Strategies for Recruitment and Retention of Foster Families

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Taking the position that social workers are prepared to develop useful foster care recruitment and retention strategies, this article describes the three phases of a Virginia based project "Strategies for Recruitment and Retention of Foster Care Families." The research phase, the planning phase and the development of multi-media models for recruitment and retention are discussed. Principles for planning and implementation are presented as well as implications for a social work approach to developing a long-term recruitment and retention strategies.

Recruitment and retention of quality foster care homes are on-going needs for child welfare agencies. Efforts in family preservation and permanency planning have not lessened the pressure to create and maintain alternative care for children in need of out-of-home placement (Halper & Jones, 1984). A trend in foster home recruitment is the market research approach (Coyne, 1987; Pastztor & Burgess, 1982; Smith & Gutheil, 1988). This approach is replacing the foster parent as recruiter model (Glassberg, 1965; Horejsi, 1979; Valluzzo, 1984). Early evidence indicates a relative recruitment productivity of market research approaches over the older, more traditional recruitment methods (Moore, Grandpre, & Scoll, 1988).

The model detailed here departs from the assumption that advertising professionals are best suited to develop foster care marketing strategies. The authors believe that social workers have the professional skills to develop recruitment models to attract and keep foster families. The suggested program is based on a social work frame of reference with important emphasis on context. The model employs the skills of assessment, goal setting, planning, and evaluation to develop, implement, and maintain a recruitment and retention program that is sensitive to the changing needs

of the child welfare agency and the children in its care. Professional advertising and marketing consultants become necessary only in the technical aspects of brochure printing, tape or film making.

This paper describes three phases of a Virginia based project "Strategies for Recruitment and Retention of Foster Care Families" depicted in Figure 1. The project's first phase included three research steps. As a result of the data analysis, a recruitment and retention planning phase was developed as the second phase. The final phase resulted in multi-media models for recruitment and retention.

Phase I:

Research Phase

STEP 1:   Rates-under-treatment of the foster care system

STEP 2:   Survey of foster care families

STEP 3:   Validation study of supervisors and administrators

Phase II:

Recruitment and retention planning phase

Phase III:

Development of multi-media model for recruitment and retention

Figure 1.
Phases of the Recruitment & Retention Model.

Research Informing the Marketing Model

The first step in the research phase for creating the marketing model identified the types of foster care homes necessary to meet the needs of children in Virginia. To identify these needs, traditional assessment and research skills were utilized to analyze the children in care and the families providing this care.

A typology, intended to capture all important variables in the foster care experience, was designed to guide the investigation of the children in foster care and foster families. The results served as the basis for decisions about the marketing plan. Figure 2 shows the multidimensional typology for matching children in need of care with foster families. The

dimensions are: the type of care received or provided (emergency, short-term, long-term); the relationship of the foster child to the foster family (relative or non-relative); and characteristics of children and families in the foster care system (Auerbach, 1985; Donley, 1984; Friedman, Baron, Lardier & Quick, 1982; Kirgan, 1983). Most of these dimensions are viewed as positively or negatively related to a measure of successful fostering (Cooper, Meier, & Peterson, 1987; Kirgan, 1983; Pardeck, 1983).

Children In Need Of Care And Their Characteristics

A needs assessment strategy using a rates-under-treatment approach was used to examine the foster care system in Virginia as the first step in the research phase. Rates-under-treatment uses data available about persons receiving a service during a specified time period to project the needs for services or the most appropriate types of services to be provided in the future. In this case, Virginia Social Service Information System (VASIS) data, a client information system, was made available by the Virginia State Department of Social Services. The data base includes records of all children in foster care. Those children in foster care during 1988 were the focus of the analysis. Three cohorts were examined: children entering care during 1988; children leaving care; and children remaining in care. A total of 8,693 cases met the criteria for inclusion.

Of the total number of children in care (n = 8,693), the majority (n = 4,033, 46.7%) entered foster care prior to 1988 and continued in care. Twenty percent (n = 1,739) of children entered foster care for the first time during 1988 and continued in care after 1988. Almost the same percentage of children entered foster care before 1988 and left the foster care system during that year (n = 1,930, 22.2%). The remaining children (n = 991, 11.4%) entered and left foster care during 1988.

As a separate analysis in this step, variables describing the children in foster care were examined. The characteristics of children included: gender, race, time in foster care, type of foster care placement, reason for initial placement, age at time of placement, handicapping condition, previous foster care experience, and the child's legal and educational status. In addition, location of the foster care placement and the region responsible for the child's care were examined.

Experiences of children in foster care during 1988 indicate that foster family recruitment and retention marketing strategies should target foster families as a resource for both male and female children. Male children and those under age 11 were more likely to be children of color, while adolescents were more likely female and white. Child abuse and neglect was most often the reason for children entering care between the ages of

RELATIONSHIP OF CHILD
TO FAMILY

. Relative

. Non-relative

TYPE OF CARE NEEDED

. Emergency

. Short-term

. Long-term

CHARACTERISTICS OF
CHILDREN

(e.g., gender, race, educational
status, time in placement, age,
reason for initial placement,
legal status, etc.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF
FAMILIES

(e.g., household composition,
family income, age, employment
status, educational attainment,
perceptions of the foster care role,
family relationships, attitudes
toward children in foster care,
preparation to provide services
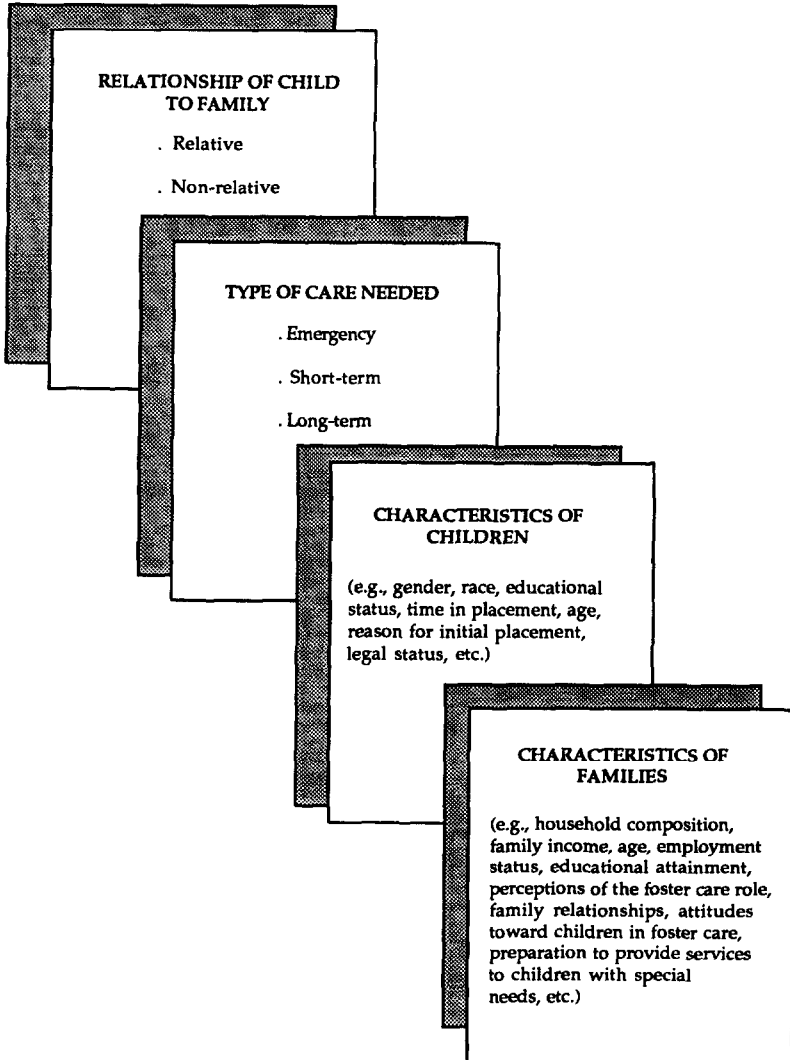to children with special
needs, etc.)

Figure 2.
Dimensions for Matching Children in Need-of-Care with Foster Families.

six and seven. Most of the children were cared for by non-relative foster families. In the majority of cases, parental rights were not terminated and the stated goal of care was family reunification. The exception was African-American children who were more likely to have permanent foster care as a goal. In addition, when the recorded goal was placement, for African-American children this was most often with a relative.

The experience of the children in the foster care system was examined to determine the average length of care children received ($M = 4.05$ years, $sd = 4.13$) and the average age of children in care ($M = 6.85$ years, $sd = 5.56$ years). When the reasons for entering foster care were examined, the majority ($n = 5,016$, 57.7%) were as a result of abuse or neglect. Analysis of the five Public Law 96-272 goals indicate that over half ($n = 4,573$, 52.6%) hold the stated goal of returning the child to his or her home.

Children entering care during 1988 were on the average nine years old, white and female. In general, these children had no prior experience in the foster care system. Those with prior foster care placements were most likely to be white, male children. Children entering care usually were placed with non-relative foster care families without the termination of parental rights.

Information from the data analysis was used to develop several aspects of the recruitment and retention strategy. For example, the rates-under-treatment approach provided information in these areas: the types of children in need of foster care; the categories of care (emergency, short-term, long-term) needed; characteristics of children in care; areas of the state with different types of children in care; and, the concentration of children in foster care by geographic area. Child specific data clarified the type of families needed and, thus, one aspect of the recruitment focus. The rates-under-treatment approach underscored regional differences in types and concentration of children in foster care and the need to regionalize the recruitment and retention model.

Survey of Foster Families

The second step in the research phase focused on assessing the current level and quality of the foster care resource. A ten percent random sample of foster homes approved for care was taken from the Virginia Department of Social Services mailing list of foster care providers. A survey instrument was designed guided by the typology to obtain a profile of the foster families. In addition the purpose was to assess foster families' perceptions of their own family, the foster children in their care, and the services the families provide. Families were also asked to suggest ideas about the recruiment and retention of foster homes.

A total of 354 surveys were mailed. A follow-up letter and a reminder post card were also mailed to encourage participation in the research. A total of 182 surveys were returned, for a return rate of 51%. Of these, 169 contained enough information to be included in the data analysis. The foster parents reported that they had provided services for a total of 1,374 children since being approved for care.

To create a profile of the foster homes currently serving the children of Virginia, the data analysis focused on the foster children in care, characteristics of foster families and foster parents, the role perceptions of families, as well as attitudes and ideas relevant for foster home recruitment and retention. As with the summary of findings from the analysis of children in foster care during 1988, we have limited reporting the results of the survey of foster families to information that would be generalizable to other areas of the U.S.

Foster homes were distributed throughout the state, and in general, matched the need for care in the various localities. Foster families were providing short- and long-term foster care as opposed to emergency care. The average foster home can be characterized as approved to provide care for two children, with at least one space available. The majority of foster families were two parent homes ($n = 129$, 76.3%). Of the single parent foster family homes, most ($n = 31$, 77.5%) were single mothers. Foster families usually care for children of their own race. Generally, characteristics can be summarized as follows: families report a total family income of less than $40,000 annually; foster mothers who work outside the home are employed in white collar jobs, while foster fathers tend to work in blue collar jobs; families have one child still living at home, usually attending grammar school.

Foster parent data was an important source of information for developing the marketing strategy. First, it served to validate the findings about the children in care. Second, it described the current level of care resource available in the state. This description included socio-economic status, employment status, marital status, and the characteristics of the family's biological or adoptive children. Family activities and family functioning were examined to describe family relationships that grow out of having foster children as part of the family system. Another area measured the ways families manage problems that may occur in the process of fostering, such as the use of formal and informal social supports. The family's perception of success with foster children as well as sources of frustration that families have felt in the course of providing foster care were also examined. Finally, foster families responses to questions about how they became foster parents, their concerns before becoming a foster family, their felt level of preparation prior to foster parenting, and evaluation of their foster care experience were evaluated to identify important initial

aspects of the recruitment and retention strategies. These aspects included the types of families that existed, were needed, how families came into fostering (providing information for targeting recruitment), and families' perceptions of training needs (aimed at developing retention strategies).

Validation Study

A survey of foster care supervisors or administrators in each locality was developed as the third step of the research phase. Foster care supervisors/administrators were presented with a survey instrument listing the characteristics of children in foster care during 1988 developed from the data analysis as well as highlights of the foster parent survey results. The validation study included data on characteristics of the children in care, the type of foster care provided, children's experience with the foster care system, the goals for children in care, foster family characteristics, and the foster parenting process. Two questions pertained to recruitment and retention of foster families.

Survey participants were asked to respond whether or not their local experience resembled the overall results of the analysis of children in care and of the foster family survey. If the finding did not resemble what was true in their locality, the respondent was asked to rewrite the statement to accurately reflect the local agency experience.

Survey instruments were mailed to all 124 local agencies in the state. Two weeks after the initial mailing, reminder letters were sent. Eighty-three localities returned the survey prior to the data analysis, representing a return rate of 67%. Seventy-six of these were usable and served as the basis of the data analysis.

Of the forty statements in the questionnaire, there were only two areas where the majority of respondents from the local areas disagreed with the research that reflected the aggregate of the state. Most disagreement was reflective of differing racial distribution in regions of the state. A second area underscored the differences between the type of foster homes available and the type of children needing care in the localities. The last area of disagreement was the perception about the sense of frustration foster families experience in providing foster care. The majority of the local area respondents asserted greater frustration than reported by foster families. These regional variations have significant implications for recruitment and retention strategies and served to shape a marketing package designed for ultimate local flexibility.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies

The remainder of this paper presents principles for developing a five-year plan for recruitment and retention. The first year plans for recruitment and retention, found in Figure 3, are displayed as examples of the general planning content areas that should be considered during each year of a five year plan. The planning components for year one were derived from an analysis of the three steps of the research phase, the development of the planning phase, and the final multi-media models for the Commonwealth of Virginia. The social work skills necessary were goal setting and planning. In our efforts, no outside media consultants were employed because the researchers had sufficient art training to develop the multimedia models. The components of the recruitment plan are: collating existing useful materials, determining media to be used, developing the administrative structure to support the planned activities, developing the theme, and formulating distribution and advertising plans. A total of 18 steps were needed for Year 1 of Virginia recruitment plan. The year 1 retention plan includes 9 steps focusing on administrative support, curriculum development, and distribution. Note that it is at the thematic stage in both plans that advertising consultants may be helpful. While this project focused on one state, the questions asked in the research phase, and the suggestions offered as a result of our analysis can be adapted to the needs of any area developing a recruitment and retention campaign for foster families.

Foster care recruitment strategies

Some research findings indicate that marketing information must be received by the target population three or four times before engagement occurs (Horejsi, 1979). There is evidence from this research that a great deal of time passes from first hearing about the need for foster parents and the family's decision to pursue foster parenting. In this sample 55.6% ($n =$ 94) took between one and 20 years from first hearing to making an application. This model, then, is based on the assumption that the potential pool of foster families must hear the same or similar messages consistently through various media over an extended period of time.

To this end, a theme should be chosen for a five year recruitment and retention plan and used throughout the effort. This theme should be supported both visually and with narrative. It should be the connecting link across types of recruitment media, across the years of the recruitment effort and across specific geographic needs. The theme should be generic enough to be adapted to the current needs of children, as well as any changes in needs that might occur during the five year period. The theme
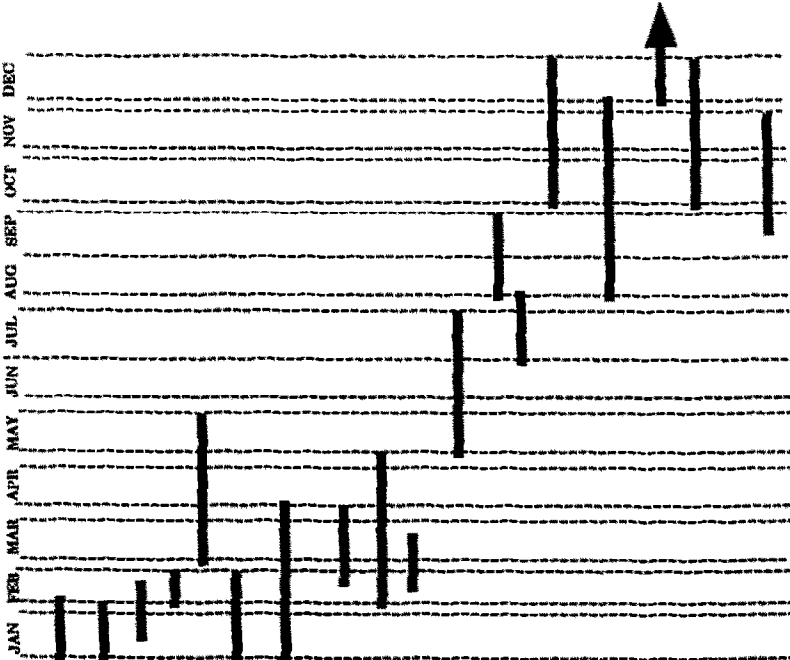
Figure 3.
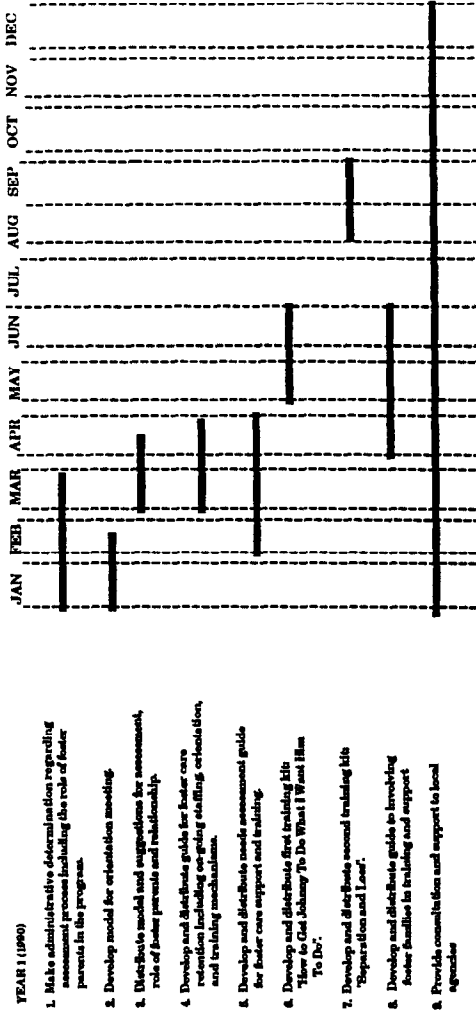**First Year Recruitment and Retention Plans.**

Figure 3 continued.

should not eliminate any type of family or child. Once the theme is chosen, a logo should be developed. This logo should appear in all recruitment materials and should serve as a symbol of the need for homes. For the Virginia project, the theme carried out was "open your heart and your home to the future." That theme was carried out in television and radio spots, newspaper recruitment ads, information meeting announcements, flyers, utility bill inserts, grocery sack advertisements.

Mass media produces the best results for the least overall effort (Horejsi, 1979; Moore, et al., 1988; Palmer, 1981). Recruitment efforts should focus on television and radio because through these media recruitment efforts can best avoid socio-economic and racial biases. The goal is to diversify successful recruitment to include the full range of families in the state rather than replicating the profile of the existing foster families.

Television and radio announcements must be personalized for the viewer or listener. All families participating in our survey reported that the personalization of the announcements were an important variable in their decision. The use of specific pictures and stories about real children is ill-advised, both legally and therapeutically. Composite stories should be created to add specifics to the picture of need and to personalize the idea of becoming a foster family. In personalizing audio-visual materials, the children and the story must seem real; the need must be specific enough for a family to decide that it can serve as a foster family to children in need of care.

Foster family participants in this research indicated that recruitment material focused on African-American families served to recruit both African-American and white families. If resources are limited, a finely developed television or radio spot focused on the need of the African-American child will also recruit families for white children. Based on our respondents, efforts to recruit African-American families should not overlook the radio, other foster parents, and stories about children, as effective recruitment strategies.

The recruitment model must include more than a theme, logo and audio-visual materials. The planning and evaluation stages must include staffing and coordination by the local agency. The recruitment campaign should be coordinated by a staff member specifically assigned recruitment and retention program responsibilities or this portion of a job assignment will receive less than necessary attention (Moore et al., 1988).

A speakers bureau should be created and aggressively used in each locality or region. Data from this project indicate that the professional is seen as the most persuasive in convincing families about the need for foster family care, followed by foster parents. Whenever possible a team approach should be used including a foster parent to reach the largest portion

of an audience and to model collaborative efforts. The speakers bureau should be used with non-traditional or rarely tapped audiences. Based on the analysis of who cares for whom, our data indicate that recruitment efforts should not overlook professionals and volunteers engaged in providing services to children. Counselors, school teachers and volunteers who work with children and similar professionals and volunteers are more likely to be willing to care for adolescents and children with more profound special needs.

A recruitment plan should be implemented only when the agency is prepared to respond to requests for information and ready to move interested families through the approval process. A specific phone number should be available on all recruitment materials. This number should be answered by a knowledgeable professional who can respond immediately to questions from potential foster parents. Our respondents reflected some frustration at the initial encounter. It would suggest to us that a call back system which was the standard in the state may have lost a high percentage of original callers.

A regularly scheduled information meeting should be available for interested families. Project data indicate that the location, time, and place of such meetings has little or no influence on the number and quality of applications received. Frequently scheduled information meetings seem to work as well as a telephone screening prior to an invitation to a meeting (Moore et al., 1988). The information meetings should be announced to the public to allow for direct attendance by interested members of the community. The content of the meeting should not only focus on the assessment and placement processes, but also on a realistic report of children needing care and the types of families needed to provide that care. Seventy-eight percent of project families had room for more children, including two families who had never had children placed. Much disappointment was expressed about not being used as a placement resource. Families should have information about the need in order to decide if they can meet that need.

Finally, the application process should include a measure of the effectiveness of the recruitment campaign. New applicants should be asked how they heard about the need for foster parents, what influenced their decision, and what was helpful and not helpful in their decision to apply to be foster parents. This information, in addition to an on-going analysis of the children in care and the quality of the foster care resource, continually serves to develop the recruitment campaign. From the discussion what should be clear is that the theme and the logo are constant over the five year cycle. Assessment, at least annually, of the effectiveness of the mass media campaign, speakers bureau, and foster care administrative system determines the degree of match between the foster family resources and

the needs of children in care. Results of the assessment should be used to develop the details of the five year plan.

Foster Family Retention Strategies

Retention of foster parents begins during the approval process. A complicated assessment process may deter even the most committed family from the program. This is particularly true for minority families who appear to react negatively to an intrusive assessment process (Delgado, 1978; Goodluck, 1983). Questions asked families should be reviewed to assure that they are directly targeted at foster family selection and are sensitive to racial and cultural differences in the community. To address possible barriers in the minority family retention rate, matching minority social worker with a minority family during the approval process (much like in the minority adoption process) may improve the retention rate.

The agency's policies regarding the structure and the relationships between social workers and foster parents should be carefully examined in two important areas: first, the role of the foster family in the agency, and second, the foster parent/social worker relationship. Role ambiguity plays a part in the foster family drop-out rate (Eastman, 1982b). When there is a different social worker for the foster parents, the foster children, and the foster child's biological family, frustration and lack of role clarity may exist. Decision-making authority for the foster child in the foster home should be clearly defined and clarified with the foster parents. Additionally, are foster families clients or colleagues? It does not appear to matter what role is assigned to foster families (Eastman, 1982a). What is of importance to retention is the consistency of agency policies and procedures regarding the role of foster families in the agency.

On-going educational opportunities for foster families appear to be critical for retention (Simon & Simon, 1982). For educational opportunities to have meaning for families, foster parents must be involved in the development and implementation of their education (Ryan, 1989). While respondent families ($n = 130$, 76.7%) felt they were somewhat to very well prepared to begin foster parenting, nearly forty percent ($n = 66$) called for more training for foster parents as a retention method. Our families see that training is critical for preparation, for maintaining the quality of care provided children, and for continued service to the agency and community. The agency must also believe that this is true and allocate resources for

losing approval as a foster home. There is an assumption that mandated training may reduce the pool of qualified families. In our study, less than 10% ($n = 15$) of the respondents believed they had no need for educational

preparation. The fear of losing what appears to be a small percentage of families may prevent the implementation of mandated training as a means of retaining the majority.

To be useful, the mandated training must directly meet the needs of foster families, first, and the agency, second. To meet their needs, foster families must have a role in developing educational content. Respondents to the survey indicated that training content is more useful when it focuses on specific behaviors of the foster child. For example, courses are helpful when they focus on the way a child acts or on how to get a child to behave, rather than on normal development or how to comply with the agency's discipline policy. The agency should deliver a message through educational activities: We want to help you learn how you can better do what you want to do as a foster parent.

The organization of educational experiences for foster parents should facilitate their participation. The respondents report only moderate income and very busy schedules. Education should not be too costly for the family. The agency should consider providing for or reimbursing child care and transportation expenses incurred by the family. Incentives should be developed to encourage participation. Incentives could include certificates of completion, increased status in the agency, or increased rates for those families completing a level of training. The accomplishments of foster families should be recognized annually with an activity that calls the community's attention to the service of foster families.

When continuing education is mandated for foster parents, it is essential that a variety of classes be available which target different levels of experience and types of children in the family's care. As was described in the recruitment process, evaluation should be central to determining the relevance and quality of the educational experiences and foster parents should be included in any evaluation process. A training needs assessment can be used at each training session to accomplish this.

Finally, parents can develop their skills and competence to serve the agency as a resource for both the planning and the delivery of continuing education. Trained and supervised parents can extend the resources of staff as trainers at little cost to the agency.

Here again the five year plan rests on specific components that change annually dependent on the families, the children in care, and the administrative system. Attention to agency policies, educational opportunities, and the role of foster parents in delivering that education remain constant over time. Details of what occurs each year should develop in response to on-going needs assessment and evaluation.

Implications

A surprising finding from the Virginia studies indicates that there are more than enough foster care placements to respond to the number of children in care. Many approved families have no children placed with them. Other families were approved for more children than are in their care. Yet, many foster care administrators and supervisors reported a lack of foster care homes in their locality. It appears that the homes that are available do not match the needs of children in the foster care system. This finding suggests that agencies in the planning phase of a recruitment and retention strategy, first, should analyze characteristics of families who are approved and are not being utilized. The agency should develop a plan for removing from the approved status those families unable to meet the current needs. Clearly every effort through supervision and training should be undertaken to enable families to stretch to respond to the current needs of children; however, some families will not choose to serve this need. In addition, normal life changes will also call for closure of some foster homes. To focus on these homes as a potential source of care when their situations stabilize is not fruitful. The system should focus on recruitment and development of new foster families rather than using agency resources to reawaken old ones. The continued interest of these non-active families in children in need of care can be captured by the agency in other ways. Some may help in the recruitment of other families, while some may serve to facilitate foster care training programs. What should be avoided is underutilized families telling the community that no new homes are needed when analysis of the children in need of care might indicate lack of match resulting in underutilization.

The recruitment and retention model recommended here calls for development of a five-year campaign. The assumption is that short term campaigns do not provide long term or on-going results for the agency. With long term commitment, a structure will be in place and an agency will be able to respond to the needs of the children in care as they arise.

Foster parents in this study reported that it took them one to twenty years from first hearing about the need for foster parents to the application process. A recruitment strategy must be in place to respond to these families when they decide to join the foster care team. A retention strategy must also be in place to engage families in on-going renewal efforts to continue their commitment to providing care.

Agency resources including money and staff must be allocated to the recruitment and retention effort if it is to have any measure of success. Developing effective marketing and retention material requires time and money. The agency must have a long term, substantial commitment to the requirements before beginning the process.

This model has a number of advantages for the child welfare agency. First, there is a lower cost for development because of using in-house resources rather than hiring consultants. Second, since internal staff provide the ideas and the plan, methods and techniques for recruitment and retention reflect the unique strengths and needs of the organization. There is also greater administrative control over the process and greater flexibility to assess changing needs as they occur.

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