

EXTRAORDINARY FOSTER PARENTS IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

*CHILD WELFARE INITIATIVE'S IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES IN
RECRUITING AND RETAINING NEW THERAPEUTIC FOSTER PARENTS*

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Child Welfare Initiative



Our Mission

The Child Welfare Initiative implements programs and practices that produce measurable improvements in the lives of children and families involved in child welfare systems.

Child Welfare Initiative
5757 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 448
Los Angeles, California 90036
telephone: (323) 549.3400
email: info@cwinitiative.org web: www.cwinitiative.org

Extraordinary Foster Parents in Los Angeles County

Child Welfare Initiative's Implementation of Best Practices in Recruiting and Retaining New Therapeutic Foster Parents

Background

The recruitment and retention of capable foster parents are persistent challenges for child welfare agencies. Foster parenting is demanding and turnover is high. At least 20% of all foster homes exit each year, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A significant portion of that attrition comes from new foster parents. The National Foster Parent Association estimates that as many as 60% of foster parents leave within the first year. Finding new parents, along with convincing experienced parents to stay, is a regular part of business for child welfare agencies.

The need for foster parents is most intense, however, for older children and adolescents, especially those with severe emotional and behavioral problems. California's Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) program is designed to serve children and youth ages 10 to 17 with serious emotional or behavioral problems. The ITFC program seeks to move young people with behavioral and mental health problems out of group homes and into family homes where they receive intensive support from qualified staff and highly trained foster parents before moving to a permanent home. Finding foster parents for the ITFC program has been a significant challenge.

In 2011, the United States District Court approved a settlement in the *Katie A., et al., vs. Diana Bonta, et al.*, (State of California and County of Los Angeles) lawsuit that required Los Angeles County to set aside \$17.3 million to provide ITFC homes for a minimum of 300 children and youth. Since then, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services has found only about 80 ITFC homes for these children, leaving 220 children without appropriate family homes.

Against this backdrop, the Child Welfare Initiative (CWI) began work to research then implement new and more effective approaches for foster parent recruitment and retention in Los Angeles County and elsewhere.

Best Practices Research

Since the mid-1990's, experts have recommended focusing on improving the public image of foster parents, relying on community groups in recruitment drives, and involving current foster parents in the recruitment of new parents. In 2002, the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Inspector General noted a growing need for additional foster parents who are willing and able to care for older foster children – particularly those with severe mental and behavioral problems. The

Office of the Inspector General concluded that the most effective means for finding and recruiting such parents were not traditional mass solicitation campaigns but targeted efforts that focused on word-of mouth recruitment where agencies ask foster parents to reach out directly to members of their family, friends, and community to find others who might be interested in fostering a child.

Recent efforts have employed more targeted approaches. Wisconsin launched a multi-year marketing campaign that used an assessment of the motivations of foster parents to drive the messaging. The California Department of Social Services found that in recent years, increased funding had gone to word-of-mouth and community-based recruiting, and Casey Family Programs reported that child welfare agencies had shown interest in moving from mass media campaigns toward smaller, targeted efforts to find capable foster parents. Recent work in Northern California identified personal and professional commonalities among high performing foster parents, then targeted community and civic organizations along with work environments where individuals with those characteristics were likely to be found. However, on a national level and in Los Angeles County, improvements have been inconsistent and reliance on broad, highly generalized campaigns has largely remained the norm.

Foster Parent Motivations, Characteristics, and Challenges

In order to learn about the characteristics and motivations of extraordinary foster parents, CWI partnered with six foster family agencies in Los Angeles County to obtain direct feedback from foster parents. Among other factors, CWI asked agencies to select foster parents from their existing pool of individual homes that agency social workers and staff felt would offer a safe and nurturing environment for their own children. CWI requested that agencies avoid identifying foster parents as extraordinary based on their simple willingness to take referred children or their overall compliance with an agency's policies or practices.

CWI's foster family agency partners referred a total of 40 foster parents: 24 traditional foster parents and 16 ITFC parents. CWI divided the foster parents into seven focus groups and interviewed each group for two hours. CWI retained an experienced marketing expert to ask each focus group of foster parents about their challenges, rewards, and motivations in foster parenting, and then to test a series of messaging themes for foster parent recruitment. In addition, CWI asked agency-identified foster parents to complete the Big Five Inventory (BFI), a nationally normed self-reported personality questionnaire that locates individuals along five continua of personality traits:

- Extroversion v. Introversion
- Agreeableness v. Antagonism
- Conscientiousness v. Lack of Direction
- Emotional Stability v. Neuroticism
- Openness v. Closedness to Experience

Each BFI domain is scored from one to five with higher scores showing a tendency toward extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness.

CWI's focus groups provided critical insight into the **motivations** of foster parents. Foster parents identified as the highest performing described being "called" to this work. For many such parents, faith helped them cope with the challenges of taking in a child. Others felt they could make a meaningful impact beyond the life of an individual child by "breaking the chain" of abuse and neglect. Still others noted that they had the time or wanted children in their home; empty nesters commented that they fostered children because they missed the energy that young people brought to their lives.

CWI's focus groups described the **rewards** of being a foster parent. Foster parents enjoyed seeing a child interact appropriately with others, growing more self-sufficient, demonstrating trust, and exhibiting loving behaviors. As rewarding, parents said, is helping a child move from destructive behaviors to a position of safety and trust with his or her foster family.

With its foster parent focus groups, CWI explored the **challenges** of being a foster parent in Los Angeles County specifically. The work of raising a child, especially one with emotional or behavioral problems, can be "frustrating, despair-inducing, and exhausting." Some parents fostering children with behavioral and mental health problems felt they were not told of the full breadth of their child's challenges in advance or adequately trained to handle those challenges. Foster parents also asserted that social workers, therapists and other support staff without parenting experience lacked credibility.

Foster parents **called for changes to agency practice** as well. Foster parents wanted foster family agencies to provide better reporting after in-home visits, preferring that agency staff treat them as members of the team. Parents also stated a preference for consistent respite care providers so that the children would develop relationships with the temporary caregivers. Foster parents requested regular contact with their peers, especially other foster parents engaged in parenting children with similar challenges.

Finally, foster parents shared what they regarded as the **key characteristics** of an exceptional foster parent. They highlighted patience as a crucial attribute; foster parents felt they needed to demonstrate patience with the child, the child welfare system, and themselves. Foster parents working with the most vulnerable youth noted the importance of “thick skin” to cope with the challenge of a sometimes angry and mistrustful child. Relatedly, they stressed having empathy for both the child in their care and the biological parents that are often so important to the child.

The BFI provided a different look at valuable foster parent characteristics. Foster parents identified by agencies as exceptional evidenced high levels of extroversion and openness, very high levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness, and moderately high levels of emotional stability.

BFI Scores from CWI’s Foster Parent Sample (Scale of 1-5)

Domain	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Emotional Stability	Openness
Average Score	3.73	4.22	4.29	2.97	3.84

Critically, foster family agency staff independently confirmed the importance of characteristics such as agreeableness and openness as valuable, which may reflect the support that foster families can offer agency staff in their work as team. Equally important and apparent from the BFI were characteristics such as conscientiousness and emotional stability, which play a critical role in the life of a child in a foster home and the daily therapeutic interventions that a foster parent offers in helping a child heal.

CWI’s Findings for Improved Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention

CWI’s research efforts provide a valuable window into the motivations, rewards, challenges, and characteristics of outstanding Los Angeles foster parents, as well as the need for foster family agency and practice changes to better support foster parents. These findings stand to improve the results of future recruitment and retention efforts.

- Understanding the **motivations**: Knowing that many foster parents are motivated by faith, by breaking the chain of abuse and neglect, or by wanting to bring youthful energy into a quiet home helps agencies construct compelling messages as they ask prospective parents to foster a child.
- Understanding the **rewards**: Recognizing that foster parents enjoy seeing a child exhibit one set of behaviors and leave others behind helps agencies highlight the

rewards of fostering a child. By highlighting those rewards, foster parents are reminded of the joys of even small successes and are more likely to continue fostering children.

- Understanding the **challenges**: Knowing that foster parenting is difficult work and that parents find each other comforting reminds us of the value of intentionally utilizing existing foster parents to recruit others and offering ongoing peer support. Hearing that foster parents sometimes felt unprepared reminds us that frank explanation of the challenges of foster parenting is important.
- Understanding foster parent **characteristics**: Knowing the characteristics of outstanding foster parents, especially those willing to take in the most challenging young people, helps agencies cost-effectively identify and target those parents. For example, nurses, teachers, mental healthcare workers, and others in service occupations often have the combination of empathy, conscientiousness, and thick skin necessary for fostering a child. Likewise, empty nesters have valuable parenting experience and sometimes miss the joys and challenges of having a child in the home.
- Responding to **calls for change**: Hearing foster parents want to be treated as members of a team is instructive for devising recruitment messaging, but even more important for improving internal foster family agency practices, such as how staff interact and communicate with parents. Knowing that foster parents prefer consistent respite care providers and regular contact with other foster parents indicates the value of strategies for building communities within and across foster family agencies.

Implementing Policy and Practice Changes: CWI's Comprehensive Strategy for Improving Recruitment and Retention of Therapeutic Foster Parents

CWI examined best practices research and utilized direct feedback from Los Angeles County foster parents on their motivations, challenges, values, and characteristics for comparison against prevailing foster parent recruitment and retention practices. This allowed CWI to identify critical changes in foster family agency policies and practices in recruitment and retention – changes that CWI is now implementing in partnership with six foster family agencies to recruit, train, and support additional high-quality therapeutic foster homes for children with mental disabilities and behavioral disorders.

Finding and keeping parents willing and able to serve youth with significant behavioral and mental health problems is a distinct challenge. To meet this challenge, CWI and the six partner agencies have signed a Memorandum of Understanding laying out specific

implementation steps to improve collective recruitment and retention of ITFC parents. CWI will direct the recruitment of therapeutic foster parents, using branding and messaging to reach specific groups of prospective parents, a recruitment and resource website for therapeutic foster parents, and a targeted multimedia campaign. With CWI's leadership and guidance, the foster family agency partners will change their internal practices to improve both recruitment and retention in the following ways:

- Designate experienced ITFC parents as Ambassadors who will provide recruitment and retention assistance, including leading recruitment events, acting as a first contact point for prospective ITFC parents, serving as peer mentors for new ITFC families, or participating in respite care and childcare provider recruitment.
- Provide incentives to any foster parent, staff member, or other individual who recruits a new ITFC parent.
- Establish an ITFC parent council and regular ITFC parent surveys so parent feedback can be incorporated into agency policies.
- Set up pooled support groups so that ITFC parents have a support group of peers serving similar children within easy driving distance.
- Increase the pool of respite care and childcare providers by asking all prospective ITFC parents to bring family and friends who can be trained to serve as consistent respite care and childcare providers, as well as examining opportunities to provide respite care services across agencies.
- Designate ongoing resources and funds to sustain recruitment and retention efforts.

Producing Concrete and Measurable Results

Through the implementation of a comprehensive strategy for improving the recruitment and retention of therapeutic foster parents, CWI is working with its foster family agency partners to double the number of ITFC foster homes under their supervision by early 2014.

CWI recognizes the importance and need for the long-term financial sustainability in any recruitment and retention strategy for therapeutic foster homes. L.A. County has already awarded contracts for therapeutic foster homes to provide financial supports to such homes once they have been successfully recruited. In addition, the *Katie A.* settlement mandates an increase in the therapeutic foster care program in L.A. County to a minimum of 300 homes, ensuring program growth sustainability. Currently L.A. County has \$12.7 million ready to fund 220 ITFC homes. Moreover, CWI's foster family agency partners have committed to sustainable changes to their internal agency policies

and practices to improve recruitment and retention strategies and supports for therapeutic foster parents.

CWI's work is the first coordinated evaluation of L.A. County's prevailing foster family agency practices and policies for recruiting and supporting therapeutic foster parents, case planning for children with severe mental or behavioral problems, and of the motivations, needs, and satisfaction of individual therapeutic and non-therapeutic foster families currently under foster family agency supervision. At the conclusion of this project, CWI will have 1) doubled the number of therapeutic foster homes for its foster family agency partners, utilized a portion of existing but unspent funding to sustain those homes into the future, and demonstrated how those remaining funds can be spent effectively to meet children's needs; 2) established systemic change at the institutional level in the recruitment, training, and support that new and existing therapeutic foster parents receive; and 3) implemented a successful therapeutic foster care recruitment and retention model that can be disseminated across L.A. County and to additional counties statewide.

Acknowledgments

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