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Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition

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Fostering New York's Children During a Global Pandemic

A REPORT OF THE 2020 FOSTER PARENT SURVEY



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COVID-19: Report finds one third of foster parents struggling with lost jobs/pay cuts due to pandemic.

Fostering New York's Children During a Global Pandemic;

A REPORT OF THE 2020 FOSTER PARENT SURVEY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition of New York (AFFCNY) recently surveyed New York State foster parents to learn more about the parenting and financial experiences of foster parents in the age of COVID-19. A total of 656 foster parents responded with almost one-quarter residing in New York City. Close to one fifth of the respondents statewide reported that one or both foster parents lost jobs due to COVID-19. Another 16.6% reported that one or both parents had taken a pay cut due to COVID-19. A higher percentage of New York City residents reported job losses by one or both parents compared to respondents from the rest of the state. A significant number of New York City residents reported not being able to meet their children's needs with current subsidies.

**Several key themes emerged:
job loss and loss of income, increased expenses,
increased family separations and decreases in
support services.**

Foster parent respondents shared their experiences in parenting children given the realities of the ongoing pandemic. Several key themes emerged: job loss and loss of income are serious concerns; family expenses have significantly increased; there have been difficult separations as a result of COVID-19; issues related to foster care have challenged families' ability to remain healthy and safe; additional stresses have arisen due to the impact of COVID on children's mental and behavioral health; childcare and a range of educational and mental services are desperately needed; and court closures have negatively impacted many families. These factors underscore the inadequacy of state subsidies for many families who are struggling to care for the children whom they parent as volunteers. Importantly, foster parents, despite the many challenges, described a remarkable degree of resilience, with families sharing that they embraced the opportunity to bond more closely with the children in their care and to grow stronger as a family.

REPORT

The Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition of New York (AFFCNY) has provided information, support and advocacy to foster, kinship and adoptive families for nearly fifty years. Our commitment to families caring for the most vulnerable children in New York State did not waver during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, parents sought our help through our affiliated groups, online trainings and the helpline to meet the needs of the traumatized children in their care. In our hotline data collection in July, we noted that for the first time ever that *respite* and *advocacy* topped the list of reasons that parents sought help through the helpline. Given these results, AFFCNY made the decision to survey foster parents to document the experience of the only New Yorkers who continue to volunteer to bring children into their homes and families during a pandemic.¹

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

AFFCNY invited survey responses from New York State certified foster parents and adoptive parents who had fostered and then adopted from the State of New York. AFFCNY requested responses through the organization's mailing list of over 11,000 subscribers through social media sites including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; through the Parent Support Group Network of over 100 individual foster, adoptive and kinship support groups; and through various community partnerships. The survey was initially distributed from August 6, 2020 through September 30, 2020. The data collection period was extended until October 10, 2020 to capture additional responses from New York City foster parents as they were underrepresented in comparison to the rest of the state when the initial results

¹ Foster parents volunteer their time to care for children removed from their biological families after the State's investigation of abuse or neglect. They are entitled by federal law to be reimbursed for the expenses of the children in their care. In July 2010, AFFCNY sued the New York State to compel the state to reimburse foster parents for the actual costs associated with children placed in their care, as defined in the federal Child Welfare Act. Federal law requires reimbursement for the for the cost of providing food, clothing, shelter, daily supervision, school supplies, a child's personal incidentals, liability insurance with respect to a child, reasonable travel to the child's home for visitation and reasonable travel for the child to remain in the school in which the child is **enrolled at** the time of placement. Unfortunately, the State has fought this lawsuit for more than a decade.

were tabulated. The targeted outreach to New York City foster parents included partnering with the New York City Administration of Children's Services for survey distribution.

SURVEY DESIGN

The survey was comprised of two parts: (1) closed-ended questions about foster parents' demographic backgrounds, experience with fostering children, the economic impact on their families during the pandemic, and housing status; and (2) an invitation to provide open-ended comments about respondents' experiences during the pandemic. These qualitative data were analyzed through coding the data into key themes.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA AND FOSTERING EXPERIENCE

There were 656 respondents to the survey, and respondents represented all New York State counties. Almost one-quarter (23.3%) of the respondents resided in New York City. Statewide, three quarters (75.5%) of respondents reported being active foster parents, with the remaining respondents reporting previously fostering and then adopting children from foster care.

There were 656 respondents to the survey, and respondents represented all New York State counties.

For the state overall, the majority of respondents were female (91.5%), married (62.0%), and white (74.8%). New York City residents also were predominantly female (92.2%), but they were more likely than the rest of the state to be black/African American (54.9% in New York City compared to 8.0% in the rest of the state) or Latinx (15.7% in New York City compared to 4.9% in the rest of the

state). They were also more likely to be a single parent (60.8% in New York City compared to 23.0% in the rest of the state).

When asked about the ethnicities of the children that they had fostered at any time, one quarter (28.9%) of the predominately white respondents from the state overall reported fostering black/African American children; one fifth (21.7%) had fostered Latinx children; and 4.5% had fostered Native American/American Indian children. In comparison, New York City respondents reported principally fostering black/African American children compared to the rest of the state (77.1% for New York City residents compared to 24.9% for the rest of the state).

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19

Survey respondents reported significant impacts on their economic status as a result of COVID-19 and the current levels of state subsidies.

A significant number of New York City residents reported not being able to meet their children's needs with current subsidies.

- One-sixth (17.0%) of the respondents statewide reported that one or both parents lost jobs due to COVID-19. Another 16.6% reported that one or both parents had taken a pay cut due to COVID-19. A higher percentage of New York City residents reported job losses by one or both parents (21.6%) compared to respondents from the rest of the state (15.7%). A slightly lower percentage of New York City residents (2.0%) reported pay cuts compared to the rest of the state (2.6%).
- New York City residents were less likely than respondents living in the rest of the state to report that they were able to meet their children's needs with the

foster care subsidies that they received. A significant number of New York City residents reported not being able to meet their children's needs with current subsidies.

- Statewide, one fourth of respondents (24.5%) reported total household income before taxes over the past 12 months as \$50,000 to \$74,999. Total household incomes under \$34,999 were reported statewide by 16.5% of the respondents. New York City residents were more likely to report incomes under \$34,999 (28.1%) compared to respondents living in the rest of the state (12.9%).
- Statewide, more than half of respondents (67.1%) were working for wages before COVID-19 or were self-employed. One fifth (19.1%) were full time parents and not working outside the home. New York City residents were less likely to report being full time parents and not working outside the home (11.1%) compared to respondents living in the rest of the state (21.4%).
- New York City residents were much more likely to report renting their homes (61.4%) than respondents in the rest of the state (15.4%).

QUALITATIVE DATA

Foster parents contributed 497 comments that described their experiences in parenting children during the ongoing pandemic. Nine key themes emerged from their comments.

Job loss and loss of income are serious concerns for foster families.

- Holy crap, it's insane. My wife and I run a business and when the shutdown began, she stopped working completely to homeschool [our children]. Eventually, she was able to get back into it, but we are definitely working less than our business and household income need us to be.
- We cannot afford preschool/preK tuition for our two foster children and I worry how this will affect them. There is no public preK in our town.
- COVID 19 has affected my family due to the fact that both myself and my wife became sick and we were unable to work so we now are trying to make payments on our bills.

“Holy crap, it’s insane. . . We are definitely working less than our business and household income needs to be.”

- I took a loss in wages with having to conform to social distancing and working from home.
- We are affected as family savings are dwindling.
- We lost our jobs and wages. We are struggling to make ends meet.
- My income dropped drastically, and I lost some health benefits as well.

Expenses have increased for foster families.

- Due to COVID, I find myself buying items needed for Early Intervention PT and OT. Subsidy is a joke. Plus providing for [my child's] basic needs. Thank goodness she is a baby and not a teen.

- I have adopted five children over the years of fostering. Since COVID hit [and] kids are at home, our bills are very high. We have to figure out what needs to be paid first. The grocery bills are outrageous!
- It has put a strain on me financially because of having children at home all day every day and not in school or summer programs. Has made the cost of maintaining daily things higher.

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- Costs have increased in food and educational items plus making up for lost services and support.
- The prices of groceries, food, clothing and other things have increased. The stipend is not enough to take care of everything for the children.
- The prices of some things have increased. There should be an extra stipend for food.
- With all children being home, all expenses increased. Utilities and food as everyone was home 24/7.

Foster families have experienced difficult separations from one another.

- It was traumatic for our children. Our oldest son was placed in the hospital and COVID restrictions were very difficult.
- Loss of support from family and friends as we were quarantining.
- We have been more secluded and visits were more limited for the children’s [birth] parents. I also lost contact with my granddaughter who is in foster care.

Our child is in temporary residential therapeutic care settings for help with serious mental health/emotional disturbance. Since COVID began, our in-person visits with him have been dramatically reduced.

- Our child is in temporary residential therapeutic care settings for help with serious mental health/emotional disturbance. Since COVID began, our in-person visits with him have been dramatically reduced.
- It has been challenging doing virtual visitations [with birth family].
- Since twice a week in person visits for my anxiety prone 10-year-old changed to twice to three times a week hour long phone calls, things have gone downhill in their rapport. Social distancing at home means not a ton of exciting content for phone calls so he feels pressure to come up with entertaining content to fill 2 to 3 hours of phone calls a week with Mom. This leads to him shutting down and Mom getting angry and this perpetuates his anxiety.

Families have experienced challenges remaining healthy and safe because of issues specific to foster care.

- Due to the special needs of these children, [our children] do not understand hygiene and social distancing no matter how much we review it.
- The stress with dealing with the unsupervised visits of the father who is not following state regulations when it comes to the health and safety of the foster child and the county's unwillingness to enforce the state's COVID laws to non-compliant parents have been the biggest challenge during these times.
- Visits [with birth parents] were made virtual for a while but now they are in person, I'm concerned about getting sick.

Due to the special needs of these children, [our children] do not understand hygiene and social distancing no matter how much we review it.

- I am not happy our foster children are now visiting within biologic homes.
- We have been extremely worried about [our children's] health since they have been continually bused around for court-ordered visits four times a week when the courts and schools have remained closed.

Foster families are facing additional stress because of the impact of COVID on their children's mental and behavioral health.

- COVID has affected my family mentally . . . all counseling being only by phone or online – these kids need to be face to face.
- COVID took away our children's special needs caretaking (OT, psychologists). That and the change in routine really affected the behaviors and the skills we were working hard to mold into more socially acceptable [behaviors].
- Our middle child is not compliant with mental health medications and self-medicating with drugs and not observing social distancing.
- Both children (now teens) suffer from the effects of complex trauma and [COVID] has certainly been a trigger.
- It has caused sadness for the children.

Trying to educate AND parent kids with trauma and who don't have permanency was a special kind of hell.

- Our children have expressed that their anxiety has increased. We have witnessed regressions in behavior, mental health and their ability to function and they have many fears about not being at school and being forgotten.
- Therapy has been very difficult for my child and lockdown caused heightened anxieties.
- Services lost for my children with IEP (Individual Education Plan) and the struggles and behaviors we have experienced. It has gotten so bad we question if we can proceed with the adoption.
- The effects include the need for structure. We foster and have adopted several children that are special needs, including their emotional needs. The lack of structure and services definitely regressed our situation of progress.
- Trying to educate AND parent kids with trauma and who don't have permanency was a special kind of hell. We needed breaks and had no way to get them. Services abruptly stopped for a month or more.

Many foster families desperately need childcare.

- Daycare has gone up and is hard to find with crazy new school schedules and work schedules.
- I no longer have daycare so [my] spouse has now left employment for daycare reasons.

Of course, the need for childcare has greatly increased but foster parents seem to be left on their own to figure things out without any additional financial support.

- There have been no options for daycare so my entire subsidy for the child in my care has gone to paying out of pocket for a private sitter.
- Stressed about how much daycare will cost for 3 full days for multiple children [when children return to school only 2 days a week].

- I don't understand where anyone thinks you can find and pay a sitter for \$37.00 each day for about 10 hours a day.
- Of course, the need for childcare has greatly increased but foster parents seem to be left on their own to figure things out without any additional financial support.

Foster parents need a range of services for their children.

- Lack of respite, lack of good therapy.
- Loss of support from school and therapies.
- Removal of social supports physically able to be present has been the hardest part for us.
- Services for the children have decreased.
- We have limited support for our children. We have 6 children (5 in school and one in college). Our children are special needs and school for 5 children with IEPs and educational needs that they want us to meet are impossible.
- The foster care agency has not been supportive due to COVID. Our foster baby did not get her vaccinations on time.

We have had to adapt to the world of telemedicine, therapy and visits to meet the needs of our foster children.

- We are in the process of adopting a sibling set of three children and everything is so slow, and we have had documentation lost and it's very hard to get new things when places are closed because of COVID. I have five children (3 foster children and 2 bio children). It's hard to try and drag them all over creation to get things I have already turned in replaced.
- We have had to adapt to the world of telemedicine, therapy and visits to meet the needs of our foster children.

Many foster families have been negatively impacted by court closures.

- My daughter has gone nearly a year now without a permanency hearing – elsewhere in the country, family courts are doing hearings remotely, so I don't understand why that can't happen here.
- Frustrated that COVID has slowed down the court system and feel like we are in a state of limbo.
- Waiting for adoption – too long.

My daughter has gone nearly a year now without a permanency hearing.

- The court being delayed is super frustrating as we are nearing a surrender and it has thrown off other court issues as well.
- The judicial system has slowed down any proceedings taking place.

Despite the challenges, foster families remain resilient.

- 24/7 was crucial bonding time that could have taken months or years.
- COVID has given us more time to be together (family bonding) and expanded our creativity.

**COVID allowed
our family to be together more
and to wear more sweatpants.**

- COVID allowed our family to be together more and to wear more sweatpants.
- More together time, more walks, and playing outside/exploring nature.
- We have bonded more as a family and also have been able to work together to address many of the issues (suicidal ideation, cutting, flashbacks of past sexual abuse) that have made a resurgence. We've had the luxury of time together to address whatever arises and find a solution together.
- Other than growing mental health concerns, we have been solid in terms of learning, growing and eating.
- On the positive side, COVID 19 has given us the opportunity to be together more as a family unit!
- We have had [our foster] child for 8 years! We finally got to the point of adoption and had a virtual adoption!

**Foster families have demonstrated
remarkable resilience
in extremely difficult circumstances.**

SUMMARY

Survey responses illustrate the challenges that foster parents are facing as they foster children while managing the impact of COVID-19 on their children, their families, and their communities with dwindling resources and inadequate subsidies. Foster parents broadly need increased financial and service supports, including childcare and educational and mental health services. At the same time, foster families have demonstrated remarkable resilience in extremely difficult circumstances, again showing the incredible value that they bring as volunteers caring for children in foster care. Their voices make clear that in this time of increased stresses on the lives of foster families and their foster children, financial support in the form of adequate state subsidies is essential.