

Chapter XI

Key Players in Resource Family Recruitment and Retention

1. Agency Directors

Why Should Directors Focus on Resource Family Recruitment & Retention?

Outcomes for Children. Most of the outcomes that we seek for children in care are directly related to having a pool of well-trained and well-supported resource families. These outcomes all center around the best interests of the child.

How Resource Families Affect CFSR Outcomes

| CFSR Item | The Resource Family Role |
|--|--|
| Safety Outcome 1: Children are protected from abuse and neglect | Resource families provide safe, nurturing homes for children in care. |
| Permanency Outcome 1: <i>Children have permanency and stability in their living arrangements</i> | Resource families maintain children in their homes despite great challenges and sometimes minimal services. They provide crucial stability and support while children and birth families work towards reunification. They are the most likely to adopt children in foster care whose parental rights are terminated (60% in FY 2006, AFCARS Report #14). |
| Permanency Outcome 2: <i>The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children</i> | Resource families facilitate contact with family members, often provide homes for sibling groups, and maintain life books and important parts of children's histories. |
| Well-Being Outcome 1: <i>Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs</i> | Resource families can provide crucial modeling and mentoring for birth parents. Their efforts with children and birth families are crucial in achieving more timely and successful reunifications. |
| Well-Being Outcome 2: <i>Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs</i> | Resource families often identify educational problems and serve as front-line responders for children and schools. |
| Well-Being Outcome 3: <i>Children receive appropriate services to meet their physical and mental health needs</i> | Resource families often identify medical and emotional problems and serve as front-line responders for children and treatment providers. |

Money. Your agency will also spend far more on out-of-home placements if you do not have an adequate pool of well-trained and well-supported resource families. Specific costs include:

- Increased travel expenses for children placed out-of-county (social worker visits, meetings, birth family visits, CFT meetings, etc.)
- Higher board rates for clinically unnecessary group home or therapeutic placements
- Staff time and resources devoted to disrupted placements if unable to match children and families appropriately pre-placement, or provide agency-wide support post-placement

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Core Messages to Send about R & R

1. Finding and supporting resource families is **everybody's** job.
2. Resource families are essential partners in achieving good outcomes for children and families. We need to **treat them like gold.**



What Directors Can Do to Build a Successful Program

- **Fund it.** Every year, provide a specific and adequate budget to support your agency's resource family recruitment and retention program.
- The sense of **mission** has to come from the top-down. Talk about the core messages in the box above:
 - At staff meetings
 - At management team meetings
 - With county supervisors
 - With community members and community organizations
- **Ask** the workers and supervisor with primary responsibility for recruitment and retention:
 - What should our **top 3 priorities** be in this area?
 - How can our agency support you in this?
- Start a **Recruitment and Retention Committee** to develop your agency's program.
 - Read **Chapter II** to help guide their efforts.
- Create an **expectation** that all child welfare staff will participate in finding, training, and/or supporting resource families.
 - Provide **flex time** to staff who participate in R & R activities
 - Make resource family recruitment and retention part of every child welfare staff member's **performance evaluation**

2. Supervisors and Program Managers

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Whose Problem Is It?

In some child welfare agencies there is an unspoken cultural divide: if you license and recruit foster homes, then resource families are your business. If you do family assessments or foster care placements, then the children are your business, not the resource parents.

Unfortunately, this split means that many resource families do not get the information, support, and follow-up they need to maintain placements and continue to foster or adopt. The direct result: resource family turnover, more disrupted placements, greater negative impact on children, and fewer homes available for them.



As a supervisor or manager, you set the tone for your units. Workers won't know that everyone is expected to partner with and support resource families unless you talk about it and model it.

How CPS & Child Placement Units Can Support Resource Families

- **Be creative** in how you might partner with resource families. Are they part of agency committees? Do they help to train social workers or orient new staff? Are they invited to and prepared for Child and Family Team Meetings? What expertise, strengths, or community connections might a resource family have that could further the agency's work?
- Institute a **24-hour call-back policy** for responding to resource families. Make sure workers have their supervisor's name and number on their outgoing voicemail. All the retention efforts in the world won't matter if resources families can't get a foster care worker to call them back.
- Have all child welfare staff attend **Mini MAPP** and/or **Shared Parenting trainings**. This will give them a greater understanding of the resource family role and how they can support it.
- Encourage and provide incentives for all staff to **participate in recruitment and retention events**: community speaking, orientations, in-service training, foster parent meetings, recognition events, etc.
- **Consider collaboration on training and support a win-win**: your agency can meet long-term outcomes better for children if everyone is developing good homes for them. For example, if a foster care worker participates in a training on managing difficult behaviors, she may end up with someone willing to foster a teen currently placed in another county or in group care. One agency is working on setting up a respite program for families caring for teens: the resource family gets time to rejuvenate, and the respite provider may be more likely to accept teen placements in the future.

3. Child Protective Services Workers

Any level of maltreatment in foster care is unacceptable, which is why North Carolina's federal Program Improvement Plan includes reducing our state's foster care maltreatment rate. That said, the rate of maltreatment for children in foster care in North Carolina is quite low. Of all children in foster care during FY 2007-2008, less than a quarter of one percent (0.21%) were substantiated as being abused or neglected by a foster parent or other substitute care provider (Duncan et al., 2008). Few children experience abuse or neglect while in foster care.

At the same time, foster parents themselves are at high risk of ALLEGATIONS of child maltreatment. In North Carolina foster parents are more than twice as likely as other people to be reported for child abuse or neglect (NCDSS, 2002). As a result, every year many innocent foster parents endure the anguish of an investigative assessment.

How investigative assessments are handled by the agency has a major impact on whether those foster parents continue or quit fostering if the report is unsubstantiated. While children's safety is always the first concern, CPS workers also play a critical role in minimizing unnecessary placement disruptions and trauma for children in care, and in keeping good foster homes available. Some critical tips: just as we strive to do for all families, maintain open communication, gather all the facts before making judgments, and keep foster parents informed about the process, their rights, and your agency's plans. Fortunately, the foster family's licensing worker can help inform and educate foster parents about the process in partnership with you.

For detailed explanations of the policy about CPS investigations in foster homes, and for related practice suggestions, see Chapter 8 of "A Supplemental Guide to Foster Home Licensing" on the Division's web site:

<http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/licensing/docs/Guide-09-26-07a.pdf>

To read the full policy go to: http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-45/man/Chapter_V-05.htm#P717_76072

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4. Children's Social Workers

Perhaps no other team member has more impact on resource family satisfaction than the child's placement social worker. The placement worker plays a crucial role in keeping resource families informed, valuing their unique insights and knowledge about each child, and responding to problems that could lead to placement disruption. In fact, foster parents often cite the following issues among their top reasons for leaving the system (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; NCFRC, 1991; Rhodes et al., 2001):

- Poor communication with a caseworker
- Inadequate consultation and support from workers
- Poor agency response to crises
- Disrespect, not being treated as team member/partner

EUREKA!

The Core of Concurrent Planning

Resource families are critical partners in pursuing all of the possible permanency goals for children in care:



- Resource families play the central role in preserving family ties, supporting children during separations, and coaching birth families to enable **reunification**.
- About 60% of children adopted from foster care are **adopted by their foster family** (AFCARS Report 12).
- After children themselves, resource families are the best source for **child-specific recruiting**: identifying important support people in a child's life who could provide a permanent placement.

What Placement Workers Can Do to Support Resource Families

- **Return phone calls.** All the banquets and gift certificates in the world can't compare with having someone respond when you need help. Whether the caregiver is handling a crisis, hoping for respite, or just needing to vent, the few minutes you devote to a timely response can save you many hours down the road trying to preserve a placement that's falling apart.
- Invite them to **Child and Family Team Meetings**, making sure they know what to expect and have a chance to give their input.
- **Keep them informed** about the case plan, Court happenings, and other important events in a child's case. Be creative about how to do this when you have a large caseload: ask families to call you for updates after Court dates or use e-mail, for example. If resource families understand the full picture of a child's case plan and the birth family's goals, as well as how case decisions are made by DSS and judges, they are less likely to be blind-sided and distraught about changes. Resource families don't get to decide what happens to children in care, but they deserve to be kept informed and prepared.
- Foster parents now have the right not only to be informed about Court dates but to speak in Court. **Advocate** for your resource families to receive training about this and exercise their rights in an appropriate way.
- **Behavioral challenges** of children in care was found to be the number one reason for case disruption in North Carolina's 2007 Federal review. Participate in finding, planning, and providing appropriate training for resource families to manage behavioral problems. Empower and assist them in finding appropriate resources for all of their family members. It's not "someone else's job" to maintain safe, stable, well-trained resource homes for children—it's everyone's job.
- Use the **Monthly Foster Care Contact Record** as a tool for keeping lines of communication open, identifying needs, and offering support to everyone in the home. For training on the use of this tool, visit <http://www.ncswLearn.org>.

5. Other Agency Staff

- Realize that every person you encounter in your work could be a current or potential foster or adoptive parent. The tone you help set for the agency through your **customer service** and attitude influences whether resource families feel respected and welcome.
- Keep a stack of **brochures or agency business cards** handy to give out to people during your work day and around the community. You never know what seeds you plant that could bear fruit for a child in need of a home.
- **Participate** in agency events to recruit and acknowledge resource families whenever possible. Another smiling face and pair of helping hands can make all the difference in whether an event is successful.
- **Recruit and build support** for foster care in your own community. You may belong to a place of worship, civic group, or club that could provide essential support to your agency's efforts to care for children. Check with the person with primary responsibility for recruitment in your agency to see how you can help build bridges in your community: recruiting resource families or volunteers, hanging posters, arranging a speaker, heading up a drive for clothes or school supplies, etc.


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Share the Passion

You have an important role to play in finding and supporting foster and adoptive homes, whatever your job title!

- Professional staff in Adult, Medicaid, Work First, Nutrition, and Child Support Services
- Clerical staff
- Custodial staff
- Transportation staff
- Everyone at DSS!

Children in foster care need everyone working on their behalf.



6. Youth in Foster Care

Agencies should engage youth in care to play an active role in recruiting resource families for themselves. Building partnerships in this area can have additional benefits for youth such as enhancing their relationships with workers and building feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- Child-centered recruitment: Ask children or teens to list all the people who have been important to them in their life. Use that list to begin recruiting individuals to re-connect or strengthen their connection with the child in unthreatening ways. Youth can also help develop recruitment materials for themselves. See examples of winning strategies in this area in Chapter X.
- Public speaking: Youth who have been cleared for adoption and adequately prepared can share their stories with current or prospective foster parents at

MAPP/GPS or in-service trainings, or at recruitment or community outreach events. Please refer to the Recipe Card 6 in the Appendix, which talks about using teens for recruitment.

- Connecting with current resource parents: Give youth a chance to interact informally with licensed families. You can do this at social events or trainings for foster families, or by having families who are waiting for placements mentor youth in care or provide respite.

7. Current Resource Families

Satisfied resource parents are the single the best tool for recruitment. This statement is worth repeating—your best recruiters are your current foster, adoptive, and kinship parents.

- One state reported in a federal survey that more than 50% of its successful foster parent recruits are referred by other foster parents, compared to a 10% recruitment rate for general recruiting (USDHHS, 2002).
- Another study of 650 foster parents found that only 21% had found out about fostering through media sources, while 58.5% did so because of the connections they had with other foster parents or children in foster care (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006).

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Working in collaboration with foster parents to increase recruitment should improve retention as well:

- Numerous studies have found that retention is significantly affected by how valued foster parents feel and how much they are treated like partners by their agencies (cited in Rhodes et al., 2001; Rodger et al., 2006; NRCSNA, 2003). Creatively involving foster parents in an agency's efforts to find and keep other foster parents can build a collaborative, mutually respectful relationship.
- Support by other foster parents also plays a crucial role in foster parents' decision to continue fostering (Seaberg & Harrigan, 1999). When you involve foster parents in recruitment, they are able to establish supportive relationships with each other from the very beginning.

Foster parents can aid recruitment and retention in many ways (USDHHS, 2002; NRCSNA, 2003):

- Sharing experiences and allowing newly-licensed foster parents to meet children in care before they have a placement
- Helping prospective foster parents complete applications
- Providing parts of pre-service and ongoing trainings
- Following-up with new contacts with an in-person visit or phone call
- Providing support groups or foster parent associations
- Organizing recognition/appreciation efforts and events
- Providing individualized mentoring for new foster parents

8. The North Carolina Division of Social Services

The Division of Social Services provides the following resources to county DSS agencies to help them with their resource family recruitment and retention efforts:

- **Children’s Program Representatives (CPRs).** Your CPR can help you develop and implement your MEPA plan, collaborate with neighboring counties, and encourage involvement by staff of all levels. To obtain contact information for your agency’s CPR, go to <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/team/CPRList.html>.
- **The Regulatory and Licensing Services** team can answer questions, help problem-solve, and consult with you about foster home licensing; the phone number for the Black Mountain office is 828/669-3388. Train-the-trainer opportunities are provided for therapeutic foster care training by the Regulatory and Licensing Services Team.
- **<http://www.ncswLearn.org>** is a portal website you can use to learn about and register for classroom-based and online training opportunities for staff and resource families. If after visiting this site you still have questions about Division-sponsored child welfare training, contact the leader of the Division’s Child Welfare Staff Development Unit by calling 919/334-1175.