REACHING OUT TO FIND COMMON GROUND: SUCCESSFUL FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

By

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Abstract

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Foster homes are limited and there are not enough placements to meet the needs of local children and youth in the foster care system. Over the last few years as foster homes have dwindled, more and more foster children have had to be placed in foster homes out of county, away from their communities, their schools and their families. There is a fundamental need for recruitment and retention of foster care placements. Other counties in California have been successful in implementing foster parent recruitment that has generated enough foster homes to meet their needs for placements. One such program has been able to place more of their foster children in the county and is placing far less of their foster children in homes outside of the county. This project will explore successful lessons learned in the recruitment and retention of foster families through the interview of the creator and director of the program.
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Introduction

Project Context

In 2014 there were nearly 63,000 children reported to be in a foster care setting in California (Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 2016). Historically, in many rural California communities, there have not been enough foster homes to accommodate the number of children who must be removed from their parents or custodial caregiver due to neglect and or abuse. Rural areas are typically at a disadvantage. Not only economically, but in a basic knowledge of the needs of local families who provide foster care. Furthermore, rural communities face challenges in their ability to inform the public about the need for foster care (Kathleen Belanger, 2013, p. 1). The main goal of my project is to elicit information from a rural county about recent successes in recruiting and retaining foster parents.

There is a fundamental need for more foster care families in many rural California counties. Along with a need for well trained, well intended foster parents. There is a need to build alliances within the communities’ who share the same concern for the children and their families. The vision of this project is for all foster children to have the option to be placed in their communities.
Practice and Positionality

I have worked at a rural child welfare services (CWS) for sixteen years. During that time, I have held the classification of child welfare social worker and have had many assignments. Recently I was classified as the placement social worker for CWS, and held that position for approximately five years. Placement social workers collaborate with foster family agencies who certify foster homes. The placement social worker maintains a relationship with state licensed foster homes and maintains communications with group homes and therapeutic care facilities. The placement social worker is responsible for locating placement when children are initially placed in foster care and when children in foster care have a need for a new placement. My original assignment was to work with foster family agencies to develop working relationships and attempt to develop similar visions of our shared expectations. What was evident was that placement stability was of utmost importance and goodness of fit was essential. That required asking foster parents what population of children they could best serve, and then honoring their boundaries. Placement disruption is not only traumatic on the foster child but also on the foster family.

The other vision that was agreed upon by CWS and the foster family agencies was that we should reconsider using those placements that were substandard, even if they were certified to provide foster care. Often times in rural communities we do not have access to a receiving home or emergency placements. There is desperation for placement and often-times only those homes that are marginal are available, and in that desperation
we use those homes. For example, we may have knowledge that a home has a supervision issues, or the home is unkempt. The foster parents may have demonstrated a lack of empathy and compassion for the experience of the children being brought to them. The shared vision was not to have those homes certified to provide foster care. We were successful in our vision. The fallout was that we are limited in our foster homes.

It has also been my observation that there was a time when a conventional family could be financially stable with one income, traditionally the father worked while the mother stayed home. It appears that our society has turned a corner, now mothers are also required to contribute to the finances of the home by working. Meaning the concept of becoming foster parents is not realistic to families who are busy providing for their own children.

Another change I have experienced in the last sixteen years is that the children who are being detained are unlike the children detained a decade ago. While children have always had an element of trauma based behaviors, many of the children being brought into foster care today are exposed prenatally to drug or alcohol abuse. Typically, the drug of choose has been methamphetamines. The children being detained today have been exposed to a different familial dysfunction because of the physical and emotional effects of methamphetamines on their parents. The children often have a new level of trauma based behaviors that foster families are not prepared to mitigate.
It has also been my experience that foster children need placement stability and that each time they experience a placement change, to include their initial removal from their parents, they experience trauma.

Complications Associated with Limited Foster Care Placements

There are complications when communities do not have enough foster care placements. It creates a macro level, negative affect, system wide, to include the following:

- Children are placed out-of-county at high rates
  - Children do not do well in placement
- Child welfare case carrying social workers are less familiar with the foster families when they are out-of-county placements
  - Foster Family Agency social workers have more interactions and work more directly with the children than county social workers
- School age children have to start new schools
  - Children don’t do well in school
- Children are being placed away from their parents, relatives and their communities
  - Family reunification services are hindered
  - More children are developing trauma based behaviors
• Relatives have less contact with the children due to the distance of placement from their place of residence.

• Visitations become challenging
  o Parents spend hours traveling to and from visits
  o Children miss school and spend hours traveling to and from visits

• The system suffers when agencies are understaffed and caseloads are high

• The quality of social work suffers

Project Aim

The hope of this project is to recruit more foster families’ in rural California counties where there are not enough foster care homes. My community partner asked that I research a California county that had successful recruiting and retention of foster homes in their county. I will provide literature about the need for stable foster homes in rural communities. This project will provide my community partner with a report documenting recommendations for successful recruitment and retention efforts for foster care placements.
Cynthia Crosson-Tower said it best when she wrote, “to better understand foster care today, we need to look at the origins of the foster care system” (Crosson-Tower, 2009, p. 305). In ancient times it was expected that children would belong to a family. When there was no family available for children it was a problem for society. A solution had to be found, and that solution was institutional care settings. These settings were detrimental to the health and overall well-being of children. In the early 1800’s the care of children changed. Children who lived in the larger cities and had no family were put on trains and met by families who lived in rural farming areas and wanted to care for children. After World War II, what we now recognize as foster care homes today began to develop, infants were being adopted at birth and children were being placed in family foster care settings. Much has been learned about the effects of congregate care versus family like settings and the nature of foster care has changed with the times. There has been much research around the best interest and needs of children who are separated from their birth family. For instance, protecting and nurturing children, ensuring that their emotional, physical, developmental, and medical needs are meet, implementing policy about permanency and time to permanency, and educating older foster youth about the transition to adulthood (Crosson-Tower, 2009, pp. 304-311).

Rural communities are often disadvantaged due to economics and the general population is not well informed about the needs of children and families in their communities (Belanger, 2013). For these reasons there are less foster care homes
available as a resource. For those community members who believe they are well informed about foster care, some may have poor perception about foster care. There are many factors that can lead up to this. For instance, other discouraged foster parents, the length of time it takes to become a foster parent, the process to become a foster parent, the lengthy paperwork and training. There is a general consensus that it has become increasingly more difficult to find families for the foster children entering the foster care system. Some research suggests that children coming into foster care today need more assistance than foster children of the past, and are more difficult to place. The children are older and often have more mental, behavioral, and emotional challenges. They continue to be victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. There is an overall concern that foster care has not changed, while the population of children and families has. Furthermore, strategies to recruit have not changed to keep pace with changing foster care needs. There should be a stronger educational framework that seeks to inform about trauma based behaviors, exposure to domestic violence, the consequences associated with abuse and neglect and pre-natal exposure to drugs and alcohol (Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).
Methodology

Through this project I plan to gather informative data about successful foster parent recruit techniques that have demonstrated growth. Once I have collected all the data I will share the information with my community partner who will determine if they implement these learned methods to recruit and retain foster parents.

Participants

I will first call and speak with the program director. I will explain the project and why I am conducting the research. I will ask to schedule an interview and I will email the consent. I will ask the director to sign the Informed Consent and mail it back to me through the United States Postal Service. Before the interview, questions will be answered and written consent will be obtained.

A telephone interview will be held with the director, the interview is expected to last no more than 2 hours, and the following questions will be asked.

1. Tell me about your program?
2. When did you start recruitment?
3. What strategies were implemented?
4. How many foster parents were recruited?
5. What was the time frame?
6. What worked well?
7. What concerns do you still have?
8. Are there any next steps in your program?

9. Lessons learned you like to pass on?

Data will be analyzed and successful program implementation ideas and lessons learned will be written into a report with formal recommendations for my community partner.
Results

This project was designed to look at a similar county’s successful foster parent recruitment and retention practices and programs. Although the program is small, within the last decade they have been able to recruit and retain foster parents for their community. The program is a non-profit organization, operated by one woman with a few support staff. The program is facilitated through the local college. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to the woman I interviewed, the Program Director and designer, as MW, she was the only staff person that I interviewed. MW has been a foster parent for approximately twenty years, she is also an adoptive mother. For twenty-five years MW has provided foster and kin-ship care education through the local college. She noticed that the county needed more foster parents. She knew that recruitment and retention of foster families would be enhanced by offering a network of interactive, supportive, and educational opportunities. She stated that she was watching the state and county licensed foster homes migrate to become Foster Family Agency homes. Foster Family Agencies are licensed through the State of California to certify foster parents. Foster Family Agency homes charge a higher rate per month for each foster child. They also provide more oversight and extra supervision of the foster homes. She also noticed that families were not providing foster care for long periods of time. When MW began this program 90% of foster children from her county were placed out of county. MW says that today very few children are placed out of county. MW started this program because she believed that foster parents could be better trained and retained. She started the program
ten years ago by approaching the county child welfare agency within her county. She proposed that First 5 funds (grant money) be used to recruit and train foster parents. The work started with surveys to assess current foster parents about their needs as foster parents; what was working, what wasn’t working and what needed to happen next. What she found was that foster parents felt overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy and frustration when trying to navigate the child welfare system. Furthermore, they believed they were not prepared to deal with the level of trauma, grief and loss the children were dealing with.

She began all of her work as a volunteer. During the first year of operation she was awarded a First 5 Grant in the amount of $33,000.00. The money was used to recruit at local events. For example, the county Fair, street festivals, adverstiment on grocery store carts, churches, schools, service clubs and professional offices. Also money was used to purchase banners, displays, and other circulation materials. She reports that they attended local events and public speaking opportunities. They hung banners throughout the city. During the first year they recruited twelve foster families. During the second year they recruited twenty-two families. After the first year they began to be awarded $100,000 a year for foster care recruitment and retention a year, this grant ended last year. They have established six other grants for recruitment and retention.

The program provides the training and support to families who eventually are licensed to provide care. The county and state still provide the license, but the county has agreed not to offer a license to a home that has not gone through MW’s program. Foster parents who successfully navigate through their program to completion must meet a
thirty-hour training requirement. She has developed a curriculum and facilitates these classes. The program has a mantra of “local families’ for local children”, and believes that quality families must be recruited. The classes are designed to offer networking, support, fun activities, positive parenting techniques, and child development curriculum. The classes focus on enhancing successful parent/child relationships that focus on trust, and working toward the best interest of the child. When questioned about ensuring the quality of foster parent, she stated that what she has discovered was that because families must be in class with her for the trainings she has become an “expert in elimination.” She stated that the training provided is meant to be honest and truthful about all the glory and trauma associated with being a foster parent, many families have eliminated themselves. In order for the trainings to remain relevant and meaningful to the children who will be served, the program meets with community partners monthly, they are accountable to a team of people. What she found to be successful in retention, was to ensure support with peer’s mentors and various other resources.

The only concerns for the program expressed during the interview was for the quality of care. She believes that quality of care is ensured by providing the thirty hours of training verses the twelve hours the state requires. Part of that assurance is all the experience MW brings to this program. The county has provided the program $100,000.00 to hire and train someone behind her, this is the sustainability plan for the program. She believes it is important to be as collaborative as possible in order to “save our place at the table” with the community and stake holders. (MW, 2016)
Next steps for their program will be to implement Resource Family Approval (RFA), implemented in January 2016 in her county. RFA is the new process of leveling the filed for relatives and non-relatives applying for foster care licenses or certification. It also provides more timeliness for children in permanency because concurrent planning homes are vetted in the process and home studies are completed. Within the first weeks of 2016 they had twelve RAF applications.

Lessons learned were that the best recruiters are other foster parents. Quality of care is what matters the most. Families should consider fostering because children need families. Foster care is not about building families; it’s about meeting the needs of children in foster care. MW believes that the program that was started ten years ago to recruit and retain foster parents is now an “institutionalized success”. (MW, 2016)
Conclusions

This project was designed so that I could interview a program that has been successful in recruiting and retaining foster parents. I chose the program because the demographics of the community are the same as the demographics of my community partner.

During the interview with MW I learned that there are no magic answers to solve the dilemma of limited foster homes in rural communities. However, I did learn that a few people can make a difference in a community.

My recommendations for my community partner will be to consider if recruitment and retention is a project for an in-house employees or a service that should be contracted out. Either way they will need to identify the funding resources, do they exist or do they need be created. There will need to be an outreach effort, and community education about the need and the process of becoming a foster parent. The community partner will need to identify what a good foster parent training curriculum would incorporate. If foster parent education is an in-house service, then they will need to identify the staff for that program. Any program that will have sustainability will have built-in, long term support for foster parents.

This project was limited by my inability to identify the program I interviewed and the community I serve in this paper. It was further restricted by the programs limited staff and their ability to spend time interviewing with me. This project provides a skeleton shell of a program that can be development with the right resources and staffing. It would
be helpful for my community partner to reach out to the program I examined as they are willing to share all of their literature and grant information that they have written. In fact, they are willing to allow a classroom of prospective foster parents in my community to attend their classes via the web if my community partner has a qualified facilitator with them. This is a project that will require time and resources, but ultimately, if successful, will provide our children with supported, stable and local caregivers.

I found this quote and it was fitting for what I found in MW’s program. “I can’t fix the world’s problems but I will do what I can to make a difference where I can”.

(Unknown, 2016)
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   http://adivineencounter.com/what-to-do/