

**Department of Health and Human Services**

**OFFICE OF  
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**Retaining  
Foster Parents**



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Inspector General**

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# ***OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL***

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## PURPOSE

To identify challenges in retaining foster parents.

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## BACKGROUND

State child welfare agencies are tasked with the responsibility of protecting children from abuse and neglect, which sometimes requires that children be removed from their homes and placed in foster care. Based on information reported to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) via the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, as of March 31, 2000, there were 581,000 children in foster care. Forty-seven percent of those children were cared for in non-relative foster family homes.

The ACF has regulatory oversight of the Title IV-E foster care program. The Title IV-E foster care program is designed to assist States in covering the costs for children in foster care by providing States with unlimited matching funds for children who meet income eligibility and other program requirements. Federal expenditures for the Title IV-E foster care program expenses totaled \$4 billion in fiscal year (FY) 1999 and \$4.3 billion in FY 2000. Federal funding for the Title IV-E foster care program totaled \$4.4 billion in FY 2001. Estimated Federal funding for the program is \$5.1 billion in FY 2002.

This report focuses on States' efforts to retain foster care families. A separate report, "Recruiting Foster Parents," (OEI-07-00-00600), addresses the issues associated with the recruitment of these families. We used two mechanisms to conduct this inspection. The primary source of the information presented in this report stems from focus group discussions with child welfare staff and foster parents in five States. We used a mail survey to obtain additional information from the foster care program managers in the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands to determine their efforts to retain foster care families.

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## FINDINGS

### **Foster Families Desire Greater Opportunity to Voice Their Concerns**

Foster parents assert that they have many expectations placed on them by the foster care agencies, but are frustrated by their perception that they have no voice in many important decisions regarding the lives of the foster children in their care. Suggestions by foster parents concerning the needs and best interests of foster children can go unheeded.

## **They Experience Limited Caseworker Support**

Caseworkers are a potentially valuable resource to the foster care program because they can provide foster families with the support and assistance necessary to facilitate smooth transitions into temporary homes for foster children. However, foster parents said caseworkers are often inaccessible and slow to respond to the needs of children and foster parents. Multiple responsibilities placed on caseworkers contribute to unmanageable workloads and high turnover, creating a disconnect in relationships between foster parents and caseworkers. Because of this, foster parents expressed difficulty establishing positive rapport with caseworkers.

## **They Need More Help Obtaining Services for Themselves and Their Foster Children**

Because children enter foster care with more health and behavior problems than in the past, the need for quality and accessible services has increased significantly. However, foster parents are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain necessary support services, such as respite, child care, dental, medical, and mental health, for the children in their care.

## **False Allegations of Abuse and Investigations Trouble Foster Parents**

Foster parents and caseworkers agree that foster families are often falsely accused of abuse or neglect by the children entrusted to their care. Many new foster parents are unaware of the intrusiveness and impact investigations of such abuse and neglect have on the lives of foster parents. Foster families decide to exit the system because of the repercussions from false allegations by foster children.

## **Program Managers Lack Data Needed to Improve Retention**

States lack the performance indicators and data collection tools needed to accurately assess why families choose to discontinue fostering. The absence of these data elements may explain why there are discrepancies between what foster parents and foster care program managers consider the reasons families choose to no longer continue fostering.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Foster parents who decide to no longer foster leave with a wealth of experience and knowledge, and the foster care program loses a home for a child in need. While foster parents leave the system for a variety of reasons, many leave because they are frustrated and exhausted. They are weary from navigating a foster care system that is difficult and inoperable. To facilitate the transition of the foster care program to adapt to the changes

of today's American families and improve retention practices, we offer suggestions and recommendations to both States and ACF which will facilitate:

- ! access to needed services;
- ! improved foster parent supports; and
- ! the collection of information to identify and address the challenges associated with retaining foster parents.

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## **AGENCY COMMENTS**

We received comments on this report from ACF. The ACF concurs with our findings and recommendations, stating that the information presented in this report will be useful to them in their continued efforts to meet the needs of this country's children and families. Their comments emphasize ACF's continued focus on the importance of children's issues. In addition, ACF provided important contextual information and suggestions which served to enhance the report. We have made revisions to the report based on ACF's comments. The full text of their comments is contained in the appendix.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## PURPOSE

To identify challenges in retaining foster parents.

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## BACKGROUND

The ideal foster care system would have a sufficient number of foster families with the skills to meet the needs of children removed from their homes. However, States are experiencing a shortage of families willing to provide foster care, especially those willing or able to meet the specific needs of the children in care (e.g., children with mental disabilities, physical disabilities, behavior problems). These shortages are indicative of States' problems recruiting foster families ("Recruiting Foster Parents," OEI-07-00-00600) and retaining those families already in the system. This report identifies why non-relative foster families discontinue fostering as described by foster parents, caseworkers, and program managers.

The majority of children in the foster care system are cared for in foster family homes; the remainder are cared for in institutions, group homes, or other group settings. Based on information reported to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) by 45 jurisdictions, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, via the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for the semi-annual reporting period March 31, 2000, approximately 581,000 children were in foster care. Forty-seven percent of those children were cared for in non-relative foster family homes. The remaining 53 percent were cared for in a variety of foster care settings as outlined in the table on the following page. Between April 1, 1998, and March 31, 1999, the number of children in foster care increased by 38,000. The mean length of time a child remained in foster care was 32 months.

The ideal foster care system would have a sufficient number of families with the skills to meet the needs of the children removed from their homes. Retaining foster parents, especially those willing to care for children with mental, behavioral, or emotional issues is essential to States efforts to provide care for children in need.

**Placement Settings of Children in Foster Care  
During Fiscal Year 2000**

Placement Setting	Children In Placement	
	Percent of Foster Children	Number of Foster Children
Foster Family Homes (Non-Relative)	47	274,100
Foster Family Homes (Relative)	26	151,864
Institutions	10	57,590
Group Homes	8	46,279
Pre-Adoptive Homes	4	22,484
Trial Home Visits (with own families)	2.7	15,818
Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelters	1.4	7,886
Supervised Independent Living Facilities	.9	4,979
Total Number of Children in Foster Care	100	581,000

*Source: AFCARS 2000*

*\* Pre-Adoptive Homes, Trial Home Visits (with child's family), Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelters, Supervised Independent Living Facilities*

*Federal Role in Foster Care*

Federal financial assistance for children and families began with implementation of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, Title IV-A of the Social Security Act, in 1935. The Federal role in foster care began in 1961, when Federal funds were made available to provide maintenance payments for children removed from AFDC eligible families in accordance with Federal requirements.

The Federal role was further expanded with implementation of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272). The Act amended child welfare services laws to institute financial incentives for States to provide certain protections for children in foster care under Section 427 of the Social Security Act (Title IV-B) and established the Title IV-E foster care program. As a result, the foster care component of the AFDC program was transferred to the new Title IV-E program in October 1982, and Federal Title IV-E foster care funds became available to provide maintenance payments for children removed from AFDC eligible families in accordance with Federal requirements. As such, States can claim reimbursement for foster care maintenance payments made on behalf of children who meet the eligibility criteria outlined in Section 472 of the Social Security Act. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 was intended to provide States with the necessary tools and incentives to achieve the safety, permanency, and well-being goals indicated in Public Law 96-272. As a result of ASFA, many States have chosen to recruit jointly for adoptive and foster families.



The Title IV-E foster care program is designed to assist States in providing safe and appropriate care for children in placements outside their homes, whether in foster family homes, residential child care facilities, or other eligible foster care facilities. The program provides unlimited matching funds to States to assist with the cost of foster care payments for children who meet income eligibility requirements and have been removed from their home as the result of a judicial determination that continuation in the home would be contrary to the welfare of the child. Funds are also available to cover certain administrative and training costs associated with the provision of foster care.

The ACF has regulatory oversight of the Title IV-E foster care program, including approval of State plans to ensure State foster care programs are operating within Federal guidelines. States administer the Title IV-E program in accordance with the approved State plans. The ACF has recently begun to monitor States' conformity with their State plans through Children and Family Services reviews.

The ACF also provides limited technical assistance to States through the Children's Bureau National Resource Centers. However, most network technical assistance is focused on safety and permanency placements of children who enter the child welfare system. States can also request onsite training and technical assistance from the Centers, but receive little, if any, technical assistance to assist them specifically with the retention of foster parents.

### *Funding for Foster Care*

Title IV-E is an entitlement program; therefore States can claim Federal reimbursement for foster care maintenance payments made on behalf of all children whose families meet the income and program eligibility criteria for program participation under Section 472 of the Social Security Act and implementing regulations. The ACF provides States with Federal funds by reimbursing a certain percentage of each State's own expenditures for foster care maintenance costs. The rates at which the Federal government reimburses the States' Title IV-E expenditures for the cost of foster care maintenance are the same rates at which the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services matches State expenditures for medical assistance (Medicaid), and range between 50 and 78 percent. The Federal match rates for administrative and training costs associated with the Title IV-E foster care program are set at 50 and 75 percent respectively.

Because the Title IV-E foster care program is an entitlement program, Federal expenditures for all Title IV-E program expenses are open-ended and will increase in accordance with State expenditures for eligible children. Federal expenditures for Title IV-E foster care program totaled \$4 billion in fiscal year (FY) 1999 and \$4.3 billion in FY 2000. Federal funding for the Title IV-E foster care program totalled \$4.4 billion in FY 2001. Estimated Federal funding for the program is \$5.1 billion in FY 2002.

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## METHODOLOGY

We used two mechanisms to conduct this inspection. We judgementally selected a sample of five States (California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas) as the primary source for data collection. Based on FY 1999 AFCARS data reported to ACF, approximately 53 percent of the nation's foster children reside in these 5 States. In addition to geographic diversity, the five States provided a mix of both county administered (California and New York) and State administered (Florida, Illinois, and Texas) foster care programs.

In the five States, we collected in-depth information about retention issues through personal interviews with State foster care program managers, and focus group interviews with child welfare staff and current and former foster parents. Child welfare staff interviewed included caseworkers, caseworker supervisors, foster care recruitment specialists, and staff from private foster care agencies with whom the State foster care agencies contract. At a minimum, we conducted one foster parent and one foster care program staff focus group interview in both an urban and rural location in each of the five States. In total, we conducted 14 foster parent and 11 child welfare staff focus groups in the 5 States, interviewing 115 foster parents and 107 child welfare staff respectively.

We also used a mail survey to solicit information from the foster care program managers for the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico to determine their efforts to retain foster care families. We received survey responses from 41 foster care program managers. We did not receive responses from the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Washington, or Wisconsin. The completed survey from Kentucky was received after our analysis was completed. However, these 12 entities account for only 19 percent of the children in non-relative foster care homes and 9 percent of the total number of the children in foster care.

The report focuses primarily on information provided by foster parents. We believed they were best positioned to describe issues related to retention. When we were able, we linked the statements of foster parents with those of caseworkers and program managers. It should be noted that we made no attempt to assess State reimbursement rates for foster care.

We conducted this inspection in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

# FINDINGS

The Title IV-E foster care program was developed in an era when women typically worked at home to maintain their households and care for children and other family members. Today, the world is different. In two-parent families, both parents often work outside the home, leaving their children in the care of daycare providers or other care givers. An ever-increasing number of households are managed by single working parents. However, the foster care program has failed to keep pace with changes in the American family. Foster parents believe foster care programs continue to operate based on the assumption that they can willingly choose not to work, be available at all times, and independently locate and secure the services necessary to meet the needs of the children in their care.

During the course of this inspection, we had the opportunity to talk with foster parents with varying levels of experience in the foster care system. Some foster parents had cared only for one child, while others had entered the foster care system only as an avenue to adoption. Other foster parents had cared for hundreds of children over the course of many years. Despite these differences, most foster parents said fostering affords them opportunities to give back to their communities and make a difference in the lives of the children placed in their care. Every foster parent we spoke with said they had, at some time, considered leaving the foster care system. Even so, many foster parents continue to foster because of the personal satisfaction they receive from fostering.

In our discussions with foster parents, caseworkers, and program managers, we were advised of the many frustrating reasons families choose to no longer foster. Many of the reasons are not new and little has changed over the years. What has changed are family dynamics and the increased needs of foster children, greatly intensifying the challenges faced by foster parents. Foster parents in all five States visited indicated that children coming into care have more behavioral problems than in the past (e.g., reactive attachment disorder, higher incidence of physical and/or sexual abuse), creating a greater need for support and assistance from foster care agencies and caseworkers.

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## **Foster Families Desire Greater Opportunity to Voice Their Concerns**

The reality of foster care programs is that foster parents are often left to their own devices to navigate the complex foster care system. According to foster parents, families willing to provide safe homes for foster children receive only limited information to assist them in locating and obtaining the services necessary to meet the needs of children in their care. Foster parents said inadequate supports, limited agency recognition, and the financial strain of fostering often leaves them feeling frustrated and unappreciated.

### *Insufficient Agency Supports Discourages Foster Parents*

Many foster parents expressed feeling unsupported and unappreciated by foster care agencies. Many families believe caseworkers and agency staff fail to value their suggestions and opinions regarding the needs of children in their care. They were also unaware of any formal procedures to allow them to voice their concerns. Foster parents said they are the most knowledgeable of the needs of the children in their care, and believe it is essential that they be included as part of the “team” involved in decisions concerning foster children in their care. However, we heard several instances in which families were left out of the important decisions concerning the children (e.g., returning children to their biological parents, medical necessities, psychological treatment options).

Foster parents in many States have developed local foster parent associations. Statewide foster parent associations also exist in 36 of the 41 States responding to our survey. Local organizations maintained and administered by foster parents strive to provide foster families with resources and supports that they might otherwise be without (e.g., clothing, food, cleaning supplies). Several families indicated these local associations are a valuable resource, but are weakened by their inability to influence local foster care program administrators and legislators.

### *Foster Parents Pay for Additional Expenses*

Foster parents in all five States described incurring expenses exceeding their foster care reimbursement and the negative impact it has on retention. During foster parent focus groups, we heard stories of families receiving children with nothing more than the clothes they were wearing at the time. In other instances, families have paid for transportation to numerous medical, psychological, and caseworker appointments. Foster parents emphasized the needs of these children are often immediate. To ensure their social development, it is equally important that foster children participate in extra-curricular activities (e.g., sporting and social events). However, foster parents are often left to pay for the costs associated with a foster child’s participation in these activities (e.g., sports equipment and fees). In all five site visits, foster parents reported contemplating no longer fostering because of the additional financial strain it places on them.

Foster care program managers and caseworkers did not perceive the expense of fostering as important an element in retention as foster parents. In fact, only six of the program managers responding to our survey cited financial issues as a primary barrier to retaining foster families. While caseworkers included in our focus groups were more sensitive to the impact that additional expenses have on foster families, they believed a lack of available services has a greater impact on retention than do expenses associated with fostering.

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## They Experience Limited Caseworker Support

The foster care system is designed as a system of supports, primarily targeted to promote the safety and well-being of each child in care. An essential link in providing a safe and nurturing environment for the children in foster care is the relationship between caseworkers and foster parents. Caseworkers are most often the front line support to foster parents. When poor relationships exist between caseworkers and foster parents, the availability of services and information needed to make the best choices for foster children becomes limited.

### *Caseworkers are too Often Inaccessible*

In each of the five States we visited, foster parents reported the need for greater support and assistance from caseworkers, and said they are encountering greater difficulty accessing caseworkers. Several of the foster parents said that caseworkers did not return their calls for days or even weeks. Even when able to contact caseworkers, foster parents said they have experienced difficulty in getting them to respond to their needs in a timely manner. Caseworker unresponsiveness left foster parents feeling frustrated and uncertain about how to resolve problems.

When asked about their inaccessibility, caseworkers agreed that they are often difficult to reach or slow to respond. They attributed their inaccessibility to multiple responsibilities and high caseloads. For the 28 States that reported caseworker caseloads, the average caseload per worker ranged from 8 to 66, and may include case management for the child's entire family. In addition to their regular caseloads, many caseworkers are also required to assist in recruiting, training, and licensing new foster parents; some are responsible for facilitating pre-service training classes for prospective foster parents; some caseworkers attend court proceedings involving foster children; and some assist families in completing home studies. These additional responsibilities further limit caseworkers' abilities to address foster families' concerns in an efficient and timely manner.

### *High Caseworker Turnover Leads to a Lack of Rapport*

In all five site visits, foster parents expressed difficulty in creating a consistent rapport with caseworkers because caseworker tenure is short, thus creating a revolving door of employees within the agencies. Of the 30 State responses we received to a question about caseworker tenure, foster care program managers in 13 States indicated the average tenure for child welfare workers in their States ranged between 13 and 24 months; seven program managers reported the average tenure to be between 25 and 48 months. Foster parents said they find it difficult to build rapport and a positive working relationship with caseworkers because new workers are constantly being assigned to the children in their care.

Foster care caseworker positions tend to be entry-level and are usually filled with recent college graduates who may not fully understand the role the foster parent plays in the

lives of the children in their care. Often, new caseworkers have limited child welfare experience and may be unfamiliar with the types of children in foster care. They may also be unfamiliar with the available services or how to access them. Foster parents in focus groups described what they perceived as a lack of training for new caseworkers regarding effective communication with foster children and parents, and contend that the lack of training is manifested in the treatment they receive from caseworkers.

### *Multiple Caseworkers Create Difficulties*

Foster parents also expressed frustration in dealing with multiple caseworkers. Because caseworkers are assigned to individual children or sibling groups, foster families caring for more than one foster child may have several caseworkers. As such, foster parents often must deal with differing expectations regarding the kind of care and services the children need. Additionally, appointments with caseworkers and foster children become numerous and burdensome as foster parents attempt to coordinate their schedules and those of the children with their assigned caseworkers. For families already facing excessive demands on their time and energy, these situations can be particularly difficult.

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## **They Need More Help Obtaining Services for Themselves and Their Foster Children**

Caring for foster children can be more demanding than caring for one's own children. This situation is readily apparent in families caring for both their birth children and foster children in their care. Parents must take special care when securing child care or respite services. They must seek medical and dental services that meet the requirements of the program. While Medicaid is available to pay for dental and medical services for foster children, these services are limited in their locality and availability. Ultimately, the burden to procure these necessities rests primarily on the shoulders of foster parents.

### *Respite and Child Care Services are Limited*

In four States, foster parents expressed frustration with insufficient or non-existent respite and child care services. Foster parents portray these services as paramount in the retention of families because they allow foster parents to work, complete other necessary activities (e.g., taking other children to medical appointments and attending school conferences), and provide opportunities for foster parents to take a break from the physical and emotional stress that accompanies fostering. Obtaining these services can be problematic because some agencies require that respite and child care providers be licensed and graduates of the pre-service training classes required of foster parents. Such requirements, although imposed to ensure the safety of children in foster care, greatly limit the pool of families. In addition, families report receiving little, if any, information regarding respite care givers and are often forced to seek respite services on their own. Program managers also alerted us to the fact that agencies limit the number of hours for which families can claim reimbursement for respite care each month, and that some agencies provide no reimbursement for such care.

Despite foster parent concerns about the lack of respite and child care, State foster care program managers frequently did not rate these services as important to retention. Only 14 of 41 program managers listed the need for respite and child care as important services in the retention of foster care families. These results may partially reflect the State's own difficulty in addressing this need.

When asked about foster parents' concerns regarding the lack of respite and child care, State foster care program managers and caseworkers noted that the difficulties families have in obtaining those services may be a result of limited State funds. One foster care program manager said that there are times when they do not inform families about child care services because they lack the fiscal resources to administer them.

### *Dental and Medical Services are Difficult to Obtain*

In four of the site visits, foster parents expressed frustration with the lack of dental care available to foster children. They report that access to dental care is difficult because of the limited number of dentists who accept Medicaid. The lack of dentists is particularly problematic because most States require that children receive dental services while in the care of a foster family. Foster parents said they are finding it increasingly difficult to locate dentists willing to accept Medicaid patients, traveling long distances to acquire dental services, and encountering problems scheduling dental appointments (i.e., some dentists see Medicaid patients only on certain days of the week or month, during limited set hours, or only care for a limited number of Medicaid patients).

Foster parents also expressed difficulty locating and accessing other medical and mental health services. In three States, foster parents stated that medical care is very difficult to obtain because fewer physicians are participating in the Medicaid program. Like dentists, many of the physicians that do participate in the Medicaid program have chosen to limit the care they provide and the hours and days they will treat Medicaid patients. Because all children in foster care are Medicaid eligible, locating and obtaining providers who accept Medicaid is essential.

Only one of the State foster care program managers who responded to the survey listed access to medical care as one of the primary reasons families choose not to continue fostering. However, foster parents report that the difficulties associated with accessing medical care contribute to their fatigue and frustrations with fostering.

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## **False Allegations of Abuse and Investigations Trouble Foster Parents**

In every foster parent focus group conducted, foster parents expressed concerns about being investigated for false allegations of abuse and neglect. They said that, while they understand procedures to address allegations are essential in protecting children, false allegations can greatly harm the emotional well-being of foster parents. Such allegations can also be a financial drain on foster parents and affect their professional credibility. In

addition to the embarrassment and disruption that false allegations may bring, foster parents worry that their biological or adopted children will be removed from their home because of an allegation of abuse regarding a foster child.

According to foster parents who have been fostering for several years, many new foster families are unaware of the likelihood that they will be accused and investigated for abuse and are unprepared for the impact it will have on them. One experienced foster parent said “it’s not a matter of if you will be accused of abuse and neglect, but when you will be accused. If you remain a foster parent long enough, it will eventually happen to you.” The strong likelihood of being accused of abuse or neglect can lead families to leave the foster care system. Yet, only 8 of 41 State program managers selected investigations of abuse as one of the reasons families are leaving the system.

Another concern foster families have with abuse allegations is the length of time an unfounded or false allegation remains in the State system. Although the length of time varies from State to State, we heard that such allegations can remain in the State system as long as 7 years before they are expunged. Foster parents who have been cleared of all allegations brought against them contend that it is not merely the fact that their names are on record for an extended period of time, but that it is disheartening that their names were placed on record in the first place. Foster parents also said the investigations associated with such allegations leave them feeling insulted, distrusted, and potentially labeled as child abusers. Many foster parents expressed the emotional trauma they felt after being accused of the very thing they are trying to prevent. False allegations of abuse strip foster parents of their trust in the State system and leave them feeling unprotected.

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## **Program Managers Lack the Data Needed to Improve Retention**

States lack the performance indicators, benchmarks, and data collection tools needed to accurately assess why families choose to discontinue fostering. Despite the fact that 30 of the 41 foster care program managers who responded to our survey said they attempt to determine why families are leaving, only 4 program managers indicated they had established benchmarks for retention and only 10 had developed retention goals. While some States have attempted to determine why foster parents leave (e.g., conducting exit interviews or follow up surveys), most States have no systematic approach to determine why foster parents choose not to continue fostering.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Every family leaving the foster care system takes with them many hours of specialized training. Those who have fostered for years also take with them their experience in navigating the system, in finding needed services, and in caring for children with varied problems. The loss of these trained and experienced foster parents greatly impacts the foster care program. We believe it may have an even greater impact on programs than failing to recruit new foster families.

Nevertheless, the foster parents with whom we spoke expressed a strong commitment to fostering. They are willing to commit time, resources, and energy to provide foster children with a stable and safe home environment. Yet, limited supports and a lack of services creates significant stresses and problems. Many foster parents struggle to care simultaneously for children, coordinate with multiple caseworkers, identify and access services, work, and maintain a household. It is imperative that efforts be made to reduce barriers to continued fostering.

## Suggested Improvements

Based on information provided by foster parents, foster care program managers, and caseworkers, we offer the following suggestions to State foster care program managers, local public and private foster care agencies, and foster care associations to augment the supports and services available to foster families:

- ! develop a State-wide “Foster Parent Tool Kit” to provide foster parents with information about what they can expect from foster care agencies, their role, rights, and protections as foster parents, and procedures for voicing their concerns regarding the children in their care;
- ! promote the designation of foster parent advocates to work directly with foster parents and the agency to represent the concerns of foster families and give them a “voice” in determining both their best interests and the interests of the children in their care;
- ! encourage networking and information sharing among foster parents through local and national foster parent associations, support groups, foster parent community newsletters, and agency alerts regarding policy changes;
- ! establish “clothes closets” to disseminate clothing and provide household necessities to foster parents in an effort to reduce their out-of-pocket expenses and designate funds to cover one-time expenses (e.g., sports equipment);

- ! provide opportunities to develop consistent rapport between foster parents and caseworkers;
- ! promote collaborative efforts by ACF, State agencies, and national organizations to make child care and respite care services more accessible to foster parents;
- ! establish local networks of licensed child and respite care providers;
- ! provide foster parents with information (e.g., foster parent handbooks, manuals) to assist them in navigating the foster care system and accessing dental, medical, and any other needed services; and
- ! provide information to foster parents on how to cope emotionally and financially with investigations of abuse. This can be accomplished by including the information in existing training curriculum, and developing training specifically focused on investigation survival.

## **Develop Retention Tracking Systems**

We noted numerous instances where foster care program managers did not fully appreciate the extent to which foster families viewed aspects of the program as barriers to continued fostering. We attribute this, in part, to the lack of retention goals and benchmarks that States currently utilize. To the extent that resources are available, ACF should provide technical assistance to assist States in improving retention through the

- ! development of outcome-based retention strategies to determine why families choose not to continue fostering;
- ! development of data tracking tools to collect retention information;
- ! establishment of benchmarks and performance indicators; and
- ! collection of retention data.

## AGENCY COMMENTS

We received comments on this report from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The ACF concurs with our findings and recommendations, stating that the information presented in this report will be useful to them in their continued efforts to meet the needs of this country's children and families. Their comments emphasize ACF's continued focus on the importance of children's issues. In addition, ACF provided important contextual information in which, for example, ACF notes that States can use some Federal funds for child care and respite care services and that 64 percent of foster children adopted in 1999 were adopted by foster parents. This information is beneficial in understanding the overall issues related to foster care. We believe that this kind of information provides valuable insight for the States, counties, and others working to enhance foster care programs across the country.

We have made revisions to the report based on ACF's comments. The full text of their comments is contained in the appendix.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIE  
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TO: Janet Rehnquist  
Inspector General

FROM: Wade F. Horn, Ph.D. *Wade F. Horn*  
Assistant Secretary  
for Children and Families

SUBJECT: Comments on the Office of Inspector General's Draft Report: "Challenges  
in Retaining Foster Parents" (OEI-07-00-00601)

Attached are the Administration for Children and Families' comments on the Inspector General's  
Draft Report: "Challenges in Retaining Foster Parents" (OEI-07-00-00601).

Should you have questions concerning our comments, please call me at (202) 401-2337.

Attachment

**COMMENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ON  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL'S DRAFT REPORT, "CHALLENGES IN  
RETAINING FOSTER PARENTS" (OEI-07-00-006001)**

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the above-captioned report. This Office of Inspector General's (OIG) report will assist ACF as we continue our efforts to work with States and communities to meet the needs of children at risk of harm and their families.

**OIG Recommendation**

**Suggested Improvements**

Based on information provided by foster parents, foster care program managers, and caseworkers, we offer the following suggestions to State foster care program managers, local public and private foster care agencies, and foster care associations to augment the support and services available to foster families:

- develop a State-wide foster parent Bill of Rights to empower foster parents and provide them with information about procedures to voice their concerns;
- promote the designation of foster parent advocates to work directly with foster parents and the agency to represent the concerns of foster families and give them a "voice" in determining both their best interests and the interests of the children in their care;
- encourage networking and information sharing among foster parents through local and national foster parent associations, support groups, foster parent community newsletters, and agency alerts regarding policy changes;
- establish "clothes closets" to disseminate clothing and provide household necessities to foster parents in an effort to reduce their out-of-pocket expenses and designate funds to cover one-time expenses (e.g., sports equipment and prom attire);
- provide opportunities to develop consistent rapport between foster parents and caseworkers by assigning each foster family a single caseworker and assigning caseworker mentors;
- promote collaborative efforts by ACF, State agencies, and national organizations to make child care and respite care services more accessible to foster parents;
- establish local networks of licensed child and respite care providers;
- provide foster parents with information (e.g., foster parent handbooks, manuals) to

assist them in navigating the foster care system and accessing dental, medical, and any other needed services; and

- provide information to foster parents on how to cope emotionally and financially with investigations of abuse. This can be accomplished by including the information in existing training curriculum, and developing training specifically focused on investigation survival.

#### Agency Comment

The recommendations focus on clear communication of expectations between the agency and prospective and current foster parents. They are consistent with effective strategies for retaining foster parents and are encouraged by the Children's Bureau. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), the Children's Bureau, strongly supports agency procedures that provide for open and clear communication with foster parents. The Children's Bureau further supports foster parent retention strategies through the provision of technical assistance to States and localities and at national and regional conferences that showcase States or local agencies that have developed creative programs for foster parent retention.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 requires States to notify foster care providers, relative caregivers and pre-adoptive families of periodic reviews and permanency hearings held by courts and administrative bodies regarding the children in their care. These caregivers must also be given an opportunity to be heard at these reviews and hearings so that decision-makers have all relevant information on the child's safety and well being. It is the expectation of the Children's Bureau that this provision is implemented in the States and that foster parents be made aware of these opportunities.

The Children's Bureau recognizes the need for social workers to develop a good rapport with foster parents. However, there is a struggle that agencies have in balancing the needs of foster families with the needs of children in care. The recommendation that each foster family be assigned a single caseworker could negatively impact the children in care by causing the children to be moved to the caseload of a new social worker when the children have a change in placement. Good social work practice indicates that the primary consideration in assigning caseworkers should be the needs of the children and the experience and ability of the caseworker to meet those needs. Therefore, it is important to have a consistent caseworker whenever possible for each child or sibling group regardless of the home in which they may be placed.

The report noted that some States have little resources for reimbursing child care and respite care services. Federal rules, however, are clear that States can use Federal funds for some of these activities. States can claim the cost of child care, as part of title IV-E foster care maintenance payments, when foster parents work outside of the home. States can also pay for child care expenses when foster parents are attending administrative reviews, permanency hearings, case conferences, and foster parent training. In addition, States can use their title IV-B, subpart 1, child welfare services funds to pay for respite care. Federal regulations require that child care and respite care providers be either approved or licensed in accordance with State standards.

The report describes the lack of accessible dental and medical services due to a shortage of Medicaid providers. The recommendation relating to this need was to provide foster parents with information about accessing services that already exist. The Children's Bureau in conjunction with Regional ACF offices has documented gaps in some localities in dental and medical services to children in final reports of the Child and Family Service (CFS) reviews. Where States do not meet substantial conformity on outcomes related to dental and health care or in making available the necessary array of services, they are required to enter into a program improvement plan that will address these areas. Providing adequate medical and dental services to children does encourage foster parent retention.

### OIG Recommendation

#### **Develop Retention Tracking Systems**

We noted numerous instances where foster care program managers did not fully appreciate the extent to which foster families viewed aspects of the program as barriers to continued fostering. We attribute this, in part, to the lack of retention goals and benchmarks that States currently utilize. As such, ACF should provide technical assistance to States to assist them in improving retention through the

- development of outcome-based retention strategies to determine why families choose not to continue fostering;
- development of data tracking tools to collect retention information;
- establishment of benchmarks and performance indicators; and
- collection of retention data.

### Agency Comment

Many States are in the process of developing child welfare performance measures; some are including measures that will identify retention efforts leading to an experienced pool of foster care parents. Information obtained from such initiatives could lead to a better foundation of knowledge nationally especially with respect to the most cost-effective strategies. The report mentions that 30 States responding to the survey are attempting to determine why foster families are leaving. Including information regarding their efforts would be very instructive and assist in improving all States efforts in this area.

### Additional Agency Comments

To understand the current picture of available placements in foster homes, it is important to include the fact that foster parents overwhelmingly adopt children from the foster care system. In 1999, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data showed

that foster parents adopted 64 percent of children placed for adoption from the foster care system. This has been a consistent trend for a number of years. Although a foster family that adopts does not always leave the system, adoption generally means that there is one less opening for a foster child in that home. There are many reasons why we want to encourage foster parent adoption, but the impact on available placements for other foster children cannot be ignored.

The report also states, "...most network technical assistance is focused on safety and permanency placements of children who enter the child welfare system." States can also request on-site training and technical assistance on foster care retention strategies from the Children's Bureau's National Resource Center (NRC) for Foster Care and Permanency Planning. This NRC provides direct services if they are requested, and all States that have requested assistance in the area of foster home retention have received appropriate help. The NRC also has disseminated excellent materials on foster care retention. Currently available on the NRC's web site is last year's newsletter featuring such articles as, "Finding, Preparing and Supporting Foster and Adoptive Parent Resources." This newsletter includes an article by the Executive Director of the National Foster Parent Association, as well as other articles on retention by other respected professionals.

The foster parents in the focus groups indicated that abuse allegations remain in the "State system" for up to seven years before they are expunged. States that receive basic State grants under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) are required to develop procedures to promptly expunge any records that are accessible to the public or are used for background check purposes that are determined to be false or unsubstantiated allegations of abuse and neglect. However, States may keep such information in casework files to assist in assessing future risk and safety.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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