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Improving Support for Foster Families

Laurie Todd-Smith, Ph.D. & Julia Butch

TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ A lack of adequate support for foster families, coupled with low rates of kinship placement with relatives, has led to much trauma and many placements for foster children.

- ★ Some states have taken action to better address the unique needs of foster parents, to prioritize placing children with relatives, and to increase permanency for foster children.

- ★ States should prioritize ensuring timely kinship care from relatives, utilize private-sector services to reduce the number of children entering care, and implement innovative training models and response services for foster parents to better support foster families.

Introduction

Imagine a six-year-old child entering the foster care system after being removed from the home due to neglect and abuse. This child is hoping for stability and love but instead is moved from one foster placement to another, experiencing a staggering eight different homes in just five years. Each move brings new caregivers, schools, and sets of rules, leaving the child struggling to form lasting relationships and trust adults. Unfortunately, this story is not unique; it highlights the critical gaps and challenges in the foster care system that urgently need addressing.

The instability faced by foster children has long-lasting effects on emotional, psychological, and educational well-being. Frequent moves disrupt children's sense of security and belonging, often exacerbating the trauma they have already experienced. This lack of permanency is caused, in part, by foster families feeling helpless and ultimately choosing to leave the system. A 2007 Harris Interactive study found that 75 percent of adults who had ever fostered or adopted children reported dissatisfaction with the support they received from the child welfare agency either before or after placement (Atwood, 2011). Lacking resources and support, these foster parents, who set out to do an honorable thing for their community, withdraw their services out of frustration with a system in which they feel voiceless. Critical steps must be taken to ensure that foster children and foster parents are supported and can thrive as a family.

By examining challenges within the system and proposing evidence-based solutions, we can work toward a foster care system that genuinely supports and nurtures the children it serves and the foster parents on whom it so heavily relies. States should prioritize ensuring timely kinship care, which is foster care provided by relatives or family friends, by passing key legislation. They should also use private-sector services and technological advances to reduce the number of children entering care, improve foster parent recruitment strategies, and implement innovative training models and response services to meet the needs of foster parents. These solutions can better support foster families and mitigate trauma for foster children.

Prioritizing Kinship Care and Granting Judicial Oversight
Decreasing the number of different placements for foster children requires better retention of foster parents and prioritizing kinship care. Placement with relatives, such as grandparents, is believed, in most cases, to result in the best outcomes for children (Edwards, 2018). Studies show that children placed with relatives maintain stability and have fewer placement changes, fewer behavior problems, and more educational consistency, even if the relative is distant and does not have a strong preexisting relationship with the child (Edwards, 2018). A 2017 study of foster children in California, where 15 percent of all U.S. foster children reside, found that children in relative care left their placements and re-entered the foster care system less frequently than those in non-relative care or group homes (Edwards, 2018; Todd-Smith, 2024a).

In 2023, Arizona led the way in increasing kinship care by enacting SB 1186 to expedite the placement of children entering foster care and to limit the number of times a child is moved between foster families. The legislation prioritizes locating relatives for kinship care immediately after a child is removed from the child's original home, as well as not removing the child later from a foster parent with whom the child has formed a connection. It also mandates judicial oversight to determine the adequacy of the child protection agency's searches and the placement that is in the best interests of the child. Importantly, the legislation also ensures rights for foster children older than 14 in kinship care, such as a transition plan that addresses education and career planning and helps with obtaining key documents such as a driver's license or Social Security number. Legislation like this is key to maximizing foster children's quality of life and future opportunities (Edwards, 2018).

Engaging Private Sector Models & Technology
Stronger systems that engage both the government *and* the private sector are necessary to reduce the number of children entering foster care, better recruit foster parents, and increase adoptions for children who cannot access placements with relatives. Faith-based private models, in particular, possess considerable wisdom on how to recruit families and sustain relationships (Todd-Smith, 2024b).

Some states are using technology to improve the process of linking foster children to families. In 2021, Ohio became the first state to implement tools from Connect Our Kids to help children's services professionals connect the state's 3,100 foster youth with their forever families. The tools include a desktop and mobile app that professionals can use to build family trees, find family contact information, and engage families and supporters of children in foster care (Ohio Governor's Office, 2021). Using this innovative technology will allow the pool of potential relative

caregivers to expand greatly because an entire family tree will be available, rather than just family members in current contact with the child's parents.

Other states use CarePortal, a software that uses a private sector–driven model to support at-risk foster youth across the country. The faith-based platform allows struggling families and children to connect with nearby churches that can provide help. Agencies upload details about a family's urgent needs, and then an alert goes out to the community in real time, allowing communities to provide resource support that can prevent children from having to go into foster care. Between 2015 and 2022, CarePortal served 224,350 people (CarePortal, n.d.).

Oklahoma largely relies on outsourcing to recruit and retain foster parents and has included CarePortal in its Pinnacle Plan, which aims to transfer many recruitment efforts to outside agencies (Oklahoma Human Services, n.d.). The Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) employs a hybrid system, with private agencies servicing about 1,000 resource families and 2,000 kinship homes and the DHS servicing another 1,000 resource families (Casey Family Programs, 2021). By connecting charity organizations to at-risk families, capitalizing on the charitable contributions of faith-based organizations, and outsourcing the search for new foster parents through platforms like CarePortal, states can reduce the number of children entering and staying in care long-term.

Improving Training & Response Services for Foster Parents
Training for Foster Parents
Parent Resource for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) is a program originally developed by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, offering a competency-based model of practice "designed to strengthen the quality of family foster care and adoption services by developing and supporting foster and adoptive families who are willing, able, and have the resources to meet the needs of traumatized children and their families" (CEBC, n.d.). The program provides a standardized framework for the recruitment, preparation, and selection of foster parents and adoptive parents, as well as for foster parent in-service training and ongoing professional development. It focuses on the following competencies:
- protecting and nurturing children;
- meeting children's developmental needs;
- supporting children's relationships with their biological families;
- connecting children to safe, nurturing, lifelong relationships; and
- working as a member of a professional team.

The PRIDE training workbook equips foster parents with the knowledge needed to recognize signs of abuse, monitor the development of their foster child, and strengthen family relationships (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.). The system has now been implemented in 26 states and has been largely successful in meeting its goals.

PRIDE has shown significant increases in foster parent competence and confidence in the system before foster parents accept a child into their home. A 2016 review of the program

found a statistically significant increase in participants' knowledge of the PRIDE competencies after they had completed the program. And importantly, foster parents have found the program personally engaging and satisfying (Nash & Flynn, 2016). Additional studies have found that PRIDE's online module format is the most cost-efficient way of licensing new foster parents, as well as the easiest format for those in rural areas (Kaasbøll et al., 2019).

Mobile Response and Stabilization Services for Foster Families
Often, a lack of adequate support exacerbates the struggle of foster parents caring for challenged foster children, making them less likely to continue fostering. Foster children often come from traumatic backgrounds and may have special needs or behavioral issues, and foster parents often report feeling ill-equipped to handle these challenges due to a lack of access to necessary services (Todd-Smith, 2024b). States should implement programs that provide timely and solutions-based support to foster parents to address this.

In 2017, New Jersey's Department of Children and Families implemented a Mobile Response and Stabilization Service Project (MRSS) to increase support to children and parents during the transition into a new home. Families can call this hotline for help when a child is involved in an emotional or behavioral health crisis and will receive a response within an hour, often with on-site intervention for immediate de-escalation. From there, a plan is developed to include identified behaviors that need to be addressed, strategies to address the behaviors, and desired outcomes. Mobile Response can even recommend stabilization management services for up to eight weeks in cases that require additional attention (State of New Jersey, Department of Children and Families, 2017). Services vary according to the child's and family's individual needs, but can include:

- in-home counseling;
- behavioral assistance;
- caregiver therapeutic support;
- intensive in-community services;
- skill-building;
- medication management;
- coordination and development of informal and natural support systems, such as faith-based organizations, mentors, and peer support; and
- coordination of specialized services to address the needs of children with co-occurring developmental disabilities and substance use.

Since its inception in 2004, MRSS has helped to maintain 94 percent of children in their living situation at the time service was provided, including children involved with the child welfare system. Over the last four years, between 95 percent and 98 percent of children served by MRSS have remained in their current living situations (Casey Family Programs, 2021).

Conclusion

By taking these steps, states can help ensure that foster children have the best chance of receiving temporary or sometimes long-term care from loving relatives and reaching their full potential. If we prioritize placing children with relatives and approach the issue with urgency, these children will face fewer traumatic placement changes, and the trajectory of their lives will improve. For more information about adoption and foster care policy, visit America First Policy Institute's Center for the American Child.

States should do the following to increase permanency for foster children and better support foster families:

- Enact legislation such as Arizona's SB 1186 to prioritize timely placement with relatives and allow judicial oversight when removing a child from a foster family.
- Expand the pool of relative caregivers for foster children by implementing Connect Our Kids, as in Ohio.
- Support families in crisis and outsource foster parent recruitment by using platforms such as CarePortal and shifting toward hybrid systems that include both relevant state agencies and private-sector organizations, as Oklahoma has done.
- Utilize innovative programs such as PRIDE in California to improve training for foster parents and to decrease the number of placements faced by foster children who cannot access kinship care from relatives.
- Implement Mobile Response and Stabilization Service projects, as in New Jersey, to better support struggling foster parents and address the mental health needs of foster children.

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