feels welcome. There should also be pictures of the children awaiting homes (along with background information) posted on the walls or projected through a slide show to begin creating connections with prospective resource parents.

Who should represent the agency during orientation?

By sharing their experiences during orientation, current resource parents can provide a powerful voice that can help prospective parents better understand the challenges and rewards they would face as foster or adoptive parents. One agency instituted an orientation panel made up of staff members, a resource parent and a former foster child to provide a variety of perspectives. Prospective parents appreciate hearing from people with resource family experience who have successfully completed the certification process, and it enables them to envision their future role. It is also helpful to have an agency leader present during orientation sessions to thank participants for their interest, to stress the importance of fostering and adopting and to demonstrate that the agency values its resource parents.

Are there special provisions for kinship families?

The profile of kinship parents is often different from that of other resource parents. Kinship parents may already be caring for relative children in their home and may not need an orientation meeting to determine whether they want to continue caring for the child(ren). If orientation is required before beginning pre-service training, or if it appears that a kinship family would benefit from the information, an individual orientation session should be offered at the agency, at the family's home or by phone.

In most cases, kinship caregivers may benefit from a personalized orientation to answer their questions and concerns that have arisen with the emergency placement of the child. One jurisdiction created

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **The best way to keep prospective parents on track is to limit the time before the second step and to stay in touch with prospective parents. If a caller has to wait two weeks for orientation, send them a thank you letter and give them a reminder call about the orientation.**

a customized orientation exclusively for kinship caregivers that focused on their immediate needs. Certification for kinship parents should be expedited since they are already caring for or interested in a specific relative child.

How should orientations be scheduled?
Orientation should be offered as frequently as possible based on an agency's size and available resources. A large urban agency may offer more than one session per week. While that may not be feasible for smaller agencies, no interested caller should have to wait more than two weeks for orientation because a long delay will reduce the likelihood of attendance.

Orientation sessions should be offered in multiple locations that are accessible by public transportation and have adequate parking. If an agency lacks such facilities, the orientation workgroup should investigate potential locations that may be used for free, such as a meeting room in a public library, church or school. These locations will also be needed for trainings.

In large urban areas, sessions should be rotated through different neighborhoods and offered at varying times during the day, evenings and weekends to accommodate different schedules. There should also be a special focus on serving neighborhoods that generate the greatest number of children entering care. Taking the orientation out of the office to the neighborhood can go a long way toward engaging the community as a partner in expanding the pool of foster and adoptive homes in targeted communities.

Pre-Service Training

What kind of tracking process exists?
After completing orientation, participants who remain enthusiastic about becoming resource parents move on to the next step of pre-service training. Many agencies require detailed applications from prospective parents who want to continue; however, we have found that contact information is still all that is needed at this point in the process.

When planning orientation or pre-service training, agencies should not require prospective parents to bring an invitation with them in order to attend because if they lose the invitation, they will not come. The agency should make every effort to design a clear and simple process that is easy to navigate, including frequent follow-ups to reduce attrition during the interval between orientation and pre-service training. Following orientation, prospective parents should not have to wait more than a month to begin pre-service training and they should receive a reminder phone call or post card a day or two beforehand. Ideally this call should be made by the same staff member who took the prospective parent's initial call, or who taught their orientation class.

To oversee the resource parent development process, it is important that agencies maintain a clear tracking system that monitors each prospective parent's progress and the associated staffing assignments. The tracking function helps organize the entire process and adds a layer of accountability. If possible, it should be accessible through a shared drive on the agency's network. Instituting computer-based tracking may pose a challenge to some agencies, but it also provides an opportunity for staff to help design a new tracking system. Staff input will help the agency determine what information is needed to help develop an adequate supply of resource parents, without becoming burdensome to collect and manage. Overly complex tracking forms will quickly fall out of use. For an effective prospective parent tracking form example, see Appendix 9.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **During orientation, participants should be invited to begin pre-service training at a particular time and place. Interested participants can leave behind their tabletop nametags with a checkmark, or sign-up sheets can be passed out for upcoming pre-service training sessions.**

Pre-service training often uses a standardized curriculum such as MAPP, PRIDE or PATH. While most curricula cover similar content, it is the execution of the training experience that makes a difference in retaining prospective parents through the training cycle and provides the participants with an impactful developmental experience. Pre-service training, in general, serves several purposes and is much more than a training event:

- It is a continuation of the recruitment process;
- It is community education about the foster care/adoption/kinship programs;
- It continues the self-selection process and provides additional information to the prospective parents;
- It is the beginning of the mutual assessment process; and
- It is the continuation of forming a relationship with the agency.

Here are some tips to make a prospective family's experience a positive and successful one during pre-service training:

- **Have awesome trainers.** Energetic, enthusiastic, skilled and knowledgeable trainers can make a huge difference at this point in the process.

- **Use foster/adoptive/kinship parents as co-trainers and on panels.** These resource parents should represent the values, skills, attitudes and motivations that make great foster/adoptive/kinship families.

- **Use youth and birth parent speakers.** They are always the highlight of any training session when they are included.

- **Be flexible about your schedule and your location.** Offer training during evenings, weekends, and in various community locations that are easy for the public to find and park.

- **Be forgiving with attendance.** It would be difficult for any of us to commit to a lengthy schedule of classes. If prospective parents have to miss a session or two, do not penalize them by making them begin the process over. Allow them to make up one-on-one or during another series. Do not create barriers for the families. Remember that the families may need to flex their work schedules and use vacation time to care for the children that are placed in their home.

- **Help prospective parents believe they can be successful.** Too often, trainers feel compelled to use scare tactics and share the worst-case scenarios with families to ensure that they will be able to handle the children. While information about the children's special needs is critical to present, encouraging families to network, seek support and educate themselves will motivate them to continue with the process and to believe that they can be great foster/adoptive parents.

- **Have additional staff or resource parents assist with the training event.** It is very helpful to have a few extra hands to sign-in families, serve refreshments, and answer questions before and after the event. This allows the trainers to focus on training without ignoring the prospective families' needs.

- **Be patient and sensitive about class content, activities and homework.** The pre-service training content can be powerful and emotional. For some participants, it may be the first time they have heard in-depth information about physical or sexual abuse, or their stereotypes of birth families may be challenged. Agency staff are often frustrated and disappointed when participants do not readily embrace the agency's values or practices. No applicant comes to the agency 100 percent ready to be a foster, adoptive or kinship parent. It is the agency's responsibility to develop prospective families into capable resource families. Pre-service training is only a small part of their developmental process. Other opportunities to develop and educate the family on a one-on-one basis lie ahead during the home study process.

- **Recognize the role that past learning experiences and culture play in the classroom.** For some participants, it may have been years since they have been in a classroom. This may not be the most comfortable experience for them. Fears about public speaking, reading out loud, personal disclosure and language barriers can make training a stressful event. In addition, an individual's cultural values, norms and rules may inhibit them from discussing topics such as sex or childhood experiences publically with strangers.

intake → orientation → pre-service training → **home study** → certification

Home Study Overview

The next step is the home study, which may run concurrently with training, but frequently occurs after pre-service training is complete. The home study may be the least standardized step in the development process. A comprehensive inquiry might include a 30-page psycho-social assessment that details a prospective parent's background and family life, and considers how to best match children. A less rigorous approach might only require a three- to five-page checklist of basic safety and security concerns with almost no information about the personalities or backgrounds of the prospective resource parents. In general, thorough home studies enable workers to identify strengths and limitations, build a relationship with the family, and continue the education of the family. This ultimately allows the agency to appropriately match families with children, improving the chance of permanency if reunification fails.

With any agency, it is important to understand how the home study process is managed. In some jurisdictions, workers rely on families to fill out the home study document themselves, thus missing the opportunity to learn about the families with whom they hope to partner. Requiring families to complete their own home studies may not result in full disclosure and it also assumes a level of literacy and comfort with writing that may not be the case. There is some debate about which home study format is best. The most commonly used are MAPP, SAFE and PRIDE. Depending on how they are used, all three are effective, although SAFE requires more advanced reading and writing skills. Agencies must recognize that the home study formats and documents are only as good as the social worker completing them. Completing the home study of a prospective family requires high skill levels in the areas of assessment, interviewing, relationship-building, organization, time management and writing.

What is the purpose of the home study?

Without clear standards, home studies vary considerably by jurisdiction. Some agencies consider home studies as a formality for ascertaining safety and may use a short, formulaic approach. Others consider home studies as an opportunity to learn more about prospective parents so they can better match resource families with children in care.

The home study should be a mutual assessment process in which the prospective family is engaged to explore their strengths, limitations, values, motivations and expectations. It must be done with the family, not to or for the family. The goal is to have the agency and family reach the same conclusion at the end of the process; either the family is ready or not ready to be a resource family. This process must be done within the context of the family's culture and without the social worker's values as the determining factor.

It is critical that the prospective families are prepared for the home study experience. It is an intrusive process that requires applicants to share very personal and sometimes difficult information. Social workers should review the process with the family explaining to them what is being requested and why. Providing applicants with a guide or handout that reviews the process will make the home study feel less mysterious and encourage the applicant to be more collaborative during the process.

How are home studies assigned?

At times, foster care/adoption staff with responsibilities in addition to completing home studies may have difficulty managing competing priorities. In particular, for staff that struggle with organization or time management, or if they find other tasks more appealing, home studies may not be their top priority, and a backlog can quickly develop. Some agencies hire contractors to complete home studies, however, this can prevent agency workers from developing relationships and trust with resource parents in order to guide placements. Using contractors can make it difficult to establish practice standards because of their temporary status. However, if contractors are needed to meet the demand, they should be used to complete adoptive home studies, providing the prospective parents with the time needed to answer questions and concerns. Agency staff should be used for foster and kinship families. In kinship cases, the family may already be caring for a child and have specific questions regarding agency practice. The family may also need a liaison to the child's social worker and help navigating the system.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **Interviews or focus groups with current resource parents may reveal what has worked well and what felt overly invasive. This baseline information will help drive any necessary reforms.**

How long should it take to conduct a home study?

There is debate about the number of home studies a worker can be expected to complete per month. The number will vary depending on the job description. If workers are only responsible for home studies and recertification, completion of home studies can occur more quickly than if staff are also responsible for intake, orientation, training, support and placement. Backlogs grow when workers passively wait for required documents or wait for families to complete various steps (such as fingerprinting) on their own. When workers actively guide families and facilitate the process, home studies move more quickly. Whenever possible, agencies can deploy administrative support staff to gather and follow up on the documentation needed from each family.

Here are some tips that can help move the home study process along more quickly and efficiently and serve to engage families as partners in the process:

- When you are on a home visit, schedule the next visit with the family at that time.

- Carry an extra set of blank forms and documents with you in case the applicant needs more, has lost theirs, or has made a mistake in filling out the first set. Don't make them feel embarrassed if the forms are messy or incomplete.

- Encourage the applicant to use tools like “Get Started Now!” and the “Certification Roadmap” to help them be actively engaged in the certification process.

- Give the family a self-directed safety audit at the first visit. Let them identify what needs to be fixed or installed and begin working on it prior to your own inspection visit.

- Assist the family to complete the home study document. Paperwork is difficult enough for a seasoned social worker to complete. Imagine being an applicant who sees all those forms for the first time, especially if English is not your first language. Be helpful, patient and supportive.

- Use a printout of the home study as a guide for note-taking during certification home visits.

- Provide the family with blank medical forms at the first home visit so they can have them filled out by their doctor. Write the name of each applicant or household member on the forms in big, bold letters. This will remind them of which forms need to be completed and ensures that the documents will be matched to the applicant if they are submitted separately.

- Be proactive—don’t wait for the applicants to call you. Call them first—they may have questions or concerns.

- Use checklists like “Get Started Now” to keep track of returned forms and documents. Write yourself reminders to follow up on any documents that are outstanding using your desk or computer calendar.

- Try to identify any history of mental illness, physical issues or criminal records early in the process because it takes time to gather records and documentation.

- Mail or email homework assignments to the family with due dates.

- Use genogram/ecomap tools to help access and organize family information. This will also help create good notes for writing the home study.

- Consider utilizing electronic fingerprinting to streamline this process. Complete fingerprints during the training process so as not to require an additional appointment for the applicant.

- Send the agenda for your home visit to the family in advance so they will be prepared, and confirm the date and time with them.

A checklist of appropriate home study requirements can be generated or customized by workgroups to streamline the process. See Appendix 10 for a comprehensive home study template.

Certification

What paperwork is required for certification?
To complete certification, resource parents usually must provide financial documents, a criminal background check, a safety inspection of the home and additional identification forms such as a marriage license or divorce decree and social security number. Some agencies require even more paperwork, including proof of health and car insurance, letters of recommendation, pet records and school records for any child in the home. Other certification policies vary by jurisdiction. Agencies should examine the purpose of each required document and consider streamlining their approach to promote compatibility and assure safety, without needlessly burdening or discouraging prospective parents. It is the role of the social worker completing the home study to assist the family through the process, helping them to overcome barriers and roadblocks. For more information about accelerating certification, see Appendix 11.

Paperwork can be daunting. If an applicant has reading or writing issues, is not proficient in English, or does not understand child welfare lingo, they can be easily deterred. A thorough review of all paperwork, forms, documents, and references that are used in the home study process is important to update and streamline the process, and to prevent unnecessarily discouraging applicants.

The following questions can assist in your critical review of the paperwork:

- **What requested information is duplicated on multiple forms?** Ask for information only one time. One jurisdiction reviewed all their forms and recognized that some pieces of information were requested over 10 times! This creates unnecessary paperwork for the applicants and social workers.

- **What jargon or lingo used on the forms is not commonly known or understood by the public?** Simple terminology like, "DOB" or "AKA" may not be known by the applicants and they may feel too embarrassed to ask for help.

- **Are directions clear and concise?** Provide simple, direct instructions that will assist the applicants in completing forms. One site provided applicants with a guide to complete the home study as well as a completed mock application so that they could see what was being requested.

- **Is the information being requested really necessary?** In some jurisdictions, mounds of information and documentation are requested from the applicant but not considered during the approval process. Only ask for information that is essential to the process.

Using Data to Drive Development

Remember that delays in the certification process discourage prospective parents from continuing. Collecting and tracking development data over time allows the agency to keep abreast of unnecessary delays and is, therefore, key to creating a successful resource family development process. Capturing this data will reinforce the changes that are being instituted and highlighting progress will give workers a sense of accomplishment.

Each stage of resource family development work should be monitored and then presented through an accessible one-page “dashboard” that can be easily updated. Prospective parent flow can be tracked through the following data:

- Number of intake calls coming in per month;
- Nature of the callers’ interests–foster care/adoption/kinship;
- Number of prospective parents who attend orientation;
- Number of prospective parents who attend pre-service training;
- Number of prospective parents who complete pre-service training; and
- Number of prospective parents who become certified.

In addition to prospective parent information, it is also helpful to track agency processes, including:

- Elapsed time between each step;
- Details (how/when) of follow-up with prospective parents; and
- Source of inquiry mentioned by prospective parent (referrals, media, publicity campaigns, etc.).

A dashboard that captures this information would enable supervisors to better manage development by updating their units on the average time elapsed throughout the process, and the amount of follow up needed to support the resource family pipeline. Ideally, summary tracking data could be accessed by workers on a shared network drive, although a hardcopy version would also be useful for agencies with less advanced information technology. For a sample summary tracking document, see Appendix 12.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: **Setting clear, realistic goals for progress is critical to successful quality assurance. For example, if a unit is averaging seven months from the time of first phone call to certification, an immediate goal could be to reduce the average to five months within a year. The goal should be set publicly so that the unit is aware of the target and can report on progress periodically.**

Tracking Performance Enhances Quality Assurance

Tracking each stage of resource family development and publishing results through an accessible, brief monthly report will support new policy and practice as people across the agency learn more about the process. Ideally, the tracking system should support management and front-line staff by enabling supervisors to isolate resource family development data by worker, and identify bottlenecks as well as points where the process is effective.

Strong Communication Needed for New Approach

Changing attitudes about resource families and implementing new practices requires ongoing communication across the agency. The appendices included in this guide are designed to help staff and management capture and share information more effectively—and to clarify the different roles required to achieve resource family improvements. Publishing a monthly newsletter is one way for workgroups to raise awareness about new initiatives and invite participation.

IV

recruitment

FINDING PROSPECTIVE RESOURCE FAMILIES

While the development process creates and sustains a pool of qualified resource parents, recruitment is the engine that keeps everything moving. This section examines the different types of recruitment and offers some guidelines for succeeding with each approach.

Understand Current Recruitment Efforts

There are three main types of resource family recruitment: general, targeted and child-specific. Most jurisdictions focus primarily on general recruiting, attempting to reach as many families as possible. However, spreading the message widely is less important than spreading the message to the right people. All states are required to make child-specific recruitment efforts, although the intensity and quality of effort vary widely.

General recruitment consists of basic, undifferentiated outreach to the public, conveying the message that homes are needed for children in foster care or awaiting adoption. The goal is to disperse the message widely and to generate as many phone calls as possible from people who want to help—regardless of qualification or the type of children they wish to foster or adopt. Common examples of general recruitment tools are: television/radio public service announcements, billboards, booths at community events, advertisement in newspapers and social media.

Targeted recruitment routes the recruitment message directly to the people who are most likely to follow through to become foster or adoptive parents for specific types of children. It focuses on families in targeted communities where homes are needed as well as finding families with specific backgrounds that match the backgrounds and needs of children awaiting homes. Targeted recruitment reflects a clear understanding of a community's needs based on the profiles of children awaiting homes. Common examples of targeted recruitment are: placing human interest stories in neighborhood publications, engaging teens as recruiters, holding "fosterware parties," partnering with a faith organization in a specific neighborhood and customizing recruitment materials to reflect targeted groups of children.

Child-specific recruitment develops an individual recruitment plan for a specific child or sibling group in need of a temporary or permanent family. For example, the child's parental rights may have been terminated and no family has been identified or a youth may be stepping down from a group home who needs specialized care. Child-specific recruitment is often done as a partnership between the child's caseworker and the recruiter. The process usually begins with a conversation with the child to determine who the key people are in the child's life that could be explored as family options. In addition, a thorough review of the child's case record often uncovers important relationships and connections. Customized materials such as flyers or brochures are developed to highlight the child's personality, likes/dislikes, activities and needs.

The initial step in assessing an agency's recruitment program is to determine who is responsible for the recruiting function. In many instances, no individual staff member is devoted to the task full time, which may limit effectiveness and consistency.

It is also important to understand the agency's current approach, including:

- What is the recruitment budget?
- What type of outreach (if any) is done?
- What marketing materials and media are used? How are they developed?
- Is there a strategic plan for recruitment that drives activities for the year?

This information may be gathered through a series of interviews with supervisors and workers, individually or through focus groups. The research should lead to a new understanding of recruitment by revealing gaps in finding, tracking and following up with prospective resource families. For help developing a comprehensive recruitment plan, see Appendix 13. There is a solid body of research about effective recruitment; for recommended reading, see Appendix 14.

The Case for a Strategic Recruitment Plan

In many agencies, recruitment is often approached in a haphazard way with staff doing the same activities and events from previous years. Unfortunately, this has yielded the same result–an inadequate supply of resource parents. An annual plan for recruitment will eliminate the use of overused and ineffective strategies when written with specific goals and outcomes delineated from the beginning. All activities must move the agency toward its identified goals and outcomes.

Recruitment plans must:

- Have specific goals and outcomes identifying the types of children targeted and the numbers of specific families that are being targeted. (Example: Targeted homes for African-American boys, ages 12-15. Goal in 12 months: 20 newly certified homes);
- Use data to determine what recruitment goals should be established;
- Be written in great detail with dates, time/location, materials needed, estimated budget, contact persons and responsible agency personnel;
- Have activities that build on one another, month after month, to keep the message going out to the community;
- Be community based, creating solid partnerships with local resources;
- Be culturally sensitive with appropriate messaging and images that accurately reflect the children in need of homes; and
- Eliminate or limit the use of booths and tables, which are general recruitment in nature.

A well written and executed recruitment plan is the beginning of success!

Structure Recruitment Support According to Available Resources

Some agencies may not be able to afford the luxury of a dedicated recruiter and recruitment may be divided among several staff. In that case, developing work plans that are doable with clear action steps and timeframes is critical. Supervision is essential to support staff in managing the competing priorities of the primary roles along with recruitment responsibilities.

An overall recruitment approach might include the following:

- Designate and fund staff (supervisors, recruiters, adoption workers).
  – Review current staffing;
  – Examine data to recommend how many staff to hire and train;
  – Create job descriptions; and
  – Help with interviewing and hiring, as needed.

- Develop staff training for general, targeted and child-specific recruiters, as well as training for supervisors.
  – Create curricula;
  – Contract with additional consultants, as needed;
  – Create paperwork and handouts for use;
  – Develop strategic recruitment plans that include targets and customized activities, and that identify responsible staff and outline budgets;
  – Develop plans for responding to interested parties after each recruitment activity; and
  – Develop monthly reports for use by workers, supervisors and management to ensure accountability.

- Provide ongoing coaching and technical assistance.
  – Review monthly reports with supervisor;
  – Assist with budgeting choices;
  – Create structure for supervision; and
  – Provide coaching and support.

Supervisors can support recruitment through consistent work plans and results tracking. Standardization might include a weekly reporting form that details contacts and captures recruiting activity, along with a monthly reporting form which focuses on results. For sample recruitment reports, see Appendix 15.

Specific Skills Required for Recruitment

Many jurisdictions struggle to define recruitment and to provide clear job expectations. Some agencies assume that recruiters will act as public relations or media liaisons while also doing general recruitment. Ideally, the recruiter role should resemble a community organizer, mobilizing neighborhoods and interest groups and finding partners to help locate promising resource family candidates. Recruiters must be organized, self-starters with an abundance of enthusiasm, savvy and creativity. A determined person who will be relentless at following up leads and making cold calls, and who has no issue with working nights and weekends, can launch any agency's recruitment program to a new level.

For an exercise that promotes creative outreach for recruiters, see Appendix 16. Good candidates may lack a background in social work, but they can be brought up to speed by attending new worker trainings and shadowing experienced workers. It is also important to provide recruiters with opportunities for professional development and peer support through training or attending conferences. For a sample recruiter job description, see Appendix 17.

Best Practice Recruitment Models

Recruitment reform for a state or jurisdiction will vary depending on local circumstances. Potential strategies can range from working with a single "model" county or office that acts as a pilot, to engaging multiple counties or offices simultaneously or sequentially, to providing statewide support. In each case, the goal is to enable each agency to build ongoing recruitment capacity that will meet the specific needs of the children served. The following section reviews the three primary recruitment formats.

General Recruitment

General recruitment should be considered the baseline communication required to inform stakeholders and the public about the need for foster and adoptive families. It is often the most costly type of outreach, yet research has shown that general recruitment alone rarely attracts parents who will complete the approval process successfully, particularly for those children and youth most in need of families. To develop a balanced approach to recruitment, jurisdictions should dedicate about 15 percent of recruiting budget and personnel time to general recruitment, which includes purchasing advertising. See Appendix 18 for a list of general recruitment ideas that accommodate a range of budgets.

General recruitment may be accomplished more efficiently at the state level, or in county-administered systems, through access to reduced bulk media rates, including television, radio, internet, billboard and print advertising. State-led general recruitment should support a broad, consistent message and approach, while targeted and child-specific recruitment should remain local, focusing on specific populations.

Targeted Recruitment

For planning purposes, agencies should focus the majority (about 60 percent) of their recruitment budget on targeted recruitment. While this approach may attract fewer inquiries from prospective parents than a general recruitment campaign, the rate of completion should be significantly higher and the prospective families will be applying to foster and adopt your highest-need children. In general, between 5 and10 percent of interested callers complete the certification process and become resource parents, although yields should increase with greater focus on targeted recruitment.

General recruitment can lead to licensing any prospective parent who expresses interest, based on the belief that more is better. In some jurisdictions, this has resulted to large numbers of families awaiting infants, with little interest in the pool of teens awaiting homes. Targeted recruitment uses community research and data to make educated choices about who to approach based on actual local needs. For instance, if a majority of children entering out-of-home care are between six and nine years old, then recruiters would want to target parents of grade-school children or community partners that serve that population. However, a closer look might reveal that the children most in need of homes are actually age 15 or older, because local grade-school children often find placements with relatives. In that situation, recruiters might look for prospective parents among high school parents, teachers, volunteers, coaches and after-school programs for teens. Targeted recruiting can also be based on children from ethnic or racial groups where there may be strong demand and short supply of resource families. Engage cultural organizations, using racially specific media, or approach minority-owned businesses and churches to help spread the word to the audience most likely to respond to the need.

One successful targeted recruiting tactic is to provide prospective parents with detailed, local information as a recruiting tool. It is more powerful to approach a prospective parent with specific data rather than with the message that thousands of children across the state need homes. Examples include:

- Four children in your elementary school are in need of a home.
- Twelve children in your neighborhood are removed from their homes every year and will have to move to a new neighborhood, away from their school and friends.
- There are 17 tribal children in care who have to live in non-tribal households.

Specific stories can motivate people to share information with friends and recruit on behalf of the agency, even if they are not interested in becoming a foster or adoptive parent. Specific training helps recruiters manage broad contact networks, follow up on leads and generate goodwill. Like a community organizer, a good recruiter mobilizes people through education and by building awareness that resource families can make a difference in the lives of children. For more information about targeted recruitment techniques, including approaches for teens and siblings, see Appendix 19.

Child-Specific Recruitment

Child-specific recruitment is the process of designing a customized plan to recruit a family for a specific child where no placement resource has been readily identified. It is much more than just creating a flyer and dropping it off at a few churches. Child-specific recruitment has five components:

1. Building a relationship with the child and engaging the child in recruiting a family.

2. Exploring placement options with relatives and other connections by “mining” the file.

3. Creating a personal recruitment team for the child comprised of interested people such as relatives, friends, school personnel and current/past caregivers.

4. Exploring placement options outside of the child's family based on the child's strengths, needs and background using media and other customized strategies.

5. "Growing Connections" by involving the youth in activities of interest or mentorship programs, or for youth in group care, by connecting them with a "visiting family."

Building relationships with the child: An essential task of child-specific recruitment is to engage the youth. The child or youth should always be involved in their own recruitment activities because they know themselves best. All too often, a child or teen becomes aware of the adoption plan when the first visit is scheduled with his/her prospective family. Investing time to build a relationship with the youth is key to building trust between the youth and social worker. In addition, eliciting ideas from the child will help gain the child's buy-in to adoption, move the preparation process along and empower the child to transition to a family s/he has assisted in locating.

Too often social workers and recruiters discontinue the search for a family when the youth states, "I don't want to be adopted!" Building a relationship can go a long way to encouraging and supporting the youth to take a chance on a new family.

Finding family connections: Child-specific recruiting requires dedicated and creative workers who are able to reach out and connect with people on a child's behalf as a spokesperson. Family-finding work should begin when a child first enters care and focus on identifying relatives, friends and other connections (often called, "fictive kin") for potential placement. The process should continue throughout the life of the case. For many teens, family-finding work requires digging into the past and rediscovering relationships that could provide support. Interviewing the youth and using ecopmaps and genograms can be of tremendous help in identifying relatives and important connections.

Children who are freed for adoption and not in a pre-adoptive placement should receive regular reviews from caseworkers and supervisors to ensure that no family members (or fictive kin) have been overlooked. In addition to case reviews, workers should discuss connections with family and friends directly with the children in care, since they may have had contact with people not previously known to the social worker. Connecting with relatives and others, who may have been contacted earlier in the case but declined placement, may uncover individuals capable of providing a permanent family for the child or may lead the recruiter to other possibilities. Adoption workers who are responsible for locating permanent placements should receive training about child-specific recruitment strategies, along with resource family recruiters since they share the same goal.

Building a recruitment team: Creating a recruitment team to work on behalf of the child is another critical component of child-specific recruitment. The child's worker and recruiter are obvious members of the team. However, an interested teacher, grandmother, previous foster parent or CASA volunteer can participate as well to spread the word, and can assist in seeking leads for possible placements for the child.

In some cases, placement with family or friends is unavailable—relatives may be struggling or difficult to locate, or the child may have extreme medical or psychological needs. Workers should be aware of community resources that can help them find adoptive and foster parents, such as Wendy's Wonderful Kids, which has staff in 50 states and in Canada who are trained in child-specific recruiting. Many agencies refer child-specific recruiting cases to private partners like Family Builders.

Using media and other options: Increasingly, agencies have turned to media, the Internet and other customized methods to assist in child-specific recruitment. Human interest stories in newspapers or interviews on television or on the radio have been successful for some children. Do not assume that every teen will turn an opportunity down to tell their story. For those youth who are reticent to be in the public eye, a personalized DVD can be made and shown only to an interested family privately. Creative use of the Internet has been helpful in spreading a child's story nationwide. Many agencies have seen the value in having the child create their own recruitment brochures and portfolios.

Recruiters should place an updated photo listing with AdoptUsKids and with the state adoption listings for every child who is available for adoption. Usage research shows that no state lists more than 17 percent of its waiting children with the AdoptUsKids service, which has a success rate of 40 percent, despite being used for difficult-to-place children with special needs. Recruiters may want to rewrite profiles, creating a more compelling, distinctive description that will help connect the right child with the right family. It is also important to include a good photograph, in which the child appears comfortable, in order to generate interest. For more information about photo listings, see Appendix 22 as well as the "Answering the Call" Series from AdoptUsKids (http://www.adoptuskids.org/resourceCenter/atcPublications.aspx).

Once revised to better represent the children seeking families, photo listings can be leveraged through multiple outreach channels. Recruiters can produce a variety of outreach materials, such as bookmarks with a child's picture and a tagline like "Mark wants a family to read to him too," which could be distributed at the local public library. They could also create business cards with a child's picture and tagline, and solicit local merchants to help distribute them. If the child is old enough, they could be asked to approve or even help design outreach products. All recruiting materials should also include the worker's phone number and email address.

Remember, it is not enough to simply create a profile. Getting it into the hands of prospective parents who will respond to that child's need for a permanent family is the goal.

Growing connections: It is rare that a youth will be without any connections in their past or current life. But for some teens who have spent years in congregate care, they may have lost contact with family, have not made long-lasting friendships and have been isolated from the community. In these cases, it may be advantageous to create new relationships via a mentorship program such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Also, some agencies have a strong volunteer program or are able to connect a youth to an outreach program through the faith community, police department, or school district.

Growing connections based on a child's interests can be an effective recruiting technique. For instance, if a child loves animals, a recruiter might ask the local SPCA to share her story with their volunteers, or local veterinarians might share her story with clients by posting descriptive flyers. Perhaps the opportunity to volunteer at the vet's office or an animal shelter will help the child to interact with prospective parents with similar interests. A veterinarian may become interested in mentoring, or even adopting; other people visiting the office might also become interested in the child. The key is to introduce specific children to a network of like-minded people, engaging others to help in the recruiting process and improve the odds of finding an appropriate home.

Child-specific recruiting requires creative and persistent workers who encourage families to connect with a child they have never met. It is important for recruiters to develop a deep understanding of the children on their caseloads by speaking with the children's caseworkers; developing relationships with the child to learn what they like and dislike; understanding their personality and their strengths; and learning about their needs, medical difficulties and placement history. See Appendix 20 for a case file review tool that supports child-specific recruitment and see Appendix 21 for additional ideas about child-specific recruitment.

Likewise, youth who are in need of specialized placements or who have no family resources can also benefit from child-specific recruitment. Several jurisdictions have instituted child-specific recruitment for their youth who have been assigned APPLA as a case plan goal and will be emancipating without a family. In those instances, child-specific recruitment was used to provide the youth with connections and supports as they transitioned to adulthood.

For more information on child-specific recruitment, visit the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption website at www.davethomasfoundation.org.

Follow Up on Referrals

It is critical to have in place a plan to respond to interested parties once the calls on a child's behalf begin. Too often, individuals become excited at the idea of adopting a specific child only to be met with "we can't tell you anything because of confidentiality" or "You don't have a home study done yet, I can't share any more information with you." Consider the following questions when planning your response strategy:

- What information can be given to a caller who has no home study completed?
- How can we refer the family for a home study?
- What information can be given to a caller who has a home study completed?
- What will the protocol be to obtain the home study from another agency?
- How will requests to meet the child be handled?

Ensuring that prospective parents are handled professionally and sensitively will help to maintain their interest and enthusiasm for the child.

V

support

KEEPING RESOURCE FAMILIES ON BOARD

After resource families have been recruited and developed, agencies face the challenge of providing ongoing support to help ensure successful adoptive and foster placements. This section reviews the range of measures that enable agencies and key partners to support and retain resource parents.

Understand Current Support Infrastructure and Available Resources

Effective support starts with a strong understanding of the importance of resource parents and respect for their critical role in creating permanence for children in care. The first step in assessing a jurisdiction's support system is identifying who has the responsibility for working with resource parents and in what ways are staff currently responding to the resource parents' needs. Many agencies have specific workers who carry a caseload of resource parents, just as caseworkers carry a caseload of children. These staff members are responsible for recertifying homes annually, troubleshooting when resource parents experience problems and checking in on resource families regularly. These workers may also assist with the placement of children and oversee required visitation. Jurisdictions without dedicated resource family support workers may rely on other caseworkers or clerical staff to provide support when needed. The support of resource parents rests with every staff member of the agency, not just the foster care or adoption staff. (This will be discussed later in this section.)

Conducting a utilization study enables jurisdictions to gain a clear picture of available homes and to efficiently plan resource allocation dedicated to resource family support. For a sample utilization study, see Appendix 23. In order to receive new applicants into the process, there must be adequate staff time available to process the applications and complete home studies. A utilization study can assist in "cleaning up" the caseloads of staff. Some families are not being used as placement resources due to restrictive placement parameters, administrative holds or staff concerns, yet these families are consuming precious staff time.

A utilization study begins by gathering information about all open homes and identifying those with current placements. Homes without placements should be considered individually to determine whether they should be closed. The process for examining homes should be done locally by managers, supervisors and workers, and should include phone calls or visits to understand why the resource parents have vacancies. This inventory promotes better placements by revealing how many homes are viable, since the number of homes ready for placement often diminishes over time due to families' changing circumstances. For example, if a family frequently fostered teen boys but their granddaughter had moved in, they might consider fostering a school-age girl. In another example, a family member's work shift changed from day to nights, limiting their availability for foster care. However, during a conversation with support staff, they agreed to try placing a teenager who could be left home alone at night with a young adult birth child of the foster parents.

Multiple Initiatives are Available to Support Resource Families

There are a number of leverage points that can be used to provide support to resource families, including:

- Board rates and flexible funding
- Respite care
- Support visits
- In-service training
- Recertification
- Placement
- Partnerships
  - Community
  - Inter-agency
  - Intra-agency
  - Family
- Exit surveys

Board rates and flexible funding: Board rates are frequently the first (and sometimes the only) thing that people associate with supporting resource parents. While rates are certainly important, national polls consistently show that resource parents prefer specific services that promote more successful placements over board rate increases. To better understand board rates in a particular jurisdiction, it is important to consider two factors: current rates (published in the USDA report, Expenditures on Children by Families (http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/ExpendituresonChildrenbyFamilies.htm) and the rate of change in payments. In places where board rates have been frozen over time, resource parents may feel under-appreciated and resentful. The annual USDA report helps evaluate rate level by establishing the average yearly cost of raising a child based on the child's age, the type of setting, and the region. See also: *Hitting the MARC: Establishing Foster Care Minimum Adequate Rates for Children,* by Children's Rights, National Foster Parent Association, University of Maryland School of Social Work, October 2007.

When examining board rates, it is important to clarify that they are designed to reimburse (rather than compensate) resource parents for the expense incurred providing care for children. The reimbursement concept honors the effort made by resource parents and may help agencies advocate for a raise in board rates. For instance, in explaining the rising costs of parenting, a children's services commissioner secured a board rate increase after citing the USDA report, and explaining to the legislature that it cost more to board a dog each day in that jurisdiction than to care for a foster child—and that children required more than food, water and "walks" from resource parents.

In addition to board rates, flexible funding can fill gaps and support resource parents. When available, these funds can enhance the quality of life for both children and resource parents by paying for items like a computer, a dress or ticket for a prom and after-school activities (which also provide respite for resource parents). Flexible funds may also cover needs outside of the home, including therapeutic and tutoring expenses, and can pay for house modifications to accommodate a child, such as building a wheelchair ramp or removing moldy carpet.

Respite care: One of the most frequent requests from resource parents is for respite care to provide relief from day-to-day stress. While most agencies have respite policies in place, resource parents frequently report that it is difficult to access. Respite can prevent child abuse or neglect, and reduce placement disruptions. It also promotes retention of foster and kinship homes and the adoption of special needs children. The National Foster Parent Association recommends that all foster parents receive at least two days per month of planned respite care. While that guideline may be difficult to accommodate, there is a continuum of formal and informal respite care that can provide relief: after-school activities or jobs for teens, summer camp, planned respite with a worker or other resource parent, or crisis respite that may salvage a troubled placement. For more creative respite ideas, see Appendix 24.

Agencies should encourage informal respite as an important way for resource parents to establish healthy boundaries and protect themselves from burnout. Finding adequate numbers of respite caregivers can be challenging since all care providers must pass criminal background checks and be fingerprinted. Agencies should maintain listings of cleared babysitters, especially those with expertise in caring for children with special needs. Resource parents should also be encouraged to arrange their own babysitting swaps. In addition to informal supports, all parents should learn about formal respite care options and who to contact during their pre-service training. All respite programs should be monitored to ensure that they are being used appropriately.

For more information about developing and running respite programs, see *Taking a Break: Creating Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Respite in Your Community*, published by the Collaboration to AdoptUsKids (http://www.adoptuskids.org/resourceCenter/publications/respiteManual.aspx).

Support visits: Support visits promote resource parent retention by surfacing problems before they escalate. In an agency with resource parent workers, dedicated workers may be responsible for resource family support visits, as well as home safety checks, recertification and help with reunification. In jurisdictions where workers are too busy for regular visits other than recertification, staff could still regularly contact resource parents by phone.

Some workers consider support visits excessively burdensome to resource parents, who may already struggle with over-taxed schedules. However, providing each resource parent with an assigned support worker ensures that every parent has a dedicated contact person so when a problem arises, they have someone familiar to call. The contact person should accommodate the resource parent's schedule by meeting at convenient times and locations. Support visits build a relationship between the support worker and resource parent, and this can significantly reduce disruptions. See Appendix 25 for a support visit form, which provides suggested agenda items for a variety of circumstances.

In-service training: In-service training is an effective, and often under-utilized, way to support resource parents who are required to receive annual training to maintain certification. Agencies can design a wide range of training materials that meet the needs of resource parents based on information gathered through periodic surveys conducted during support visits or recertification. In-service trainings can leverage a variety of resources, often free of charge. For example:

- The local fire department could provide training on home fire safety;
- The local police department might train parents about car seat usage;
- The local health department could offer training on communicable diseases, immunizations, childhood illnesses, etc.;
- Local business partners might provide sessions on helping teens find jobs;
- Local teachers might guide parents through effective strategies for homework help or navigating the IEP process;
- An agency therapist could work with parents on mental health issues in children, medication compliance and how to manage potential side effects; and
- Resource parents struggling with birth-parent visits might benefit from a panel session with successful, collaborative birth mothers and resource parents.

As issues emerge among resource families, support workers should maintain a running list of ideas for future training sessions.

In addition to presenting helpful content, effective training must also be accessible to resource parents. Providing childcare at trainings is important and can be offered in a variety of ways, such as enlisting caseworkers to entertain the children during the session, or creating a children's training event at the same time, which targets a particular age or special needs group. Providing a pleasant setting at different locations throughout the community with some snacks helps attract parents. Transportation support through bus passes or gas reimbursement can also boost attendance.

Foster, adoptive and kinship parents need immediate training to meet a child's unique needs. When a new issue, need or problem arises, the caregiver cannot afford to wait three to six months until training has been scheduled on the needed topic. Consequently, agencies need to offer families additional training resources via the Internet, community resources or one-on-one to ensure that little issues do not become big problems. While online training can be easy and convenient for emergent issues, it should not fulfill all training requirements. The benefit that caregivers experience from networking and developing supportive relationships with other foster, adoptive and kinship parents must also be considered when planning and implementing an in-service training program.

All of these strategies, as well as typical training offered at an agency, require outreach to parents through multiple channels. In addition to sending out general notices and reminders, staff should be aware of upcoming trainings and recommend specific sessions to resource parents who would benefit from them (or who need to keep up with licensing standards). Agencies should ensure that all eligible parent activities are counted toward their training requirement. For instance, if parents attend therapy with their child, or meet with a therapist for 10 minutes following their child's session, that time can be applied to their training requirement. Another strategy is to provide credit for participating in support groups or attending the Foster/Adoptive Parent Association monthly meeting.

Recertification: Recertification provides another opportunity to support resource parents. Support workers should have a clear understanding of resource family requirements in order to prepare parents for the recertification visit. If there is a safety hazard in the home or a change in household composition, the worker should be able to help the parent resolve the issue and prevent any lapse in certification or placement disruption. Workers should be able to schedule recertification far enough in advance to give the family time to correct any problems before the certification expires.

The recertification process is also another opportunity to continue the resource parents' growth and development. Review the successes and challenges the parents have encountered in the past year. Identify specific training or education that would help fill the gaps in their knowledge and skill. This may be a good time to review the number and types of children the resource parent has cared for and make any necessary adjustments.

Additionally, recertification is an opportunity to check in with resource parents regarding the services and support they are receiving from the agency. Some jurisdictions have created a satisfaction survey that is completed by the resource parent during recertification. It should include queries on the quality of communication and information received about children in their home, as well as rating the timeliness and appropriateness of services/supports they have received. Resource parents should also be asked about how well they have been included as part of the team; if they have been invited to court hearings and reviews and been given updates on the progress of the case. This survey can identify areas of support that need to be reformed in areas of the agency outside of the home development department.

Some jurisdictions recertify every home annually, although it is not required under federal law. Local regulations may require recertification every two or three years if families have a good track record and receive regular home visits. In many jurisdictions, recertification involves an excessive amount of paperwork. Agencies should consider how to simplify the process to make it a more pleasant experience for both the family and the social worker.

Placement: Placing the right child in the right home is a key component and driver of resource family support. Cooperation between a child's caseworker and support workers who are familiar with local resource parents leads to successful placements. Parents need to receive background information about the child, along with an explanation of what brought the child into care. Sharing information about the child's needs, possible visitation schedule, etc. assists in preparing the resource parent to care for the child.

Training for placement workers should include learning how to constructively discuss potential placements with families and children. Clearly explaining the reasoning behind a particular match will make resource parents more comfortable with a prospective placement, particularly one that differs from their expectations. Examples include:

- " I know how patient you are and that you have experience with substitute teaching. This child is going to need help with her school work and her reading skills are behind because she has not attended school regularly for years."

- "Your active lifestyle is a good match for this child because she loves running and dancing and we think she will feel comfortable in your home because of your dogs—she's a big animal lover."

Depending on their age, a child may also benefit from understanding the placement rationale. Caseworkers should avoid making promises to a child about permanence or reunification, but school-age children may feel more comfortable going to a home when they have received a clear explanation, such as:

- "We chose this family because we know you want to stay at your school."

- "We chose this family because the mother stays home during the day and she will be available after school to help you with your homework."

Jurisdictions have different approaches to placement. Some rely on children's caseworkers to make placement decisions, although they may be unfamiliar with the pool of available families, while others may work primarily with resource families and lack experience with specific children. Without a system for sharing information, the risk of failed placement increases—disrupting children and families as well as caseworkers who must quickly find alternatives. To improve coordination and reduce confusion about roles, one licensing unit established a simple rotation schedule for placement duty: each day one worker became the lead for placements, creating a single point of contact. Agencies can also improve coordination by developing annotated listings of available homes that are maintained on a shared drive that can be easily accessed and updated by staff.

Partnerships: Community: Engaging the broader community is one of the most effective ways to support resource parents. Sharing success stories with the public about resource families builds awareness of their important work and supports recruitment. Positive messages also make resource parents feel appreciated and recognized. External communications can include advertisements that showcase resource parents, public awards, and press coverage of positive events. Resource parents can also be recognized in church bulletins, in speeches or press conferences by public officials, and in mailings that accompany board reimbursement payments. Agencies should maintain confidentiality by ensuring that communications about resource parents do not reveal the identity of children in care.

Agencies can explore creative ways to involve the community, such as encouraging merchants to offer discounts or redeemable coupons to resource families, or to offer internships, mentoring and after-school jobs to teens in care. Resource family recruitment campaigns can highlight the number of children in out-of-home care within a particular neighborhood. There is a substantial difference between saying "1,500 children in our state are in the child welfare system and we have 640 homes for them" and saying, "In your neighborhood last year, 11 kids had to enter care and leave their families. They were able to stay at our local school instead of losing their friends and teachers because five families in this neighborhood, just like you, came forward and became certified to care for these kids." The personal message is much more powerful than the broader, stark statistics.

Another important message to share with the community is, "Not everyone can be a foster or adoptive parent, but everyone can support them!" This can encourage people in the community to sponsor kids to camp, donate school supplies, bake birthday cakes, conduct a gift drive for holidays and birthdays, etc. The opportunities for community involvement are countless. Encouraging local families to donate time or services to resource parents is often a first step toward bringing them in later as resource parents, while reinforcing a positive image about the work. When foster care receives only negative attention due to a crisis or an agency's bad reputation, resource parents do not want to be associated with the agency; it becomes harder to recruit and attrition increases. By reaching out through programs and the press, agencies can improve their relationship with the community while building long-term support for resource families.

Partnerships: Inter-agency: Partnering with other agencies can provide additional support for resource families by enhancing their access to services. Children in care interact frequently with other local departments, including schools, health care, mental health, juvenile justice and others. Agencies can often reduce paperwork and roadblocks by sharing information and streamlining regulations. For example, one jurisdiction required an examination by a medical professional before a child could be placed in a home. Children and their caseworkers had to wait for hours in an emergency room until the jurisdiction developed a small clinic where registered nurses could perform examinations during business hours, providing a more pleasant, and less costly, experience. For admissions after business hours, the agency worked with the emergency room to expedite the process by allowing children in need of placement to skip to the front of the line.

Other supports include:

- Contracting with providers who facilitate visits with incarcerated parents;
- Creating a hotline for police to contact child welfare when they determine that an adult under arrest has dependent children, reducing the need for shelter placements; and
- Working with school systems to streamline enrollment for children entering a new school during the middle of the school year.

Partnerships: Intra-agency: Supporting resource parents is the responsibility of the entire agency. Yet, resource families are often treated poorly by public agency staff. This attitude must change and should start at the top of the agency. Managers should always speak highly and respectfully of resource parents so the culture toward them is positive and respectful. In one jurisdiction, multi-disciplinary workgroups created an internal media campaign that promoted a culture in which "support is everyone's business." The workgroup developed a series of slogans that accompanied pictures of children on full-sized, high-quality posters. Every local and regional office received a set of the posters for display. Messages included:

- She got an A on her math test…thank her foster parent!
- He got a birthday cake and candles…thank his foster parent!
- She learned to tie her shoes…thank her foster parent!
- He hasn't wet the bed for a month…thank his foster parent!
- They got to go home to their birth mother…thank their foster parent!

Every staff member, at every level within the agency, should see resource family support as part of their job. In one agency, a workgroup developed "role cards" that identified how each position in the agency could support resource parents within the context of their role. (See "Role Cards" Appendix.) For example, clerical staff could warmly greet resource parents when they come to the agency. Or the transportation staff can give the foster parent a brief verbal report when returning the child after a visit. Agencies should also include content about resource parent support in staff-wide training to reinforce the message that "support is everyone's job!"

Partnerships: Other Resource Families: When resource parents are asked about what they need to feel supported, they often request support from other resource families, including support groups, mentoring from more-experienced families, a buddy system or a hotline staffed by experienced resource parents. Occasionally a pre-service training group evolves into an informal support group, or families exchange contact information, but agencies rarely make a systematic effort to encourage peer support. Other resource families can provide an effective support option for new parents who may be reluctant to call a worker for help.

Agencies may be reluctant to facilitate peer family support because of potential liability. However, parents naturally turn to friends and family for advice from other parents who have had similar experiences. Agencies should encourage parents to contact caseworkers whenever a problem arises that requires agency intervention. At the same time, agencies can facilitate resource family group meetings or provide a space for them to meet on their own. If there are workers who carry a caseload of parents, they can pair new parents with experienced parents, or create a group made up of the families on their caseload. Agencies can also track the overall satisfaction level of resource families through an annual survey. See Appendix 26 for an example.

Exit Surveys: Exit surveys are a form of quality assurance that enables agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of resource family support activities. Every parent who is closing their home should be offered a short (one-page) survey with a few open-ended questions to encourage specific comments. Surveys should ask both positive and negative questions, and should ask for concrete, creative suggestions for improvement. The surveys should remain anonymous unless parents choose to identify themselves, and they should be maintained by an individual worker in a central location so the results can be compared and analyzed together before they are disseminated across the department. For a resource parent exit survey example, see Appendix 27.

VI

final thoughts

Whether temporary or permanent, resource families play a vital role in child welfare. Children could not be protected without them. They assume tremendous responsibility in caring for vulnerable children and they deserve to be treated as critical partners of the agency. Despite the important service they perform, resource families frequently lack the tools needed to succeed—and when they suffer or fail, so do the children in our care. For many years, we have worked with multiple child-serving agencies to identify and deploy best practices in working with resource families (see Appendix 28 for a partial summary of best practices). By assessing and working on each step of the resource family continuum from intake to placement, agencies can create an environment that will attract more resource parents and can better serve children in their care.

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