

# **Florida Foster Care Recruitment and Retention**

## **Perspectives of Stakeholders on the Critical Factors Affecting Recruitment and Retention of Foster Parents**

**Phase I of a Two-Part Study Commissioned by the Department of  
Children and Families**

**Conducted by the Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy  
Mothers and Babies**

The Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy Mothers and Babies was commissioned by the Florida Department of Children and Families to conduct this study. The Center engaged researchers from the Florida State University, School of Social Work, Dr. Brenda "BJ" Jarmon and Dr. Sally Mathiesen, to direct the study, with co-investigators at the University of Florida, Dr. Leslie Clarke and Elizabeth McCulloch, J.D. and the University of South Florida, Kathy Lazear, M.A. This report is a summary of the results of this study.

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Carrie Plocher  
Stephen Roggenbaum, M.A.

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# Executive Summary



## Study Purpose

This report summarizes the first phase of a two-phase study commissioned by the Department of Children and Families (Department or DCF). The Department commissioned the study because of the growing demand for foster homes and increasing difficulty in recruiting and keeping foster parents. The conclusions and strategies recommended in this report are derived primarily from the perspectives of stakeholders in the foster care system: foster parents, children in foster care, department staff involved in foster care recruitment and retention, and other agency personnel.

The second phase of the study will examine the number of foster parents with particular parenting or childcare skills and the number of children in foster care with emotional, medical or other psychosocial needs. It will focus on determining the number of foster care homes needed statewide by skill level of the home. The second phase will include medical and therapeutic foster care homes, and will address targeted recruitment and retention strategies in more detail than discussed in phase one.

The goals of Phase I of this study were:

- To provide information to the Florida Department of Children and Families on current activities and trends in foster care recruitment and retention;
- To identify the perceptions of foster parents, foster children, Department staff and other agency representatives concerning ways to improve foster parent recruitment and retention, and
- To develop a plan for improving recruitment and retention of foster parents.

This report summarizes and analyzes the data and perceptions we collected and offers policy and program strategies for improving foster parent recruitment and retention. The proposed strategies are organized under each conclusion into two categories: (1) strategies that can be implemented without additional funding, and (2) strategies that will require additional funding. The conclusions and strategies constitute the proposed plan for improving recruitment and retention of foster parents. Both the conclusions and strategies are relevant to recruitment and retention of foster parents in either state-operated or community-based programs.

## Study Methods

We used three different methods of data collection and analysis in this study. First, we obtained and analyzed computerized data from the Department of Children and Families on foster care licensing and placement. Second, we reviewed the scientific literature on foster care services, including Florida-specific evaluations and reports on foster care. This information is incorporated into our conclusions section as “best practices” that are used in this and other states to improve recruitment and retention. Third, we designed and carried out a statewide qualitative survey of foster care recruitment and retention by interviewing “stakeholders” in the foster care system through focus groups and individual interviews.

For the focus group and interview portion of the study, we collected representative data from across the state and Districts, as well as geographic areas. We selected one county in each District to represent one of three types of geographic areas in the State: rural, suburban or urban. Within each county sampled, we selected a random sample of foster parents and a random sample of foster children and asked them to participate in focus groups. In addition to these meetings, group and individual interviews were held with local Department staff, foster parent associations, and Youth Advisory Board members (Department supervisors).

We also conducted individual interviews with representatives of *One Church, One Child* programs, Guardian Ad Litem programs and other private agencies providing foster care related services. In all, a total of four or more focus groups and interviews were held in each Florida district for a total of more than 105 focus groups and interviews. We tape-recorded, summarized and analyzed these data to extract the key points and recommendations from all stakeholders.

In addition to the focus group and interview data, a written survey instrument was created based on the questions developed for the focus groups. This instrument was distributed broadly across the state to foster parent associations, agency staff and other groups. More than 70 completed survey responses were received.

The findings, conclusions and recommended strategies in this report represent the aggregate thoughts of a number of stakeholders across this very diverse state. The overall tone of the report suggests that the foster care system needs to be modified to significantly improve recruitment and retention of foster care parents. However, many of the recommended strategies, with the exception of enhanced financial incentives and other strategies that require additional resources, are being implemented to some extent in some districts and communities but not all. The Department can quickly move ahead in many of the critical areas by taking the best practices of some of its units and community partners statewide. There are likewise a number of critical areas where the Department has adopted appropriate policies and guidelines; however the execution of these policies and guidelines has not been successfully accomplished across the state.

## **Findings from Focus Groups, Interviews and Written Surveys**

The following briefly summarizes the findings obtained through the focus groups, interviews and written surveys from foster parents, foster children, Department staff and other agency representatives. These findings are organized by the key questions that were posed to all respondents.

### **Why do people become foster parents?**

Most respondents thought that people become foster parents because they want to help children, or because they feel a mission to care for children in need. Many foster parents reported that they felt a spiritual calling to become a foster parent, or that they had love that they wanted to share with children. Other foster parents entered fostering because of a child they knew or a relative who needed a home. Some foster parents reported that they were unable to have a biological child and were told that foster parenting could lead to adoption. Department staff and agency representatives periodically mentioned that they thought that some people became foster parents for the money. When pressed to estimate what percentage of families were in foster care for this reason, most respondents did not think this group was very large, but they did think that these were not the best homes. Unfortunately, as reported by some agencies, many inadequate homes are not shut down because of the critical shortage of foster homes relative to the current demand.

### **What practices do people think work or may work to improve recruitment?**

When asked what could be done to improve the recruitment of new foster families, many foster families said that current foster parents were the best recruiters of new foster parents. Foster parents recruit new foster parents through social contacts, group meetings and even by talking to strangers who ask parents if they are fostering. When foster parents are positive about their experience, it is likely to lead others to pursue foster care. However, if they have not had a good experience, they don't recommend it. In addition to foster parents doing informal recruitment, other avenues for the recruitment of new foster parents were suggested, such as presentations to church and civic groups by foster parents and Department staff, advertising through television, radio, billboards, flyers, and information tables in front of stores.

Both foster parents and agency staff thought that one of the biggest barriers to recruiting new foster parents was the extensive negative media attention which resulted in negative perceptions of foster children and foster parenting in the state. It was frequently noted that these perceptions would have to be changed before the recruitment of new parents would be effective. Participants said that it was important to focus on the success stories of the foster care system. Another idea mentioned was to allow prospective parents to meet some of the children in need of foster care in order to provide additional motivation for them to become licensed.

Despite offering many ideas about possible recruitment strategies, most respondents noted that recruitment strategies would not work until the support system for current foster parents was improved. Foster parents as well as representatives of the Department and other agencies, were concerned about the functioning of the foster care system and how problems with the administration of the foster care system were negatively affecting both the foster parents and foster children. As noted by many foster parents, the administrative rules and procedures governing foster care were so burdensome that it was difficult to be a foster parent, let alone recruit new foster parents. All stakeholder groups interviewed acknowledged this problem and reported it as a significant barrier to recruitment.

## **What discourages foster parents? What helps to retain foster parents?**

When asked what discouraged foster parents from fostering, the primary responses concerned problems with the bureaucracy of foster care as well as the absence of perceived support from Department counselors by foster parents. Most respondents reported that the Department was too overburdened so that staff was unable to do their jobs. Others felt as if foster children and parents were left on their own without support from the Department. They complained of not being treated like a true “partner” in the care of the foster child, despite what they were told in the MAPP (Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting) pre-service training prior to licensure. They reported being treated disrespectfully as if they were babysitters or persons not having much time or emotion invested in the child. In contrast other foster parents spoke about treating the foster children as if they were their biological children.

From the foster parents’ perspective, they would like to be treated as true partners in caring for the child and they would like to be given a greater sense of empowerment over the child’s well being. All parents noted that foster parenting would be much more satisfying and they would be willing to be foster parents longer if they were treated as equal partners and given authority over some decisions. The examples parents gave were the authority to be able to communicate with the child’s medical care provider, to be able to decide on haircuts and travel outside the county, to assist with the case plan and similar decisions that are typically the purview of parents. Foster parents also wanted more training to be able to handle the many challenges foster children face. Extended training is offered in some Districts. However, other Districts that offer more training noted that it is difficult to get parents to attend additional training.

Some of the other types of support that foster parents, Department staff and foster children reported as lacking included: timely reimbursements to foster parents for expenses, insufficient contact between foster care counselor and foster children, no respite care, and difficulties in finding approved babysitters.

To avoid having foster parents quit the system, many respondents believe that more counselors are needed. This would stop counselors from becoming overburdened and reduce the high rate of counselor turnover. Also, this would allow each caseworker to spend more time working with an individual case. Better screening of children may also help to alleviate burnout and stress in foster parents. The need for more respite care was also a common concern. Many parents feel that if they were allowed some time away from the day-to-day work of caring for these children, then they could reduce the level of burnout.

## **Conclusions and Strategies for Improving the Foster Care System**

The following conclusions and strategies were developed based on analysis of the focus group, interview and written survey data. Based on these findings, we recommend that before any major recruitment campaign is initiated by the Department significant attention and resources should be put into repairing the problems in the current foster care program and its administration.



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**Conclusion 1: The recruitment of new foster parents can be achieved most effectively by improving the care and retention of current foster families. The retention of current foster families can be improved best through changes in the rules and functioning of the foster care system.**

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## **Conclusion 1: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 1a:** Improve the relationship between Department staff and foster parents by providing training for workers and foster parents that focuses on teamwork and cooperation. How staff can best assist foster parents must be addressed.

**Strategy 1b:** Define the roles of the foster parent and the Department by enhancing and implementing the bilateral agreement between the foster parent and the Department. The current foster care agreement is an excellent starting point. In addition to its current provisions, this agreement should specify the support services that the Department will provide to the foster parent and should be tailored to the specific needs of the child and the parents. It should also stipulate that foster parents would not be retaliated against in any way for refusing to take a child for whom they are not qualified to serve. This recommendation in no way suggests that foster parents should be able to discriminate with regard to acceptance of a child based on race, religion, sex or any other condition pursuant to state or federal law.

**Strategy 1c:** Reengineer the workload of counselors by shifting tasks that do not require social work training to other workers, such as transporting children to appointments.

**Strategy 1d:** Make the administrative systems that support foster children and foster parents as efficient as possible to reduce the time it takes for children or parents to get a response or assistance for a problem (for example, provide counselors with pagers).

**Strategy 1e:** Involve foster parents in court proceedings regarding their foster children, through early notice of court hearings and mechanisms for foster parents to express their views on decisions being made on behalf of the foster children under their care.

**Strategy 1f:** Provide foster parents with mechanisms for giving feedback to the Department on their experiences as foster parents and their suggestions for improving how the system is run. The following are examples of mechanisms for doing this:

- Give foster parents as a group a greater voice in determining how the foster care system is administered by designating foster parent associations as foster parent advisory councils.
- Ensure that the procedure adopted by the Department for foster parent review of the performance of foster counselors is implemented. Additionally make sure that appropriate action is taken with respect to the findings of this review. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. Participant surveys following MAPP training are also done in some districts (such as District 8) and these data are summarized to help trainers better target the MAPP trainings.
- Ensure that the required exit interview is conducted with all children ages 5-17 who leave a foster home where they have stayed for at least 30 days. Also ensure that appropriate action is taken with respect to the findings from these interviews. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. These data should be shared with Foster Parent Associations. District 8 conducts these exit interviews and summarizes the results for district staff.
- Require an exit interview with all foster parents who close. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. These data should be shared with Foster Parent Associations.
- Require an exit interview with foster parents when a child leaves. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. This data should be shared with Foster Parent Associations.
- Provide foster parents with access to a suggestion box or an email address for submitting ideas for improving the foster care system.
- Create a Web site chat-room for foster parents to engage in a dialogue with other foster parents, Department staff and related agencies on ways to improve the foster care system,

particularly in regard to supporting foster parents and children in foster care. This Web site could include links to other Web sites that address issues related to effective foster care.

- Provide a toll-free phone number with a recorded message that allows for comments and exchange of information. This number could serve like a triage center. For example: Press 1 if you need to reach someone immediately; press 2 if you would like to be sent the FCAP report; press 3 if you would like to hear about recent announcements affecting all foster parents; press 4 if you would like to have a list of the when and where your local FPA meeting is held; press 5 if you would like to make a suggestion for improvement in an area.
- As done in District 9, develop an automatic “telephone dialing” mechanism with phone numbers of all foster parents for the purposes of quickly disseminating special announcements (e.g. announcement of upcoming speakers for FPA meetings, availability of circus tickets, etc.)
- Increase opportunities for foster parents to network; for example, KIDS in District 10 has a monthly covered dish event where each foster parent is encouraged to bring a dish that is representative of their cultural heritage.

### **Conclusion 1: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 1g:** Reduce the caseload of foster care counselors to no more than 12-15 children per caseworker as recommended by the Child Welfare League of America.

**Strategy 1h:** Research and implement ways to reduce turnover among counselors such as increasing pay levels and providing more administrative support.



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**Conclusion 2: Foster parents and foster children want the foster care system to provide ongoing economic, emotional and other support to foster families and children.**

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## **Conclusion 2: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 2a:** Monitor compliance with key provisions of the foster care system, including:

- Providing foster parents with full information about the child at the time of placement,
- Ensuring that the child's belongings are transported with the child, and,
- Ensuring foster care counselors regularly visit the foster care homes under their supervision.

**Strategy 2b:** Involve neighborhoods and the larger community in developing culturally appropriate community systems that support foster families through engaging extended families and neighborhood support groups (such as mentors, foster grandparents, madrinas and padrinos). Two communities that have implemented innovative models in this area are Little Havana in Miami and Jacksonville.

**Strategy 2c:** Provide more culturally appropriate services, including African American and Hispanic (including bilingual) social workers and therapists, and training that targets ethnic minorities in order to serve these groups more effectively.

## **Conclusion 2: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 2d:** Provide adequate financial incentives for foster parents, including:

- A higher board rate to cover the full costs of parenting foster children based on empirical estimates of these costs.
- A board rate supplement for parents with children with serious behavioral or medical problems based on an initial assessment and a reassessment every six months.
- Reimbursement for home improvements required as a condition of licensure provided the foster parent serves children adequately for a least one year or for some other specified period of time commensurate with the value of the improvement.
- The option of joining the state employee health plan with the state contributing to the plan as if the foster parent were a state employee.
- A contribution to a retirement fund after a foster parent has served children adequately for a minimum of one year with continuing contributions for every subsequent year the foster parent provides services.
- Compensation for foster parents to cover excessive physical damages to homes caused by foster children.
- Continue support of the Foster Allegation Support Team (FAST) that assists foster parents who are under an abuse allegation.

**Strategy 2e:** Develop an option for parents to become 'professional foster parents' for children with higher levels of need, and pay these parents a rate that would allow them to forego outside employment. Include medical benefits, liability insurance and retirement options for these parents, to make the work commensurate with outside employment. The Hull House project in Volusia County and the SOS project in Ft. Lauderdale are two Florida examples of this approach that should be assessed to determine their effectiveness.

**Strategy 2f:** Create local systems of respite care for foster parents.



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**Conclusion 3: The emotional, behavioral and medical problems of foster children have increased in recent years; yet assessment of and treatment for these problems is very limited.**

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### **Conclusion 3: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 3a:** Match foster children to foster parents who have the skills to deal with the problems the children have. Ensure that foster parents maintain and update these skills through monitoring and supplemental training.

### **Conclusion 3: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 3b:** Screen and assess the emotional, behavioral, educational and medical problems of all children in foster care. Conduct this assessment immediately upon removal or transfer of a child from a home, by creating small, short-term assessment facilities in each District, with special activities and services to meet the needs of children in transition. This initial assessment should be followed up at least every six months after placement to determine if additional supports are needed for the child and the foster parent. A child should not be placed with a foster parent if the needs of the child exceed the skills and experience of the foster parent. District 8 has a procedure for screening children to determine their needs, training foster parents to meet these needs, and paying higher board rates based on the skill levels and needs of child. This is called the Enhancement Project, which could serve as a model program for other districts.

**Strategy 3c:** The Medicaid comprehensive behavioral health assessment should be implemented statewide as soon as possible. This is a comprehensive approach to assessing the needs of the child that is financed through the Medicaid program. Requiring this assessment to be done every six months should be considered rather than once a year as currently specified in the procedure.

**Strategy 3d:** Provide all available information to the foster parent at the time of placement

**Strategy 3e:** Ensure that all foster children and foster parents have timely access to quality mental health counseling and parent training services. Offer in-home counseling to families in which this would be effective or where transportation or work issues prevent families from taking children to mental health agencies.

**Strategy 3f:** Document the distribution of children with different levels of problems and use this information to target recruitment and retention efforts. This would ensure that the parents who are most needed will be recruited. Build a continuous database of the number and characteristics of foster children and foster parents. Phase II of this study will attempt to establish a baseline in regard to the number of children in foster care with particular needs and the availability of foster parents whose skills meet these needs.



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**Conclusion 4: Foster children feel powerless, unsupported and do not trust the foster care system. Often children are in foster care many years longer than necessary and some experience many foster homes. Such changes make it difficult for them to feel secure.**

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### **Conclusion 4: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding:**

**Strategy 4a:** The foster care administrative system should be redesigned to ensure that foster children are given adequate and ongoing support by their counselor when they are placed also they should have ways to contact Department staff when they have urgent needs. Limit the number of counselors with whom each foster family has to interface.

**Strategy 4b:** The foster care system and courts must become more efficient in meeting the needs of foster children, with emphasis on achieving permanency as quickly as possible.

**Strategy 4c:** Give foster children more information and counseling about what is happening to them when they are moved.

**Strategy 4d:** Provide 24-hour hotline numbers to foster children for their use only in the emergencies involving their treatment at their foster home.

**Strategy 4e:** Give older foster children a choice of foster homes prior to placement.

**Strategy 4f:** Ensure that foster parents are culturally-sensitive and culturally-competent before placing a child from a different culture with them.



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**Conclusion 5: Good ideas and practices for recruitment and retention exist in various Districts, but there is no statewide approach to developing these ideas and practices and disseminating the results. Consequently, some Districts have effective efforts while others have limited efforts. District staff members are interested in learning what other Districts are doing; however they are largely unaware of these activities.**

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### **Conclusion 5: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 5a:** Design a statewide plan for recruitment with input from District staff, including strategies that help to remove the negative stigma of foster care and foster children. The focus must be on improving community awareness and promoting positive beliefs about foster care.

**Strategy 5b:** The Department should collect and review the materials that have been developed in the Districts and use these materials to design future recruitment materials. The materials and methods developed in Districts 8, 10 and 11 may be particularly helpful. These include a video advertisement to recruit foster parents, obtaining materials and reach the Hispanic population as well as encourage effective collaboration between community groups and Department staff.

### **Conclusion 5: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 5c:** Create a recruitment program that is targeted, continuous and statewide.

**Strategy 5d:** Ensure that local capacity to respond to telephone inquiries about foster parenting is secure and effective before implementing any recruitment campaign

**Strategy 5e:** Develop and maintain departmental Web sites and list serves for the dissemination of information on best practices related to recruitment and retention that are being used in other Districts.



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**Conclusion 6: Training programs for foster parents and departmental staff that support these parents are not adequately focused on the unique problems related to caring for children with complex problems.**

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### **Conclusion 6: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 6a:** MAPP training needs to be modified to include an emphasis on the types of problems foster parents are likely to encounter during the care of the child. The Department recognizes that the MAPP training needs revision and has begun the process of this revision.

**Strategy 6b:** Foster parents and Departmental staff should receive training together to help create a team approach to meeting the needs of children in foster care.

### **Conclusion 6: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 6c:** Increase the quantity and improve the quality of the training given to Department counselors, licensing staff and placement staff. Provide this training to new staff and improve in-service training. District 6 offers a specialized training program called “Parenting Tools for Positive Behavior Change.” This 30-hour program offers additional training to foster parents at no cost. The 2000 Legislature provided funding for four positions in every District to implement this training on a statewide basis. The Department should ensure statewide quality control of the staffing, content and methodology related to this training.

**Strategy 6d:** In addition to MAPP training, the Department should provide follow-up training tailored to the specific problems faced by foster parents. This training could be delivered effectively by foster parents with assistance from the Department.

# Summary

This report and these conclusions reflect an analysis of a vast amount of information provided to study researchers on the broad issues of recruitment and retention. Virtually all strategies proposed in this report were based on comments and suggestions from study participants. Not surprisingly, many of the ideas were the same as those suggested in national studies of foster care. Foster families and Department staff have extensive insights into the functioning of the program and how it could be improved. These insights should be tapped routinely by the Department and the Legislature.

It is important to emphasize that great extent to which the responses of the different stakeholder groups agreed with one another. Regardless of the question posed, foster parents, foster children, Department staff and agency representatives responded in remarkably similar ways. As a result, all groups emphasized the same key points:

- 1) Simplify the administration of the foster care system, including strengthening the partnership between the department and foster parents before putting money into recruitment;
- 2) Support existing foster parents through financial and non-financial supports in order to improve recruitment and retention; and
- 3) Make the changes in the system now.

Most participant groups were well aware of the many studies that have been done on the problems of the foster care system in Florida and in the nation. Consequently they were very vocal about wanting to know why the system still had not been improved. They also wanted to know what the Department and the Legislature were going to do about these problems that have existed for several decades.

Many participants believed that true changes in the system would have to begin with significant increases in legislative allocations. They want financial commitments from legislators to improve board rates, support services and staffing levels. Ultimately, they want assurances that the foster care system will be repaired quickly, that it will be made more humane and that it will finally operate to serve the best interests of the children it is designed to protect.



# Study, Purpose, Methods and Limitations



## Study Purpose

The growing shortage of foster homes in Florida and new challenges to recruiting foster parents prompted the Florida Department of Children and Families to commission the Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy Mothers and Babies to undertake a study of foster care recruitment and retention in Florida. The Chiles Center engaged researchers from the Florida State University, School of Social Work to direct the study with assistance from researchers at the University of Florida and the University of South Florida. This report is a summary of the results of this study.

This report is about the first phase of a two-phase study. The conclusions and strategies recommended in this report are derived primarily from the perspectives of stakeholders in the foster care system: foster parents, children in foster care, department staff involved in foster care recruitment and retention, and other agency personnel. Although the state foster care system includes medical and therapeutic foster care, this study did not address those types of specialized care. The need for medical and therapeutic foster care will be addressed in phase II of this study.

The second phase of the study will examine the number of foster parents with particular skills and the number of children in foster care with special needs. It will focus on determining the number of foster care homes needed statewide by skill level of the home. The second phase will include medical and therapeutic foster care homes, and will address targeted recruitment and retention strategies in more detail than discussed in phase one.

The goals of this study were:

- To provide information to the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) on current activities and trends in foster care recruitment and retention;
- To identify the perceptions of foster parents, foster children, Department staff and other agency representatives concerning ways to improve foster parent recruitment and retention, and
- To develop a plan for improving recruitment and retention of foster parents.

## Study Methods

To understand the many aspects of the foster care system and how more parents could be recruited and retained, data for this study were collected from three different sources. First the national research literature was reviewed to obtain perspectives and experiences of other states. Second, we examined Florida trends in foster care, as reported by the Department of Children and Families, as well as that reported in the 1989 study by the Auditor General's Office. Third, we collected primary data on the perspectives of people involved in the foster care system through interviews and focus groups. The different types of data were needed to obtain the full range of perspectives on the issues related to the recruitment and retention of foster parents. These data are used in combination to understand the challenges faced by parents to becoming and continuing as foster parents, and those faced by Department staff to support and retain foster parents.

The study was designed to ultimately determine the strategies that appear most effective in the recruitment and retention of foster parents. During the course of the study some of the participants in the focus groups

and individual interviews commented on the effectiveness or lack thereof of the foster care system. Though these comments have merit, the study was not designed to evaluate the system itself. Therefore, comments that did not pertain to recruitment and retention were not included in this report.

## **State Trend Data Analysis**

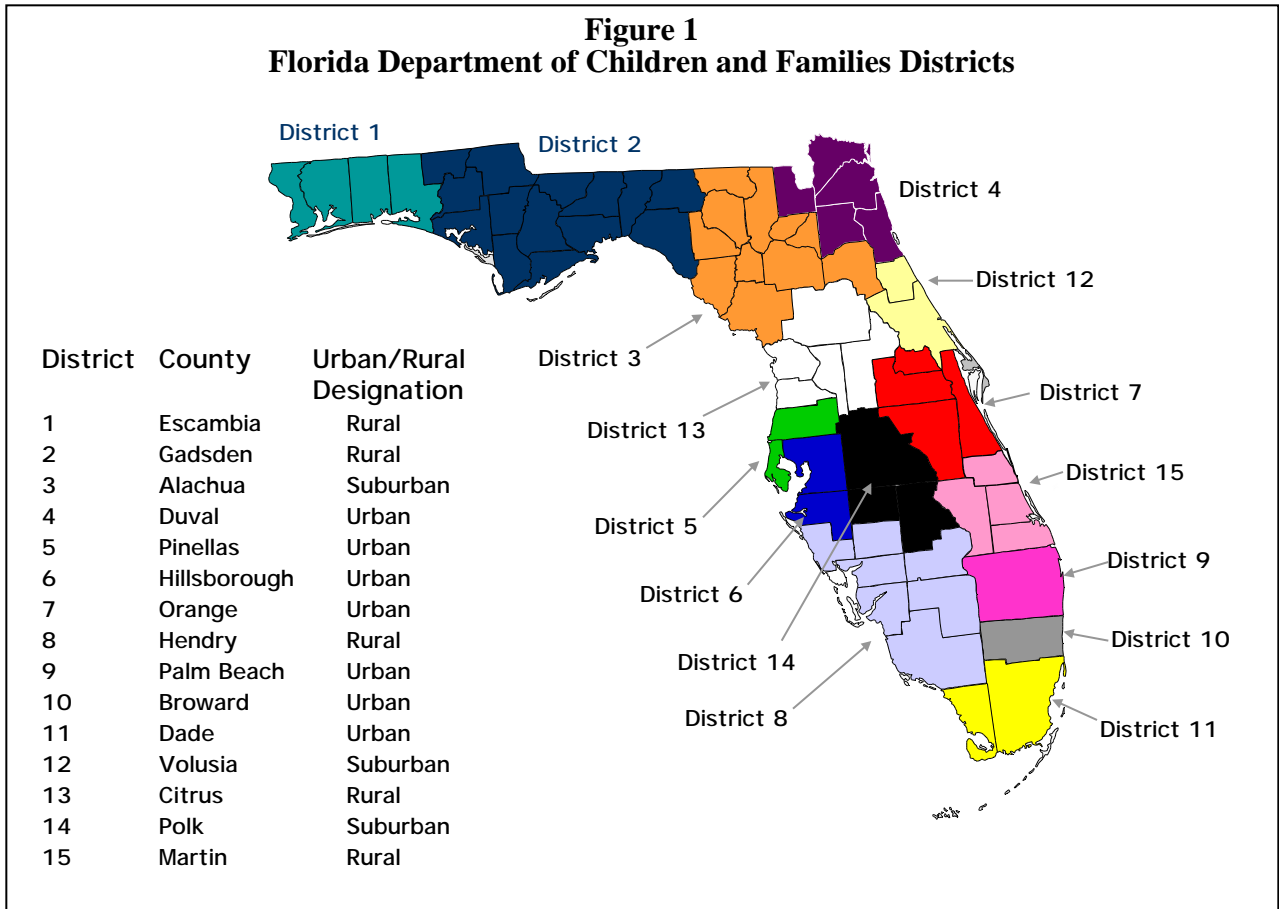
The Florida Department of Children and Families provided data on the foster child caseload, licensed foster homes, capacity of foster homes and the average length of stay of various categories of foster children. The primary sources of data were the Substitute Care Reports and Child Welfare Services. These data are from District level reports provided to the state office, the Client Information System and from the Interim Child Welfare Services Information System (ICWSIS). We desired at least 10 years of annual data to examine trends over the past decade in these events; however, the data were not reported in consistent fashion over the 10-year period. Therefore, we have only five years of data for most of the variables reported.

## **Qualitative Primary Data**

All Districts were asked to submit the following in electronic form: (a) lists of all current foster children in the county sampled between the ages of 13 and 18 who had been in the foster care at least six months; and (b) lists of all foster parents/foster homes in the county sampled that had been in a foster care placement of at least six months and were either currently active or had been active within the past five years. We also asked for data on the race/ethnicity of foster children and foster parents to be included, along with the address and phone numbers of all foster homes and children. Because each District stores foster care data in slightly different ways, the form of the data submitted for this study ranged from electronic records from the Interim Child Welfare Services Information System (ICWSIS) to paper reports.

With the list of target counties, we then sampled from these counties based on the characteristics of the foster parents and children. Random samples of foster children and foster homes were selected using a random number generator. Approximately 18 foster children's names and 15 foster parent names were selected from each county for recruitment into the study. Randomly selected replacement names were provided as needed to ensure that at least five to 10 participants would come to a focus group. We also targeted one county for the collection of data from only African American participants (Pinellas) and three for the collection of data from Hispanic participants (Pinellas, Hillsborough and Dade). This targeting and segregation in focus groups and interviews was to ensure that minority foster parents and children would be given a safe environment. In such an environment they could express their perceptions and experiences in foster care. Race-heterogeneous groups do not always offer this comfort for minority groups members.

**Figure 1  
Florida Department of Children and Families Districts**



Once the samples were drawn, research teams in each region sent letters to foster parents and followed these letters with phone contacts requesting the participation of foster children or parents in focus groups in the region. Agency staff was contacted directly. Once participation was ensured, focus groups and interviews were held in each region in a convenient and, often, neutral location, such as a library. Before each group began, all participants gave informed consent. The focus groups were tape-recorded and often were summarized immediately following the group discussion. This information was summarized by question and by type of discussant for analysis by topic and respondent. Individual interviews with respondents were also tape-recorded and documented in a similar manner.

The biggest challenges to this study were obtaining the population of foster children and foster homes that met our criteria, and by getting biological parent consents for foster children to participate in the study. The Department of Children and Families does not maintain a statewide computer system with detailed demographics on the foster children or foster homes in the state. Reports are provided by the Districts to the state office on a regular basis. These reports are compiled to report on foster children and homes, but a census of the population of children and homes is not available in a centralized location. This fact made it difficult to obtain the lists we needed for our sampling. It also required that we work with each regional data coordinator and study liaison to obtain regional and county-level information on current children in placement and licensed homes that had been in the system for six months or more.

Once we had the samples, the challenge was to obtain consent of the biological parents to talk with the foster children. While this consent is not legally mandated, legal council with the Department of Children and Families recommended it. Local Department of Children and Families staff were asked to assist with contacting biological parents and obtaining consents for the foster children sampled for the study. This was a burden to the already over-burdened counselors, and resulted in significant delays in identifying foster children to interview. In most cases, workers were unable to find or contact the biological parents. In some counties, we were simply not able to obtain consent from enough biological parents to have a foster children’s focus group. In all counties we were forced to focus on the children who were available for adoption (i.e., parental rights were terminated) because biological parent consent was not required for these children.

These challenges to our data collection highlight critical barriers in the analysis of the needs of foster children. If statewide data are not available on the characteristics and needs of the foster children, or the skills of the foster parents, then targeted recruitment and appropriate matching cannot happen. Moreover, not having access to biological parents suggests a weak link in the system between the Department and the children they serve, and the homes from which these children were removed.

After the data collection procedures were complete, a draft Executive Summary of the report was distributed to all Districts. A two-hour teleconference was held that permitted interested parties at their respective District office to participate in a “live” roundtable discussion of the findings. All Districts were represented in the teleconference, and participants consisted of District staff, foster parents, foster adolescents, and representatives from foster care agencies. There was general agreement as to the issues that emerged, and some participants offered useful enhancements that were integrated into our findings and strategies.

### Limitations of the Data

Every effort was made to obtain a random sample of participants from the population of foster parents and children to ensure that the data we obtained were from an unbiased group of parents and children. However, once the samples were drawn and parents and children were contacted, we do not know how the groups of parents and children who agreed to participate and actually came to the meeting may be different from those who did not want to participate. It is possible that the parents who agreed and who came to the focus group meetings are those who are more successful in their foster parenting, because they were able to obtain childcare and come to a meeting in the evening.

However, it is also possible that the parents who agreed to come are those who have had more difficulties with the Department and wanted an outlet for the venting of their frustrations with the system. Similar arguments can be made on both sides for potential bias among the foster children. Bias on either side cannot be confirmed because we have no relevant information on the parents and children who refused to participate. However, we believe that the data collected reflect actual experiences of average foster parents and foster children and indicate the wide range of experiences that these groups have.

With respect to the foster children, there is some possible bias in these groups as most Districts had great difficulties in obtaining consents from biological parents for children to participate in the focus groups. In many counties this problem was so significant that only children whose parental rights had been terminated were invited to participate in the focus groups. Good data on how these children may differ from children whose parents have not had their rights terminated are not available. We assume, however, that the children whose parents have had their rights terminated have been in the foster care system for a longer period of time. We also hypothesized that these children may be in foster homes that are more supportive, as foster parents were required to consent in writing to the foster child participating in the study. Additionally, they had to drive the child to attend the meeting. Yet, these expectations cannot be confirmed.

### Summary of Completed Focus Groups and Interviews

The numbers in Table 1 represent the number of people in each group or interview. The codes associated with some of the interviews indicate whether the groups were race-specific (i.e., AA = African American only, or H = Hispanic only).

**Table 1: Number of Participants in Focus Groups, Group Interviews and Individual Interviews**

| District | County Sampled | Foster Parents Focus Groups/ Group Interviews |                           | Foster Children Focus Groups/ Group Interviews |                      | DCF Staff Interviews | Guardian Ad Litem Interviews | One Church, One Child Interviews | Private Provider Community Based Care |
|----------|----------------|---|---------------------------|--|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|          |                | Random Sample                                 | Foster Parent Assoc. Mtg. | Random Sample                                  | Youth Advisory Board |                      |                              |                                  |                                       |
| 1        | Escambia       | 1   | 1                         | --   | 1 Superv.            | 1                    | 1                            | 1                                | 1 CHS                                 |
| 2        | Gadsden        | 14  | Na                        | 3  | *                    | 1                    | 1                            | *                                | Na                                    |

|    |              |      |       |      |    |    |    |    |       |
|----|--------------|------|-------|------|----|----|----|----|-------|
| 3  | Alachua      | 5    | 18    | *    | 1  | 2  | -- | *  | 1     |
| 4  | Duval        | 3    | 5     | 3    | 1  | 2  | 1  | 1  | 1 CHS |
| 5  | Pinellas     | 7 AA | 14 AA | 3 AA | -- | 2  | -- | 1  | --    |
| 6  | Hillsborough | 3    | 5 H   | 1    | 1  | 2  | -- | 1  | 1     |
| 7  | Orange       | 13   | 13    | 11   | 1  | 1  | *  | 1  | 2 CHS |
| 8  | Hendry       | 4    | Na    | 2    | na | 2  | na | Na | Na    |
| 9  | Palm Beach   | 11   | 1     | 1    | 1  | 2  | 1  | 1  | 1     |
| 10 | Broward      | 4    | 3     | 1    | -- | 3  | 1  | 1  | *     |
| 11 | Dade         | 1 H  | 5 H   | -    | 1  | -- |    | 1  | 1     |
| 12 | Volusia      | 4    | Na    | *    | -- | 3  | 1  | 1  | 1 CHS |
| 13 | Citrus       | 3    | 4     | *    | 1  | 1  | -- | 1  | 1     |
| 14 | Polk         | 2    | ***   | 2    | na | 3  | 1  | *  | --    |
| 15 | Martin       | 7    | --    | 3    | -- | 4  | 1  | 1  | 1     |

Notes: \* Could not be completed due to lack of consents or participation.

\*\*\* Met with the group and input was obtained via survey.

-- Was not completed for various reasons.

AA = African American participants.

H= Hispanic participants.

CHS = Children's Home Society

na = County did not have an active group or organization to meet with.

## Written Survey Data

To ensure input from a range of foster parents, children and agency staff, the questions developed for the focus group and interviews were used to create a one-page paper survey. The surveys were distributed broadly at Foster Parent meetings across the state, to agency staff and foster parents, and at other meetings. More than 75 responses were received and are included in the findings.

# Trends in National Research and Florida Data on Foster Care



## National Trends in Foster Care

The foster care population has increased dramatically in the past decade. In 1990, there were five children in foster care for every 1,000 children under age 18. Now there are eight foster children for every 1,000 children. As reported by the Child Welfare League, there were more than 500,000 children in foster care in 1996. Since 1986, the number of foster children has increased by 90 percent while the number of licensed foster families in the United States has decreased by 3 percent (Child Welfare League of America, 2000).

In 1989, reports from the General Accounting Office cited lack of foster homes as a serious problem (as cited in Epstein, 1999):

*“Nearly every state is experiencing a serious shortage of foster families. In some states the shortage is so great the children are being shuttled from one place to another, such as temporary homes, institutions, hospitals, until a proper home is found. There are reports that children, even preschool children, are being placed in childcare institutions because appropriate foster homes are not available. Some children are sent to shelters or back to their birth home where problems may get worse.” (p. 56)*

Reasons for this shortage identified by Hernandez (as cited by Epstein 1999) is “more children in care, declining incomes for working families at lower socioeconomic levels, high divorce and separation rates, and an enormous and growing number of two worker families” (p. 56). In addition, the GAO concluded recruitment was also affected by the fact that reimbursement for foster care services was too low to cover all the costs of the foster child.

## Characteristics of Foster Children

The age distribution of foster children is also changing. The Child Welfare League reports that infants and young children with medical complications and physical and mental limitations constitute the fastest growing group of children in need of foster care.” Although the largest group of children (38 percent) is in the 6-12 year old range, teenagers constitute a large proportion of foster children, many of whom will age out of the system rather than become adopted.

The racial/ethnic distribution of children in foster care has also been changing in recent years and does not reflect the distribution of population groups in the United States. “African American children represent 15 percent of the U.S. child population, but 40 percent of all African American foster children who are free for adoption” (Babb, 1999, p. 52). Hispanic children represent 15 percent of the population of children in the United States, but only 8 percent of the foster care population. The disparity in the distribution of the foster care population as compared to the U.S. population as a whole has profound implications for the recruitment of foster parents who have the same race/ethnic and cultural backgrounds as the children who need placement. The majority of foster families in the U.S. are Caucasian and the proportion of African American foster families has declined in recent years.

## Racial and Cultural Aspects of Foster Care

According to Babb (1999) two of the reasons African American children are entering and remaining in the child welfare system are that: 1) protective service workers do not understand cultural and childrearing differences among African Americans, perceive and report different practices as neglectful; 2) once they enter the child welfare system, African American children remain in care longer and receive fewer services.

One study evaluated an approach that focused on increasing minority adoptions (Jackson & Brissett, 1999). Recruitment techniques such as cultural competency training for staff, use of the media, and “adoption expos” held in minority communities provided an opportunity for interaction between children in need of families and those families considering adoption. At the end of eight months “84 percent of the children had either an adoptive family identified or selected, or had completed placements. (Jackson & Brissett, 1999, p. 96).

“Whole family foster care” in which whole families are placed with their children with an experienced foster family has also been described as an alternative to standard foster care. Nelson (as cited in Downs et al., 1996) reports that foster parent shares in the tasks of the biological parent by modeling and nurturing discipline. In a 1991 study conducted by Gibson and Noble (1991) (As cited in Downs et al., 1996), they described a residential care agency, in which the parents stayed in the cottage. None of the children were taken into protective custody, and only 2 percent were taken away from the home (p. 280).

## **Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Foster Children**

There are also a growing number of foster children with emotional or behavioral problems. As reported by the Child Welfare League, “Children in foster care are three to six times more likely than children not in care to have emotional, behavioral and developmental problems, including conduct disorders, depression, difficulties in school and impaired social relationships. Other estimates suggest that about 30 percent of the children in care have marked or severe emotional problems. According to a U.S. General Accounting Office study (1995), 58 percent of young children in foster care had serious health problems.

In a recent study by Intyre and Keesler (as cited by Epstein, 1999) half of foster care children “manifest evidence of psychological disorder” (p. 55). Epstein also comments on a study that found that despite the great need for mental health services for foster children, their needs are routinely ignored (Klee & Halfon, 1999). Epstein (1999) reported foster parents cannot financially meet all of the needs of these children, when they are fostering for an average board rate of only \$407 per month in 1994 in the United States (p. 58). Zuravin, Benedict, and Somerfield (as cited in Epstein, 1999) further note that, “many foster parents are apparently too unskilled and poorly motivated to offer nurturing relationships; maltreatment may even be routine, occurring in 25 percent of foster homes” (p. 59). These characteristics point to severe challenges in the system to recruiting and retaining foster parents.

## **Support Services for Foster Parents**

As suggested by the research above, the characteristics of foster children are becoming more complicated, resulting in a greater need for foster parents with adequate training and effective support services to help them through crises they face with the foster children. According to the Child Welfare League, about 20 years of research on foster care has confirmed the need to provide more of these support services to foster parents to help them stay in fostering. These services include direct involvement of foster parents in the child’s care plan and close partnering of foster parents and agency staff. The specific types of services the Child Welfare League recommends include the following:

- Involve foster parents in the development of agency policies, programs, and practices that affect family foster care.
- Collaborate with foster parents as members of a professional team.
- Provide foster parents with regular supervision, monitoring, and consultation, as well as immediate support for all members of their family, especially in times of crisis.
- Provide foster parents with accessible, competency-based in-service training.

- Provide foster parents with access to their own files.
- Create a grievance and appeals process.
- Reimburse foster parents for the full cost of fostering.
- Provide liability insurance to foster parents.
- Provide foster parents with respite care.

As noted in another study, the two strongest predictors of retention are regular attendance at a foster parent support group and the relationship between the worker and parent. Anderson (as cited in Downs et al., 1996) those who participated in foster parent organizations or other supports, 82 percent remained active foster parents for two or more years (p.307).

Research by Pasztor and Burgess (1982) on this topic also emphasizes the importance of bureaucratic procedures of foster care agencies and how they interact with foster parents in shaping recruitment of new foster parents. They noted two issues that often prevent more effective recruitment of foster parents. These are 1) “a lack of a clearly defined role for foster parents”; and 2) “foster parents’ lack of status with child welfare agencies and communities.” These researchers found that recruitment efforts that relied on foster parents as recruiters would be more effective, especially if the positive aspects of foster parenting were highlighted.

Adequate board payments and foster parent support were found to be very effective in retaining foster parents in a controlled study in Oregon (Chamberlin, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). The dropout rate of foster parents was 40 percent for those on the standard rate of pay, and only 16.6 percent among those in the increased pay group. The increased pay group also received extensive training and weekly meetings with agency staff. A study by the American Marketing Association (1992) found that the public believed that foster parents were fully reimbursed, while foster parents themselves noted the need for a more professional role and compensation that covered their costs and valued their role.

## **Other Recruitment Strategies**

One study has shown that agencies that rely on the assistance of civic and religious groups in recruitment are also successful. This study found that 53 percent of agencies that used civic and religious groups in recruitment/retention efforts reported an increase in approved families and 26.3 percent increased retention (Children’s Service Society of Wisconsin, 1991). A three-year study of market research techniques in Minnesota found that mass media, especially television, were the most effective recruitment tools (Moore, Granpre, & Scholl, 1988). Finally, a study using neighborhood recruitment with trained foster parents, and a \$100 incentive for those successful in recruiting new parents resulted in a 49 percent increase in foster families, compared to a 6.1 percent increase for the rest of New York City (Smith & Gutheil, 1988).

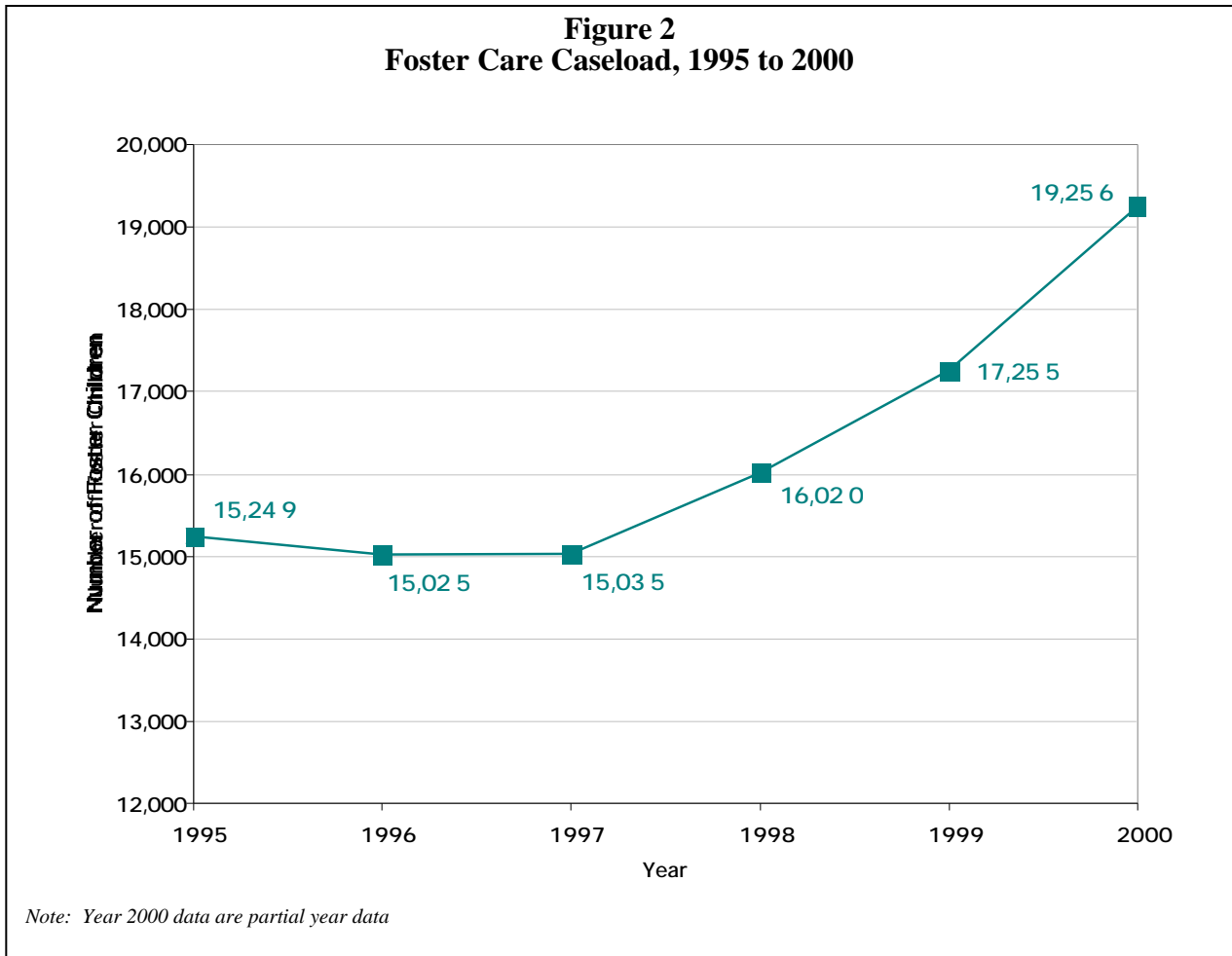
# **Florida Trends in Foster Care**

## **Number of Foster Children**

We examined trends in Florida foster care data that were provided by the Department. For some variables data were available back to the 1989-1990 fiscal years. For other variables, data were only available back to 1995. We present all available data that we believed to be consistently defined and measured across the years. The only exception to this rule is our presentation of data for the fiscal year 1999-2000. This year’s data was not complete at the time of analysis; it did not include monthly totals for May and June, so the annual averages for this year may under or over-represent the caseloads and capacity, depending on how these monthly figures fluctuated. In addition to statewide data, we review and present District-level data on foster care caseloads.

Figure 2 depicts the total foster care caseload— or the number of children in some form of foster care, including emergency shelters, community-based foster care, Departmental foster care or group facilities – in the state between 1995 and 2000. This figure shows that the total foster care caseload has increased dramatically in the past three years. In the mid-1990s, the foster care caseload dropped slightly, and was somewhat stable in 1996 and 1997. But following 1997, a dramatic increase in the number of foster children in care occurred each year. Between 1997 and 2000, the total caseload increased from 15,035 to 19,256. This represents an increase of more than **28 percent**. This rate contrasts with the decline in total cases of 1 percent that was seen between 1995 and 1997. Moreover, the rate of increase in caseload size gets larger each year following 1997; it increased 7 percent between 1997 and 1998, 8 percent between 1998 and 1999, and 12 percent between 1999 and 2000. Even if the rate of growth in the caseload is held constant at 12 percent, by the end of fiscal year 2000-2001, there will be more than 21,566 foster children in care. This will be an increase of more than 40 percent in the caseload size for the six year period, 1995 and 2001.

An examination of District specific foster care caseloads indicates that Districts 1 and 2 showed a slight decline in 1998 and 1999. However, data from Districts 3 through 15 appear consistent with the total caseload data, showing sharp increases for 1997-1999. In particular, District 12 revealed a sharp increase between 1995 and 1996, a decrease in 1997 and 1998, and began to rise again in 1998, with a sharp increase in 1999 (See Appendix). Note that all caseload charts in the appendix are on the same scale, despite differences in District sizes. Keep this in mind as comparisons are made across Districts.



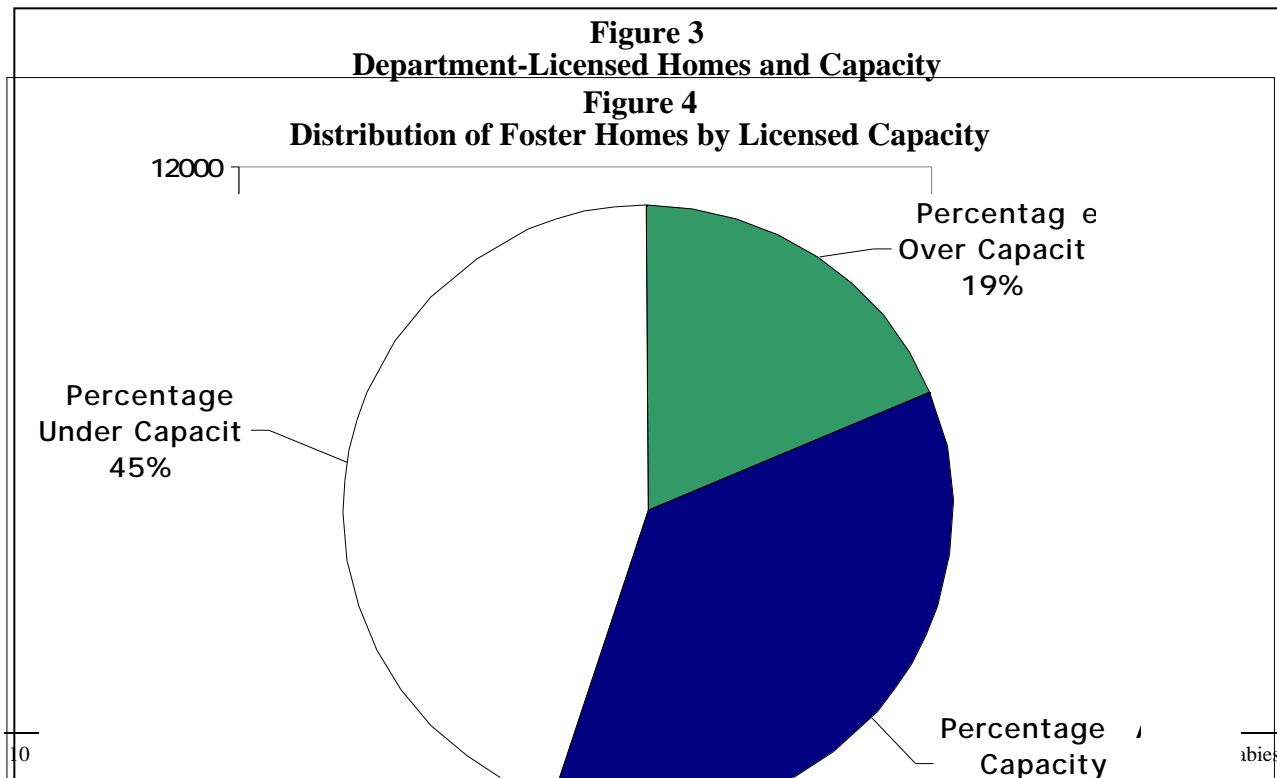
## Total Number of Licensed Homes and Licensed Capacity

The second critical measure in an analysis of foster care recruitment and retention is the number of homes that are licensed to care for foster children, and the number of children these homes can take. In Florida, there are several different types of facilities that can be licensed to provide foster care. These include Department emergency shelters, Family Safety foster homes (Department trained and licensed), community-based (or private) foster homes and community-based emergency shelters and group facilities. In our analysis, we focus on the Departmental foster homes and capacities because these are the figures that are relevant to Departmental efforts to improve retention and recruitment. Private agencies operate the other facilities and are responsible for the recruitment and retention of their foster families.

With respect to capacity, a foster home may have as many as 18 children, but is legally supposed to be no greater than five children per home, including biological children. Because the number of suitable homes does not meet the demand, many homes have been allowed to take in more children than the five-child limit. While flexibility through the use of waivers allows children to be placed in homes rather than emergency shelters or group facilities, homes with more children than their licensed capacity do not represent an acceptable environment for the children or the foster families. Improvements in recruitment and retention would allow Department staff to lower the average number of children per foster homes, ideally to less than five per home, and these reductions would probably lead to greater retention among the current foster homes due to lessened strain.

The total number of licenses issued to foster homes in Florida over the past 10 years rose from 4100 at the beginning of 1989 to approximately 5600 at the end of 1999, but this represents total licenses, including emergency shelters and private providers. These later homes are not typically used for foster care placements by department staff. An examination of the number of foster homes that were trained and licensed by the Department over the past four years shows an actual slight decline in homes since 1996. Figure 3 depicts the number of "Family Foster Homes" that the Department uses for their foster child placements. In addition to these, there are approximately 50 to 90 emergency shelters with additional capacity of 200-300 beds for foster children, but these are only considered temporary placements. Between fiscal year 1996-97 and current year figures (99-00), the number of licensed homes has increased marginally for a net gain of only 26 homes. But this gain in homes resulted in a net *loss* in capacity, due to differences in the number of children the newly licensed homes could take versus the capacity of homes that are no longer licensed. Over the four-year period, the Department suffered a decrease of 180 beds for foster children. During this period, more than 4,000 children entered the foster care system, as shown in Figure 3.

It is important to qualify information on licensed capacity with information on the utilization of the homes that are licensed. Current data show that a large proportion of the homes that are licensed are *under capacity*, or have fewer foster children than they are licensed for. Department data from April 2000 show that 45 percent of all licensed foster homes have *fewer* foster children than they are licensed for. Overall, a



full 21 percent of licensed homes, or 803 homes of a total of 3,872 in the state, have no foster children in them. This percentage represents 58 percent of the homes that are under capacity, meaning that more than half of the 1,737 homes that are under capacity have no children at all. It is important to note too that the number of homes with no children is actually larger than this, but District 10 was unable to report the number of homes with no foster children at the time of this report. Thus, the trend data in licensed capacity is misleading, as licensed capacity does not reflect real capacity as many homes are either not used or they are not used to their capacity. If unused beds are deducted, the actual capacity of all foster care beds is approximately 13,500 including emergency and shelter beds.

In addition to the problem of reported unused capacity, there are many homes that are over the five-child limit, both with and without legal waivers. Current year data show that 514 homes have more than five children and only 29 percent of these homes have a waiver for this. This means 71 percent of homes (n=364) have more than five children and do not have an appropriate waiver. While the largest proportion of these homes have six children, more than 100 have seven children, 82 have 8, 44 have nine and 33 have 10 children. Fourteen additional homes have between 11 and 18 children. These placements indicate a severe shortage of homes for placement and an overuse of the homes that Department staff may feel confident in or who may be willing to take in children when no one else will.

**Characteristics of Children in Foster Care:** Though recent data on the characteristics of foster children was not available, participants in the study indicated that children in foster care today have more complex problems than they used to have, reflecting national trends. This phenomenon was documented in the 1980s by Florida's Auditor General. In a 1989 study, the Auditor General documented the extent of the problems faced by foster children in Florida. Through a study of case records from 1982 and 1988, this report showed that rates of delinquency, emotional disturbance and developmental disabilities among foster children had more than doubled between 1982 and 1988. Sixty-four percent of their sample had had at least one behavioral problem or developmental disability and nearly 1/10<sup>th</sup> of their sample habitually used drugs or alcohol. Moreover, this report found that these children were not being properly matched with foster families who have the skills to work with these children. They further noted that

*“Most foster parents are not adequately prepared to serve or do not wish to serve children with behavioral, medical and developmental problems. These children, however, make up the majority of the current foster care population.”*

# Findings from Focus Groups, Interviews & Written Surveys



The following summarizes the findings from the focus groups, individual interviews, and paper survey. The findings are summarized under three major categories:

- Who chooses to become a foster parent and why?
- What discourages foster parents? What helps to retain foster parents?
- What recruitment methods do people think work?

The focus group and interview questions asked of all participants in the study included additional questions, including: What is currently done to recruit foster parents? Why do people become foster parents? What could improve the retention of foster parents? And what are some ‘best practices’ in foster parent recruitment and retention in Florida? Responses to these questions are integrated into the findings below.

The responses to these questions are grouped according to the group of respondents who made the comments. These are: foster parents, foster children, Department staff, and agency representatives (including Guardian Ad Litem, One-Church One Child, and other non-governmental agency staff).



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## Who chooses to become a foster parent and why?

When we asked participants “Who chooses to be a foster parent and why?” one general theme appeared across all respondent groups. The majority of respondents thought that people who go into foster parenting have a desire to make a change or improve the life of a child. Foster parents reported reasons such as, “I wanted to make a difference” or “to give a child the love that I have.” There also were responses that differed by respondent group, reflecting the different perspectives and experiences of each group. For example, while foster parents mostly reported altruistic reasons for becoming foster parents, foster children and agency staff were less idealistic and tended to perceive that people became foster parents for the money or to fill a gap in their lives. Many foster parents described foster parenting as “God’s work” or as a mission in life. For example, the *One Church, One Child* organization relies on messages about the spiritual value of caring for children in the community.

## Foster Parent Views

Foster parents generally reported that they went into foster parenting out of a concern for the welfare of children. These parents were somehow made aware of the need for foster families and they responded out of concern or out of civic duty. Many foster parents reported that they felt a spiritual calling to become a foster parent, or that they had love that they wanted to share with children. Others reported that once their children left the home it felt empty and quiet. Some parents reported wanting that full house feeling with children playing and growing.

*“There are very few people out there that are looking into foster care. They may be looking to adopt and now basically they are saying that if they want to adopt they have to become a resource parent. They have to foster first.”*

Other foster parents entered fostering because of a child that they knew or were related to children who needed a home. Many others reported that they were unable to have a biological child and they were told that foster parenting could lead to and possibly be a faster route to adoption.

In addition to reporting their love of foster children, foster parents' compassion for children was expressed in other ways in these discussions. For example, many foster parents were passionate about their concerns about the foster care system and how system problems negatively affected the children. Many wanted system-level changes primarily to improve the quality of life for the children, not only because it made their lives easier

## **Foster Children Views**

A consistent theme noted by children in foster care was that they thought some parents were dedicated to giving children in need a good home and support. They remarked that parents wanted to provide positive experiences to children. Foster children also reported that monetary concerns played a major role in people choosing to become or staying in foster parenting. They thought some parents went into foster care because they needed the money or, once they had become foster parents, they became dependent upon the money and could not stop fostering. It was noted by some that they were aware of the amount of money allotted to their family and felt that their needs were not covered appropriately given the amount received by the family. The majority of the children interviewed reinforced the views of the foster parents and were consistent about the need for more money for school activities, special needs, clothing allowance, and other incidentals experienced by most children.

## **Department Staff Views**

Some staff said that foster parents had “unconditional love for children,” or that people acted out of “altruism” and the desire to save or help children in need. Using fostering as a way into adoption was also frequently noted. But most noted that foster parents generally wanted to do “good”, even if they did not always know what they were getting into.

There was some discussion of families staying in foster care for the money, but more often than not, Department staff thought that many families tried very hard to provide good homes to foster children. Some Department staff felt that the homes were not as good as they should be and that there were not enough “quality” homes.

## Agency Views

Agency staff that participated in the study generally agreed with foster parents, children and Department staff about why a person becomes a foster parent. No additional or unique ideas about who becomes a foster parent were noted.

## Responses from the Written Surveys

Seventy people provided comments through a written survey that asked similar questions as those asked in the focus groups and individual interviews. These respondents also generally agreed with the reasons given by foster parents, children and Department staff. They confirmed that people decide to be foster parents for a variety of reasons: love, money, to compensate for an “empty nest” and as a vehicle for adoption.



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### What discourages foster parents? What helps to retain foster parents?

*“What discourages foster parents?. . .Not having full disclosure about the child, lack of support services, phone calls not returned, fear of or actual retaliation; and not being treated in a professional manner.”(foster parent)*

*“Too much red tape. Waiting in line over three hours to get child care and medical benefits.”*

*What would help foster parents? “Treat them as professionals and an equal member of the team. Give them full information about the children placed. Assist with accessing support services. And regular contact and being informed about the progress of the case.”*

*“Recruitment is not your problem, retention is the issue. No one wants to get involved in something they have heard bad things about” (foster parent)*

All participants noted that the foster care system was so overloaded that foster children and foster parents were unable to obtain the support they needed, including that mandated by law or rule. In fact, problems with the organization and management of foster care became the primary topic of conversation in both focus groups and individual interviewees when discussing why parents leave foster care.

To avoid seeing foster parents quitting the system, many individuals believe that more counselors are needed. This would stop counselors from becoming overburdened. Also, this would allow each caseworker to spend more time working with an individual case. A better screening of children may also help to alleviate burnout and stress in foster parents. This would include providing parents with a complete history of the children being placed in their homes. Furthermore, allowing parents to have more of a say in the type of children that enter their home may keep some parents from quitting. The need for more respite care was also a common concern. Many parents feel that if they were allowed more time away from the day-to-day work of caring for a child, their rate of “burn out” would be diminished significantly.

## Foster Parent Views

The need to keep the welfare of the child in focus was consistently revealed in the comments of foster parents. They were upset that the system did not operate more effectively to serve the needs of the children in care. Inefficiencies noted most often were the lack of counseling, insufficient contact with counselors, poor coordination of services, and lengthy delays in court and in finding permanent placements for children. It was suggested that having a therapist on staff at the Department would be important. As one foster parent reported,

*“Someone should be witnessing what happens to kids.” Or “There are so many people in their little lives.”*

Generally, foster parents felt powerless in dealing with the system, as did the foster children. Foster parents did not like not having a say in the life of a child that lives with them.

The specific response to questions related to why foster parents leave foster care are broken into subheadings, including bureaucratic issues and communications, partnering, flow of information, training needs, and support services.

## **Bureaucratic Issues and Communications**

The predominant issue that discourages foster parents is the lack of support from and, often a contentious relationship with Department staff. Some foster parents reported not seeing a caseworker for many months, nor ever being able to reach the caseworker by phone. In some counties, voice mail had been removed. As a result parents were frustrated by not being able to leave a message. One foster parent said that dealing with the Department was the most frustrating aspect: foster parents should not have to remind workers what needs to be done for a child’s case.

Foster parents desperately want to “keep the lines of communications open,” including more frequent visits by the foster counselor with the foster children by counselors as well as more information about court dates and progress on the child’s case.

*“We as foster parents are just as important as the caseworker. You [the Department] are pleasant while you are seeking [foster parents]. Why can’t you remain pleasant after you find us?” (foster parent)*

Foster parents were very frustrated about communications with workers. Because they could not reach workers, they felt uninformed about the child’s case, and unable to get the services they needed for the child, such as counseling. They were very angry about the lack of support that they and the child were receiving. Many foster parents noted the need for a 24-hour hotline or pagers for counselors so they could get the support and services they needed in a timely manner.

The problem of high caseworker turnover was also noted in almost every county. Some parents reported that they had had as many as 10 changes in counselors for a single child. Among the families that had many children, the problem of having too many counselors to coordinate with was noted.

State and national studies of foster care retention have also emphasized the impact of administrative practices on the retention of foster families. In 1989 the Auditor General’s office of the state of Florida made the following statement about the administration of foster care in a performance audit: “Continuing staff problems have hindered the ability of the foster care program to provide needed services to foster children, their parents and foster parents” (Finding 2.1 under Program management; p. 47). This study documented that the agency was seriously understaffed (by a factor of 30-35 percent, depending on the study and beginning back in 1979), and that staff turnover was high. This report noted that “the ability of the program to provide appropriate levels of service is dependent on the caseload of foster care counselors” (p. 48) and that current levels did not meet the needs.

Other foster parents felt that their counselors were not necessarily suited for the job. One reported that “People with human service experience do not necessarily make good human service workers.” They felt that training for workers was insufficient and that most workers did not know the foster care rules and policies. Several parents noted that they had accessed the foster care policies on the Internet or had used other resources to obtain information about the rules because the caseworker either did not know the rules or they felt that the caseworker was not giving them all the facts about the rules.

## **Partnering**

Parents want to be treated respectfully, as partners. Many parents felt that it was a “farce” that the MAPP training was built around the idea that that staff and parents were partners because once the training was over, they were no longer treated as partners. They disliked being considered as staff or “customers.” They felt that being treated as employees diminished the value of the effort they put in as “parents.” They felt as if they were parents first, volunteering their time and love out of commitment to the children rather than something they did to get paid and second, they were partners in a system that was focused on meeting the needs of the child.

Some parents felt that counselors were not helpful and were often punitive. Again, many parents felt that workers often withheld information about new placements, and others reported being lied to about the child’s issues. Not only did this anger them but they also reported that they probably would have taken the child regardless of the problems, so the lie was unnecessary.

*“Be concerned along with foster parents. We love what we are doing and the child gives us enough stress. We don’t need it from the staff too.”*

Matching children to appropriate homes was an important issue to foster parents. They felt that they had been asked what type of child they wanted in the home before they were licensed. Therefore, the Department should only call to ask them when they had that kind of child. Many parents reported that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to turn down a child when a worker is begging with them and saying they have no other placement. Then when the placement does not work out, the parents feel badly and are blamed. As one parent put it,

*“Foster parents are given a double message. . . know your limits...just say no. And at the same time, someone pleads with you to take a child.”*

Foster parents feel competent to make important decisions about the child’s care. As one parent explained:

*“We spend more time with the foster child than the counselors do.”*

The perceived failure of the Department to support foster parent decisions or to at least treat them as equal partners in a team was cited as one reason why foster parents quit.

Some parents felt offended by the way counselors and the workers who did the home visits for re-licensing treated them. They felt “talked down to” and harassed by workers about specific requirements of the household, while the needs of the child were ignored. For example, some parents complained of the requirement to keep many storage cabinets locked, with the key to them on their body at all times (i.e., for cleaning supplies). They noted that the requirement to lock cabinets made teenage foster children entering the home feel they were not trusted

Many parents reported feeling “policed” by workers rather than feeling treated respectfully as a parent who knows how to care for children. They felt the requirements for foster parenting were far more stringent than what most parents have for their own children, especially regarding household preparation.

The problem of “retribution” for not taking a child that a caseworker called about or for going above a caseworker's head was mentioned in nearly all Districts. Many foster parents had personal stories about retribution, from administrators to counselors in the Districts. They note that, “having a case manager angry with you if you deny a child they send to you” was discouraging and frustrating to them. Foster parents wanted to be able to freely turn down a child without worrying about placement or licensing staff “getting even” by making re-licensing difficult, by delaying reimbursements or other mechanisms of retribution.

Although most parents complained of the aforementioned difficulties, some reported having excellent workers. Many foster parents and children expressed sympathy for the counselors. They understood the workload faced by most counselors, the low wages, and they recognized that the problems were often beyond the control of the caseworker.

## **Flow of Information and Trust**

*“Make foster parents part of the plan and not just a bed placement.”*

Trust was a very important issue across all of the focus groups and interviews. Some foster parents said that they were skeptical about accepting the word of the worker because the workers were unsure of the actual policies. This is an extension of the importance of consistent and updated information from the Department. The foster parents noted that prompt follow up calls from counselors, and a case plan that clearly reflects the well being of the child would aid retention of foster parents. Comments from the focus group participants revealed that foster parents received inconsistent information about available services, reimbursements, policies and procedures.

Foster parents also frequently talked about getting children placed in their home without any information on the problems or needs of the child. One group of parents estimated that the file that was supposed to accompany each child was only delivered about 50 percent of the time. Nearly all parents had experienced getting a child with no information about the child. Some reported that the caseworker or placement staff had lied to them about the problems of the child in order to secure the placement.

As one foster parent explained, there are often

*“poor placement choices early in child’s foster are life. [The Department] must fully explain the background of children they are placing and try to place them accordingly.”*

Another major complaint of foster parents was how allegations of abuse by foster parents reported by foster children were handled. They reported that they were not given any information about the complaint; they were not told of the progress of the investigation; and they were unable to have contact with the child. The overall process of an investigation seemed unfair and made them feel treated as *“guilty until proven innocent.”* They wanted information about the allegation, mediation to see if it was a problem that could be readily resolved and regular contact about the progress of the case. Some parents thought that the process was a disservice to the children and the parents. Many parents revealed examples of false allegations and the many, many months of fighting and pain they endured. But even after allegations were dropped the children were not returned to them, so they lost all the way around.

*As one parent put it, “Some foster parents are forced to quit. The hassle they put you through if the child makes allegations when they are angry, and they are false most of the time.”*

*“Develop a more humane process for foster parents (and foster children) when there is an allegation of child abuse and/or neglect.”*

## **Support Services for Foster Children and Parents**

An important aspect of the parent/child/worker relationship that was mentioned consistently by foster parents was the importance of encouragement and asking foster parents for their input. Foster parents consistently reported that they did not feel part of the case, especially within the Department. An annual evaluation of foster parents’ relationship with the counselor, as well as more access to the counselor, was suggested. Other examples of recognition of their importance cited by foster parents were: more frequent home visits, increased opportunities for the child and caseworker to spend time together to create a relationship, and additional assistance with transportation and child care.

Most foster parents also emphasized the need for home-based mental health services and other support services for foster children and parents. Current access to mental health services is limited due to high demand, and is difficult to access if both foster parents work and a child is in school. Foster parents felt that in-home counseling would be ideal. Many other agency staff agreed, noting that in-home counseling would allow mental health staff to see the home situation.

Respite care and childcare were consistently noted as important retention issues, especially in rural communities. District 9 reported that respite care is one of the supports available statewide for foster parents. Parents may leave the home and another set of parents can come in for up to 12 days. But policies often create problems in accessing the respite care. Examples provided included problems with care when

foster parents or children were sick, or when foster parents needed to travel. The Department must approve the respite parents, and approval may involve complex arrangements.

## **Financial Support**

Though foster parents did not always raise the issue, when it came up in the discussions, foster parents universally agreed that it cost more to have foster children than is covered by the board rate. As one parent put it,

*"As long as are you are in foster care, you are always in the red."*

Another parent commented,

*"People don't want to foster because they can't afford it."*

What particularly bothered some foster parents was when the agency required them to make modifications to their home to meet agency rules for licensing, but the agency would not pay for the modifications.

Expenses for children's clothes, diapers and other necessities are other problems frequently noted by foster parents that are not being covered. This was particularly an issue for children who were put in multiple foster homes and did not have their clothes with them. Nearly all foster parents reported that they had received children who came with no clothes, no file and no belongings. Foster parents were extremely frustrated that this problem could not be resolved though additional vouchers for foster parents and more flexibility in the use of clothing vouchers so they could use them at consignment shops and elsewhere. They also thought that children should have clothing allowances in January and September (the start of the school terms) and that they needed more than \$50 at placement for clothing. One District reported that they have an "emergency package" prepared for children who are placed without any of their clothes and other necessities. This package includes many of the things that a foster home would need immediately upon placement.

In addition to needing more funds for clothing, foster parents and all other groups we spoke to mentioned that additional (flexible) dollars were needed to purchase things like class rings, summer camp, prom gowns and other items that were important to foster children, especially teens.

## **Training Needs**

Existing training and unmet training needs of prospective foster care parents were examined to determine how training or lack thereof impacts the recruitment and retention of foster care parents. Generally speaking, foster parents are exposed to the procedures for foster parenting through MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) training. Most of the stakeholder groups that participated in this study noted the need for greater training of both Department staff and foster parents. With respect to Department staff, this need was raised in the context of foster parents and children feeling that the caseworker was not honest with them, was not respectful, did not know how to talk with them in a compassionate way, and did not know how to meet the many challenges of their job. Respondents suggested Department staff have more training in human services in how to partner with parents and other service providers, and how to maintain good communications with foster parents about a child's case.

Many foster parents thought that more training was needed for foster parents. Most did not think that MAPP training was *"enough reality for foster parents."* This issue was mentioned by the majority of respondents, who repeatedly said that more information about how it was to be a foster parent was very important in preparing and retaining foster parents. On the other hand, some parents thought that 30 hours was too long.

Many foster parents indicated that MAPP training was not provided in a timely fashion, was not convenient to their schedules and did not include much of the content they felt was required to give them an accurate picture of what they were going to experience. The difficulty in obtaining training soon after a prospective foster parent expresses interest was a deterrent to pursuing the licensing process.

Training suggestions from foster parents ranged from "how to interface with biological parent to conducting in-home training during caseworker's visit and/or making MAPP classes realistic, which they believe will promote a lower drop-out rate in the long run." Many foster parents wanted training on how to manage stress and the impact of fostering on families. Most felt that it was important to have a celebration for MAPP education graduates, to have monthly raining services, and to provide some training for judges.

## **Foster Children Views**

The foster children interviewed focused many of their concerns on the lack of attention and support that they received from Department staff and the lack of trust they felt with the staff. They felt this had a major effect on the retention of foster parents. Generally they felt supported by their foster parents, but they felt that counselors often did not do their jobs by not visiting often enough or failing to provide support. Providing promised transportation and support to foster children and their foster parents was very important to them. Many of the foster children felt that it was critical to have access to their counselors on a 24-hour basis so that problems could be addressed rapidly. They felt fearful when they had no one to call in the event of a bad home situation.

Foster children reiterated the concern of foster parents that foster children need more effective ways to communicate with their foster care counselor. They also indicated that their freedom to communicate is sometimes restricted by foster parents.

Another issue many foster children and foster parents talked about was that being in foster placement for much longer than necessary. Many children had been in foster care for three or more years, with no permanency plan in place. They did not understand how the rules on placing children could be so blatantly broken and why the courts took so long to make a decision about their lives. The general concern was that the system moves too slowly in securing foster children stability and a future.

Many of the foster children also reported wanting a greater role in the selection of the homes they were sent to. They thought that they should be told more when they are being taken from their parents, to reduce the guilt and fear that they felt when being pulled from the home. They also wanted to have a choice in the type of home they were sent to. Consistently, foster children and parents talked about the emotional upheaval foster children experienced when they were taken from their homes, placed in a home without information, and then moved without much explanation or rationale. Foster children and parents felt that whenever a child is moved, they should get regular contact from a caseworker or counselor to help them through this transition, and if the child is old enough, they should be given more information about why they are being moved and where.

The foster children in the study were also quite frank about the ways that other foster children used the system. They knew how difficult some foster children could be and they knew that foster parents were unable to punish them in meaningful ways. This frustrated some because they wanted to see limits put on some foster children who disturbed the families they were in. They also were sympathetic with their foster parents and did not want to see good foster parents manipulated by foster children or the system.

Foster children understood well how "fatigued" and burned out foster parents get. Some suggested that the Department should give foster parents more praise. "They are braver than most people." Most foster children also thought that foster parents should get more money. They knew that they cost the family money, and in some cases they needed items that the family could not afford.

Recommendations made by some of the youths interviewed were:

- Foster children should have the opportunity to meet foster parents before they are placed;
- There should be access to a phone at all times so that children feel safe and able to report problems;
- Siblings should be placed in one home if at all possible, and should always have the opportunity to visit regularly if not placed together;

- There should be special efforts made to minimize identification of foster children at school (e.g. workers coming to the school and pulling them out of class);
- The money (\$50) that is allotted for clothing for a first time placement does not address the needs of children who are moved. The clothing is often left at the original placement, leaving the child without needed items;
- Find other places for foster children other than foster homes;
- Foster children prefer foster family homes to group homes; and
- The foster adolescents themselves would like to be involved in the recruitment process.

## Department Staff Views

The findings from interviews with Department and agency representatives were consistent with those of the foster parents regarding bureaucratic/administrative problems impacting retention. The major themes that they identified were: lack of communication; need for respite care, babysitters, awards and banquets to show appreciation; and a team approach.

Many staff noted the need to respect and value the role of the foster parents. *“We need to treat parents as assets, which they are.”* To encourage retention, there should be ways to alleviate their ongoing stress, as foster parents do not have enough “down time.”

Some District staff felt that the lack of respect for foster parents began as early as the training process for new foster parents. No flexibility in training schedules was also a problem for parents who worked or had many children. They suggested conducting training at more flexible times. One Department staff member stated that the poor condition of the training room also set a negative tone for the treatment of foster parents.

Staffing problems were also regularly noted by Department staff as causes of discouragement among foster parents. Department staff is discouraged by the high rate of counselor turnover. As one person put it,

*“Our turnover rate is horrendous. Out of 33 adoptions positions, 61 percent of staff have been there only a few months or the positions are vacant. We train and we train. [Foster parents] are constantly calling, and complaining, “I am sick that every time I call there is a new worker.” Yet what can you possibly do. I sometimes feel that we are the McDonald s of the social services.”*

Many staff also noted that most counselors never receive any pre-service training and some never go through MAPP training. While not making it a requirement, some Districts ask their counselors to go through MAPP. District 10 is one of these. Other Districts have not been successful because of the high caseloads of counselors and what they described as a “logistical nightmare.”

*“We hear complaints that foster parents aren't learning enough about the children that are going to be placed with them. There needs to be a sense of partnership in working toward whatever the permanency goal is for the child. They're told in MAPP how difficult it is to foster a child who's abused and neglected. They don't hear it. And when they get that first child it happens. I think there's a warm fuzziness that goes on in MAPP between the parent and the trainers, a close relationship, and then they're thrown into the hard cruel world of case workers who have high caseloads and are dropped from having this warm fuzzy person every week to having a case worker that may be beeped or called a couple of times. Most of the counselors have not had training in MAPP so they don't know how the foster parents are trained. Districts felt this was a “vital relationship building piece, but its not happening.”*

Most Districts reported they have an orientation to get potential foster parents into MAPP training with the required paperwork, including fingerprint cards. Most Districts try not to wait, understanding that keeping potential foster parents in the process is part of the problem.

*“If you wait for the fingerprint cards to come back then you've waited too long to engage them, and they've moved on and they're not interested anymore.”*

Some District staff see a limitation in not having enough staff to do the MAPP training for parents or having it available at various times. Some District staff felt training does not relate to what actually happens in foster care. The emphasis is on protective investigations, and not on working with children in foster care. These role and responsibilities must be sorted out with appropriate training provided to ensure that workers know their job.

Another important factor for retention in the foster home that was frequently noted was the informal support system, including extended family and resource foster parents. To enhance support systems for foster parents and foster children, various governmental, Departmental and local experts in foster care such as the Child Welfare League, *One Church, One Child*, emphasized the need to rely more on developing care that is most culturally-appropriate for the children. The Neighbor-to-Neighbor program is an example of how a community-based program can work to increase the support of foster children and families by relying on neighbors to offer support to foster families. The community and neighborhoods may be an overlooked resource base for foster children.

*"Some of the most successful foster homes I've seen had very good support systems. Some of the ones that were really bad had no support."*

Some Department staff noted structural issues of the foster care system that may inhibit retention. These issues included the need for more therapeutic foster homes, the lack of foster parents equipped to deal with kids experiencing emotional behaviors (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, separation issues) and the need for transitional foster homes.

*"There is a need for additional quality homes, and some foster homes are not as good as they could be."*

Department staff also often noted that it is important to understand the difficulties faced by foster parents. In addition to issues noted previously in this report, the following are problems that Department staff thought was sources of discouragement among foster parents:

- Overcrowding: Parents are asked to take on too many children;
- Foster children being pulled from foster families with little advance notice and no help;
- Lack of grief counseling for families who have lost a child who was fostered for a long time;
- Lack of awareness of counselors of the mental health needs of a child; and
- Blaming foster parents when foster children run away.

Some comments from Department representatives emphasized the importance of communication between foster parents and the social worker. It can be discouraging when foster parents hear counselors complain about their caseloads, and they may hesitate to contact the worker. Heavy caseloads often result in less contact with the foster parent, and limit the caseworker's opportunity to explain situations and alert the foster parent to anything that might be changing or developing in the case.

Some workers also felt that more financial supports would help foster parents. As one put it,

*"We need more money. We need contracts with Disney, Busch Gardens and other places that are so expensive."*

## Agency Views

Interestingly, individual interviews with agency representatives related comments and suggestions that were similar to those of foster parents and individuals from the Department. One legal provider in one county reported that many parents are set up to be discouraged because they are not told the truth about the problems that many foster children have while they are in training prior to placement.

It was noted by one agency representative that foster parents are stigmatized in many ways. This stigmatization includes negative press about foster parents, lack of support from schools who are often “tired of foster children,” whom they view “as a drain on the school,” and poor treatment by medical professionals who deny them medical information on the child.

Placement has to be appropriate to retain foster parents. As one agency representative put it:

*“There need to be one-child homes, one-sex homes, and homes where parents are paid to stay home; don’t call a foster parent about a child that does not match what the foster parents want or are able to deal with.”*

Many agency representatives noted that the local Foster Parent Association is very important in retaining new foster parents. The absence of Department support for foster parents was mentioned frequently, including the lack of support when a foster child gets in trouble.

*“If something goes wrong [with the child], it is the fault of the foster parent.”*

Some agency representatives noted that they actually ended up doing the work of counselors such as gathering medical records, talking to people for investigation, etc. due to the excessive caseloads. Birth parents and siblings are not getting visitations, as they should, due to worker inadequacies.

Many agency representatives noted that counselor turnover is too great, perhaps due to the fact that they are expected to do too much and have too much responsibility.

*“In our District no one respects counselors or child protective investigators. Only four out of 40 child protective investigators in the District have one year experience or more.”*

Some agency representatives noted that foster parents should be treated like professionals if retention is to be successful, which includes a higher board rate, prompt reimbursement, training and respect. Other techniques that have been effective with parents include providing immediate help during a crisis, and providing necessary tools to be able to help the kids.

## Training Issues

Participants at a Department Licensing and Providers Meeting remarked on training issues as a retention issue. Not all agreed that MAPP training was effective for all foster parents.

*“Training is spotty for foster parents. The 30-hour training needs to be ongoing, because all it really does is build on their existing skills.”*

Some of the Districts doubled up (i.e., condensed the training into a much shorter period) on MAPP training, but the efforts were not rewarding for most. District 11 did doubling up of MAPP training one year and lost homes that year. One staff member described their experience:

*“We did facilitative weekends, doubling up training and ended up not knowing who the parents were. It was not the same as when it is done over the 10 week period.”*

Volusia County also “tried to double up... not a good experience. With longer classes, people have more time to think and drop out. But with accelerated classes they dropped out after they have the kids.”

Other agency staff also noted a need to do “licensing training” with new investigators. They felt that current training was too limited so when investigators see problems in homes, they may not know what to look for or how to address problematic issues. One person thought that a staff member not talking with parents about problems in the home was “the same as condoning it.”

All new counselors should be encouraged to get MAPP training, but it is not consistent throughout the state. In some Districts, there is a wait for certification to become a trainer, not for foster parents to receive training. Field staff members spend a minimum amount of time with foster parents, once a month for about 10-20 minutes with a focus on the child, not the foster parents. Therapeutic foster care and licensing requires ongoing communication with providers. District 15 has training two hours a month for therapeutic foster care, and an ongoing mentoring program with other foster care parents.

Agency personnel made the following training suggestions regarding supports needed for foster parents and training.

- Provide training that focuses on how to interface with biological parents.
- Design a 10-week positive parenting course; trainers would go into homes to work with the family and would be open to biological parents for reunification and to adoptive parents also.
- Have more training for counselors to help them deal with the demands of the job so they can help families more.

## Responses from Written Surveys

Respondents to the paper survey supported the concerns raised by foster parents, children, Departmental staff and agency staff. They also emphasized a sense of fear as an important reason foster parents quit. This included the fear of being sued, the fear of having a natural child abused by a foster child, and the fear of being unable to take care of a child. Many agreed that taking care of a foster child can be tough and that it involves a great deal of responsibility. Additionally, some claimed that there is a lack of information regarding the foster care system. These individuals believe that if more people were aware of the need, then we would see more parents in the system. Another reason some people are dissuaded from becoming foster parents is that they find it difficult to say goodbye to a child once they have bonded with them.

According to these respondents, a general feeling of frustration appears to be the most common reason foster parents quit. This may involve frustration with the foster children themselves, or frustration with the Department, its counselors and the foster care system. Some indicated that the counselors lack a sense of concern for the children they work with. Others believe that foster parents quit because they lack proper training and preparation.



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### What strategies work or might work to recruit new foster parents?

*“I think one of the best resources for recruitment is a happy foster parent. Because that foster parent will tell their brother, their sister, their next door neighbor, and from there it all grows.”*

Overall, all respondent groups had similar ideas about strategies for recruiting new foster parents. These included heavy emphasis on the media, including the use of TV, magazine ads, newspaper articles and public relations campaigns that involve foster children, foster parents, judges and other involved parties. They also emphasized the importance of focusing on how many children were in need and how important and satisfying it is to be a foster parent. Truth in advertising was also suggested to ensure that parents who did go through the process were given the hard facts about the realities of foster parenting.

Many foster parents noted that the governmental bureaucracy of foster parenting was so burdensome that it was difficult to be a foster parent, let alone recruit new foster parents. All stakeholder groups interviewed acknowledged this problem and how it served as a barrier to recruitment. Many respondents felt that recruitment should not be pursued until the system was improved so that current foster parents felt supported.

Despite the perceived barriers, foster parents, foster children, Departmental staff and other agency representatives overwhelmingly responded that current foster parents were the best recruiters of new foster parents. Personal contact with a foster parent was one of the most noted avenues for current foster parents to have learned about foster parenting. Each group acknowledged the importance of parent-to-parent recruitment.

## **Foster Parent Views**

As noted previously, foster parents recommended extensive media coverage of the need for foster care, with a focus on the positive aspects of foster care. They also recommended that the Department staff a phone line for people who want to call with inquiries about foster care. This should include the availability of other staff to follow up by visiting the home, if necessary.

Foster parents also felt that foster parent associations could assist with foster parent recruitment by having experienced members attend orientations and MAPP classes to talk with prospective foster parents. Foster parents also thought that structured foster mentoring and training, where current foster parents share experiences and mentor new prospective foster parents, would be effective. To implement these ideas, however, foster parent associations and participating parents would need some support, including funds to cover childcare and other expenses associated with providing these services. Related to recruiting parents who wanted to adopt, one parent group felt that “The Department’s party line is not to encourage adoptive parents to consider fostering.” But the consensus of the group was that the Department should encourage these parents to consider foster care.

These suggestions highlight the need for dedicated recruitment and retention specialists in each District and an organized approach to responding to prospective foster parents.

To reach the Hispanic community more effectively, it was suggested that advertisements and outreach should be done in Spanish as well as English in communities with large Hispanic populations. As noted elsewhere, foster parents feel that convincing outreach is needed to recruit to African American and Hispanic foster families that are needed.

## **Foster Children Views**

Foster teens felt strongly about having a voice in the foster care system, including having a voice in recruiting new foster families. They wanted to do outreach and meet the families that are interested in fostering. These teens thought that they could help screen out the parents who may not be good foster parents. They also felt that there should be a better way to screen for prospective foster parents. One foster child recommended that the Department ask or invite selected families to become foster parents. One type of family they would target is one in which a parent was formerly a foster child themselves. They thought that would make the parent a better foster parent.

The foster children also felt strongly that in order to have enough foster families, the Department needed to appreciate the foster parents it did have by regularly recognizing them and giving them respect. There were many ideas offered such as having annual dinners, prizes, more funds, providing babysitting and similar supports to foster parents who are rarely given any appreciation or gifts of thanks. This recognition of current foster parents would help recruitment because, as the teens put it, “Word of mouth is effective in recruitment.” If the parents are supported then they will share their positive experiences with other foster parents. The foster children also recommended the use of newspapers and radio announcements.

## Department Staff Views

Department staff shared the same ideas for media coverage that other groups did, with an emphasis on large scale media “saturation”, promotions at PTA and other community functions, and the use of billboards. Staff members also felt that many good recruitment strategies were in place across the state, but that most Districts did not know what the other Districts were doing. Staff wanted to be informed of what was working in other Districts and how these practices could be implemented in their districts.

District staff also thought that targeted recruitment would be effective. One person suggested surveying community members to learn what it would take to engage them in foster care. They further recommended seeking out parents who have the social characteristics and parenting skills needed to match the needs of the children being placed in foster care.

Staff thought that a very effective recruitment strategy would be to have dedicated foster care recruitment and retention staff that can put all their energies in to this effort. In District 9, several agencies are sharing a recruiter. This person helps the Department as well as Children’s Home Society and other agencies to develop a recruitment plan, hold information meetings and recruit foster parents. Staff also recommended having a recruitment and retention committee, comprised of community members and staff, who could meet regularly to discuss recruitment strategies. Several Districts do this or are developing it, and one includes a teen member on the committee. District 15 has hired a recruiter in public relations and marketing and this person has implemented a billboard campaign without using any state funds. For public service announcements, the recruiter has involved the major employers in the district in doing payroll stuffers.

District 10 has also implemented a monthly meeting of all the community providers and the Department to talk about recruitment and retention efforts. This group is doing strategic teaming, in which people recruiting foster parents for babies would team up to recruit foster parents for adolescents so they would not be competing for foster parents.

Several Department staff also felt that active Foster Parent Associations were very effective recruitment and retention tools. One example was District 10’s Foster Parent Association that was characterized by staff as “wonderful.” This group created a program called Oasis, which provides day care by prospective foster parents for foster children waiting for placement.

In addition to these ideas, Department staff thought that better mapping of where the foster children are coming from could help with targeted recruitment from these areas. Also, they thought that incentives for parents who bring in potential parents might help. One District gives away coupons for dinner for two for those parents who recruit new families. The families are also included in the yearly raffle for a free weekend at a motel. Some Districts have raised funds for these incentives from outside sources such as local businesses and civic organizations.

Staff in the Orlando area said that targeted attention on the recruitment from all the faith communities and from all racial groups is needed, and that Districts 7 and 10 have had success in this area.

## Agency Views

Agency representatives also agreed that heavy media attention should be directed to the needs of the foster children. They thought that special stories about specific foster children may help to capture people’s attention.

In addition, they had several Department-based and community-based ideas and activities. They felt strongly that the Department had to be prepared to return calls in a prompt and thorough manner from people who are interested in being foster parents. Although one agency staffs an 800 number for these calls, they then refer foster parents to the Department for more information. The Department has to be ready for these calls.

A need for funding for recruitment efforts was also discussed by agency representatives. One success is the KIDS project in District 10, which mounted a huge campaign to raise \$5 million to assist in marketing to

prospective foster parents. This campaign has helped to draw more than 300 prospective families to their agency. “*Project Teamwork*,” also in District 10, involves the faith community to help recruit foster families. Finally, the Guardian Ad Litem program in this District has a program called “*Kids for Kids*,” which puts an emphasis on children assisting other children.

*One Church, One Child* representatives recommended the effective strategy they use which is to hold frequent orientation sessions for people who call in and are interested in foster care. These are held twice a month and efficiently address the questions of people who express some interest in foster care. This agency has also successfully tapped the faith community by sending representatives to speak to churches and affiliated groups about foster care. They also have foster parent and adoption staff work as a team in recruitment and retention to encourage people to consider both and to provide similar information to people interested in adoption or foster care. As one representative put it, “*adoptive parents are able to look at pictures of the children, and then meet them and decide if they want to adopt. However foster parents are not able to do that. They do not have a choice.*” *One Church, One Child* believes that recruiting people for foster care can occur as part of recruiting people for adoption.

## **Responses from Written Surveys**

The majority of survey respondents reported that advertising was the strategy most likely to improve the recruitment of new parents. They also noted that it is important to focus on the success stories of the foster care system. People need to be aware of the need and must know how they can help. Furthermore, information could be circulated at local churches, social clubs, fairs, as well as by means of brochures or pamphlets.

# Conclusions and Strategies for Improving Recruitment and Retention

The following conclusions and strategies were developed based on analysis of the focus group, interview and written survey data. Based on these findings, we recommend that before any major recruitment campaign is initiated by the Department significant attention and resources should be put into repairing the problems in the current foster care program and its administration.

**Conclusion 1: The recruitment of new foster parents can be achieved most effectively by improving the care and retention of current foster families. The retention of current foster families can be improved best through changes in the rules and functioning of the foster care system.**

## Conclusion 1: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding

**Strategy 1a:** Improve the relationship between Department staff and foster parents by providing training for workers and foster parents that focuses on teamwork and cooperation. How staff can best assist foster parents must be addressed.

**Strategy 1b:** Define the roles of the foster parent and the Department by enhancing and implementing the bilateral agreement between the foster parent and the Department. The current foster care agreement is an excellent starting point. In addition to its current provisions, this agreement should specify the support services that the Department will provide to the foster parent and should be tailored to the specific needs of the child and the parents. It should also stipulate that foster parents would not be retaliated against in any way for refusing to take a child for whom they are not qualified to serve. This recommendation in no way suggests that foster parents should be able to discriminate with regard to acceptance of a child based on race, religion, sex or any other condition pursuant to state or federal law.

**Strategy 1c:** Reengineer the workload of counselors by shifting tasks that do not require social work training to other workers, such as transporting children to appointments.

**Strategy 1d:** Make the administrative systems that support foster children and foster parents as efficient as possible to reduce the time it takes for children or parents to get a response or assistance for a problem (for example, provide counselors with pagers).

**Strategy 1e:** Involve foster parents in court proceedings regarding their foster children, through early notice of court hearings and mechanisms for foster parents to express their views on decisions being made on behalf of the foster children under their care.

**Strategy 1f:** Provide foster parents with mechanisms for giving feedback to the Department on their experiences as foster parents and their suggestions for improving how the system is run. The following are examples of mechanisms for doing this:

- Give foster parents as a group a greater voice in determining how the foster care system is administered by designating foster parent associations as foster parent advisory councils.

- Ensure that the procedure adopted by the Department for foster parent review of the performance of foster counselors is implemented. Additionally make sure that appropriate action is taken with respect to the findings of this review. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. Participant surveys following MAPP training are also done in some districts (such as District 8) and these data are summarized to help trainers better target the MAPP trainings.
- Ensure that the required exit interview is conducted with all children ages 5-17 who leave a foster home where they have stayed for at least 30 days. Also ensure that appropriate action is taken with respect to the findings from these interviews. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. These data should be shared with Foster Parent Associations. District 8 conducts these exit interviews and summarizes the results for district staff.
- Require an exit interview with all foster parents who close. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. These data should be shared with Foster Parent Associations.
- Require an exit interview with foster parents when a child leaves. Aggregate data from these interviews should be compiled to identify trends that could be addressed in training or procedures. This data should be shared with Foster Parent Associations.
- Provide foster parents with access to a suggestion box or an email address for submitting ideas for improving the foster care system.
- Create a Web site chat-room for foster parents to engage in a dialogue with other foster parents, Department staff and related agencies on ways to improve the foster care system, particularly in regard to supporting foster parents and children in foster care. This Web site could include links to other Web sites that address issues related to effective foster care.
- Provide a toll-free phone number with a recorded message that allows for comments and exchange of information. This number could serve like a triage center. For example: Press 1 if you need to reach someone immediately; press 2 if you would like to be sent the FCAP report; press 3 if you would like to hear about recent announcements affecting all foster parents; press 4 if you would like to have a list of the when and where your local FPA meeting is held; press 5 if you would like to make a suggestion for improvement in an area.
- As done in District 9, develop an automatic “telephone dialing” mechanism with phone numbers of all foster parents for the purposes of quickly disseminating special announcements (e.g. announcement of upcoming speakers for FPA meetings, availability of circus tickets, etc.)
- Increase opportunities for foster parents to network; for example, KIDS in District 10 has a monthly covered dish event where each foster parent is encouraged to bring a dish that is representative of their cultural heritage.

## **Conclusion 1: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 1g:** Reduce the caseload of foster care counselors to no more than 12-15 children per caseworker as recommended by the Child Welfare League of America.

**Strategy 1h:** Research and implement ways to reduce turnover among counselors such as increasing pay levels and providing more administrative support.




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**Conclusion 2: Foster parents and foster children want the foster care system to provide ongoing economic, emotional and other support to foster families and children.**

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## **Conclusion 2: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 2a:** Monitor compliance with key provisions of the foster care system, including:

- Providing foster parents with full information about the child at the time of placement,
- Ensuring that the child's belongings are transported with the child, and,
- Ensuring foster care counselors regularly visit the foster care homes under their supervision.

**Strategy 2b:** Involve neighborhoods and the larger community in developing culturally appropriate community systems that support foster families through engaging extended families and neighborhood support groups (such as mentors, foster grandparents, madrinas and padrinos). Two communities that have implemented innovative models in this area are Little Havana in Miami and Jacksonville.

**Strategy 2c:** Provide more culturally appropriate services, including African American and Hispanic (including bilingual) social workers and therapists, and training that targets ethnic minorities in order to serve these groups more effectively.

## **Conclusion 2: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 2d:** Provide adequate financial incentives for foster parents, including:

- A higher board rate to cover the full costs of parenting foster children based on empirical estimates of these costs.
- A board rate supplement for parents with children with serious behavioral or medical problems based on an initial assessment and a reassessment every six months.
- Reimbursement for home improvements required as a condition of licensure provided the foster parent serves children adequately for a least one year or for some other specified period of time commensurate with the value of the improvement.
- The option of joining the state employee health plan with the state contributing to the plan as if the foster parent were a state employee.
- A contribution to a retirement fund after a foster parent has served children adequately for a minimum of one year with continuing contributions for every subsequent year the foster parent provides services.
- Compensation for foster parents to cover excessive physical damages to homes caused by foster children.
- Continue support of the Foster Allegation Support Team (FAST) that assists foster parents who are under an abuse allegation.

**Strategy 2e:** Develop an option for parents to become 'professional foster parents' for children with higher levels of need, and pay these parents a rate that would allow them to forego outside employment. Include medical benefits, liability insurance and retirement options for these parents, to make the work commensurate with outside employment. The Hull House project in Volusia County and the SOS project in Ft. Lauderdale are two Florida examples of this approach that should be assessed to determine their effectiveness.

**Strategy 2f:** Create local systems of respite care for foster parents.



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**Conclusion 3: The emotional, behavioral and medical problems of foster children have increased in recent years yet assessment of and treatment for these problems is very limited.**

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### **Conclusion 3: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 3a:** Match foster children to foster parents who have the skills to deal with the problems the children have. Ensure that foster parents maintain and update these skills through monitoring and supplemental training.

### **Conclusion 3: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 3b:** Screen and assess the emotional, behavioral, educational and medical problems of all children in foster care. Conduct this assessment immediately upon removal or transfer of a child from a home, by creating small, short-term assessment facilities in each District, with special activities and services to meet the needs of children in transition. This initial assessment should be followed up at least every six months after placement to determine if additional supports are needed for the child and the foster parent. A child should not be placed with a foster parent if the needs of the child exceed the skills and experience of the foster parent. District 8 has a procedure for screening children to determine their needs, training foster parents to meet these needs, and paying higher board rates based on the skill levels and needs of child. This is called the Enhancement Project, which could serve as a model program for other districts.

**Strategy 3c:** The Medicaid comprehensive behavioral health assessment should be implemented statewide as soon as possible. This is a comprehensive approach to assessing the needs of the child that is financed through the Medicaid program. Requiring this assessment to be done every six months should be considered rather than once a year as currently specified in the procedure.

**Strategy 3d:** Provide all available information to the foster parent at the time of placement

**Strategy 3e:** Ensure that all foster children and foster parents have timely access to quality mental health counseling and parent training services. Offer in-home counseling to families in which this would be effective or where transportation or work issues prevent families from taking children to mental health agencies.

**Strategy 3f:** Document the distribution of children with different levels of problems and use this information to target recruitment and retention efforts. This would ensure that the parents who are most needed will be recruited. Build a continuous database of the number and characteristics of foster children and foster parents. Phase II of this study will attempt to establish a baseline in regard to the number of children in foster care with particular needs and the availability of foster parents whose skills meet these needs.



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**Conclusion 4: Foster children feel powerless, unsupported and do not trust the foster care system. Often children are in foster care many years longer than necessary and some experience many foster homes. Such changes make it difficult for them to feel secure.**

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### **Conclusion 4: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding:**

**Strategy 4a:** The foster care administrative system should be redesigned to ensure that foster children are given adequate and ongoing support by their counselor when they are placed also they should have ways to contact Department staff when they have urgent needs. Limit the number of counselors with whom each foster family has to interface.

**Strategy 4b:** The foster care system and courts must become more efficient in meeting the needs of foster children, with emphasis on achieving permanency as quickly as possible.

**Strategy 4c:** Give foster children more information and counseling about what is happening to them when they are moved.

**Strategy 4d:** Provide 24-hour hotline numbers to foster children for their use only in the emergencies involving their treatment at their foster home.

**Strategy 4e:** Give older foster children a choice of foster homes prior to placement.

**Strategy 4f:** Ensure that foster parents are culturally-sensitive and culturally-competent before placing a child from a different culture with them.



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**Conclusion 5: Good ideas and practices for recruitment and retention exist in various Districts, but there is no statewide approach to developing these ideas and practices and disseminating the results. Consequently, some Districts have effective efforts while others have limited efforts. District staff members are interested in learning what other Districts are doing; however they are largely unaware of these activities.**

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### **Conclusion 5: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 5a:** Design a statewide plan for recruitment with input from District staff, including strategies that help to remove the negative stigma of foster care and foster children. The focus must be on improving community awareness and promoting positive beliefs about foster care.

**Strategy 5b:** The Department should collect and review the materials that have been developed in the Districts and use these materials to design future recruitment materials. The materials and methods developed in Districts 8, 10 and 11 may be particularly helpful. These include a video advertisement to recruit foster parents, obtaining materials and reach the Hispanic population as well as encourage effective collaboration between community groups and Department staff.

### **Conclusion 5: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 5c:** Create a recruitment program that is targeted, continuous and statewide.

**Strategy 5d:** Ensure that local capacity to respond to telephone inquiries about foster parenting is secure and effective before implementing any recruitment campaign

**Strategy 5e:** Develop and maintain departmental Web sites and list serves for the dissemination of information on best practices related to recruitment and retention that are being used in other Districts.



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**Conclusion 6: Training programs for foster parents and departmental staff that support these parents are not adequately focused on the unique problems related to caring for children with complex problems.**

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**Conclusion 6: Strategies That Can be Implemented with Existing Funding**

**Strategy 6a:** MAPP training needs to be modified to include an emphasis on the types of problems foster parents are likely to encounter during the care of the child. The Department recognizes that the MAPP training needs revision and has begun the process of this revision.

**Strategy 6b:** Foster parents and Departmental staff should receive training together to help create a team approach to meeting the needs of children in foster care.

**Conclusion 6: Strategies That Will Require Additional Funding**

**Strategy 6c:** Increase the quantity and improve the quality of the training given to Department counselors, licensing staff and placement staff. Provide this training to new staff and improve in-service training. District 6 offers a specialized training program called “Parenting Tools for Positive Behavior Change.” This 30-hour program offers additional training to foster parents at no cost. The 2000 Legislature provided funding for four positions in every District to implement this training on a statewide basis. The Department should ensure statewide quality control of the staffing, content and methodology related to this training.

**Strategy 6d:** In addition to MAPP training, the Department should provide follow-up training tailored to the specific problems faced by foster parents. This training could be delivered effectively by foster parents with assistance from the Department.

## Summary

This report and these conclusions reflect an analysis of a vast amount of information provided to study researchers on the broad issues of recruitment and retention. Virtually all strategies proposed in this report were based on comments and suggestions from study participants. Not surprisingly, many of the ideas were the same as those suggested in national studies of foster care. Foster families and Department staff have extensive insights into the functioning of the program and how it could be improved. These insights should be tapped routinely by the Department and the Legislature.

It is important to emphasize that the great extent to which the responses of the different stakeholder groups agreed with one another. Regardless of the question posed, foster parents, foster children, Department staff and agency representatives responded in remarkably similar ways. As a result, all groups emphasized the same key points:

1. Simplify the administration of the foster care system, including strengthening the partnership between the department and foster parents before putting money into recruitment;
2. Support existing foster parents through financial and non-financial supports in order to improve recruitment and retention; and
3. Make the changes in the system now.

Most participant groups were well aware of the many studies that have been done on the problems of the foster care system in Florida and in the nation. Consequently they were very vocal about wanting to know why the system still had not been improved. They also wanted to know what the Department and the Legislature were going to do about these problems that have existed for several decades.

Many participants believed that true changes in the system would have to begin with significant increases in legislative allocations. They want financial commitments from legislators to improve board rates, support services and staffing levels. Ultimately, they want assurances that the foster care system will be repaired quickly, that it will be made more humane and that it will finally operate to serve the best interests of the children it is designed to protect

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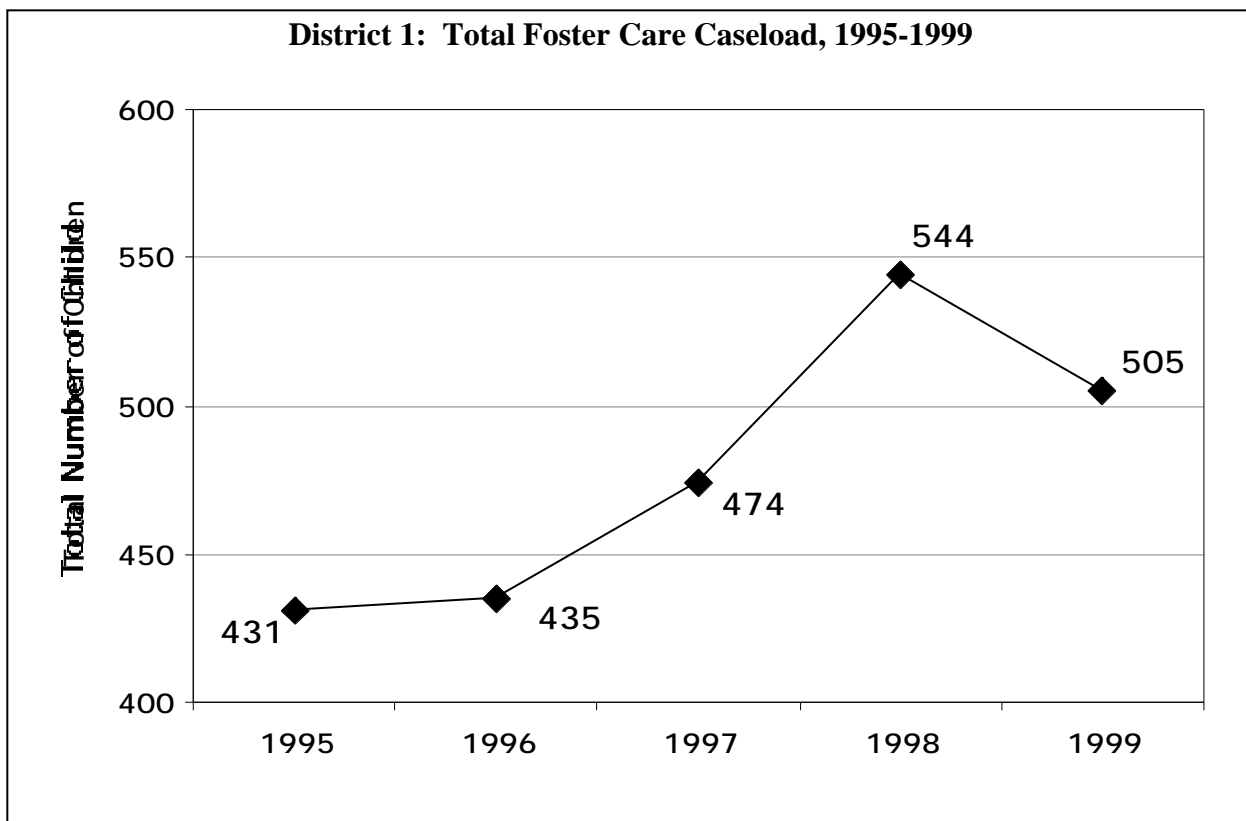


# Appendix

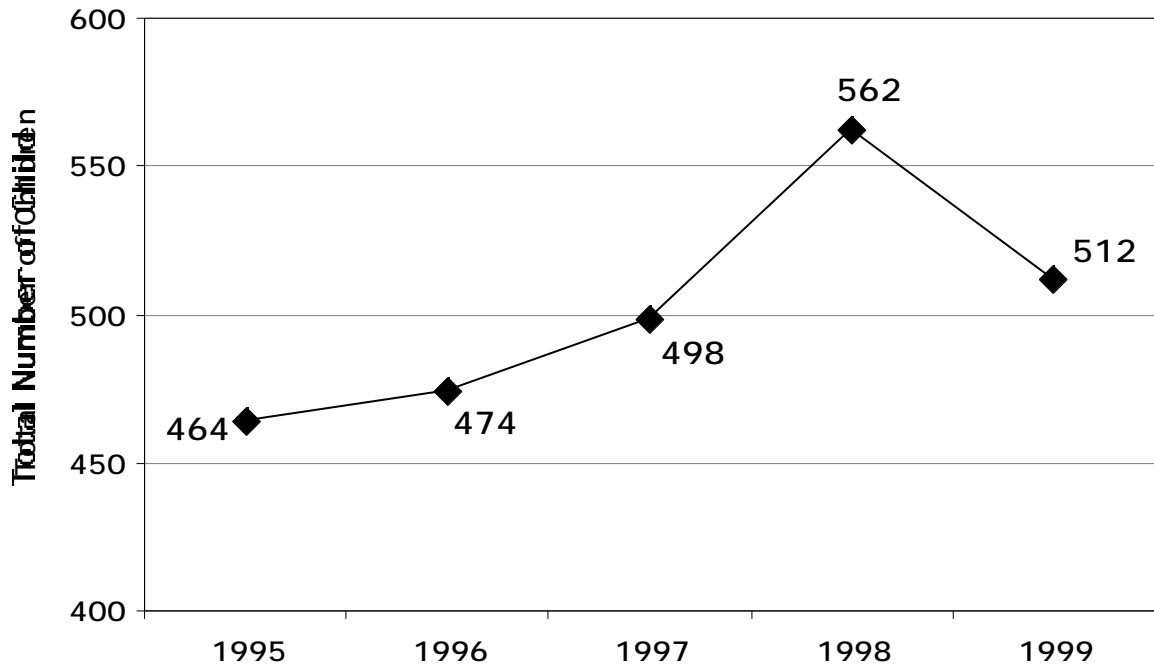


## Florida Trend Data

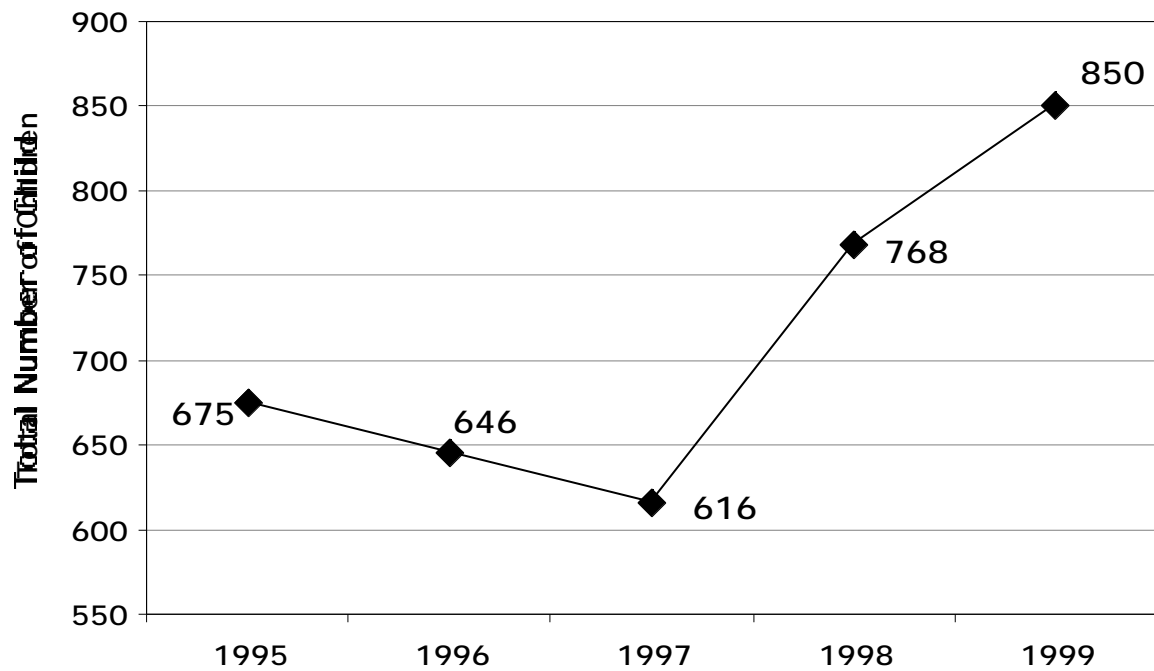
The following charts show foster care caseload trend data in the 15 Florida Department of Children and Families Districts for the period of 1995 to 1999.



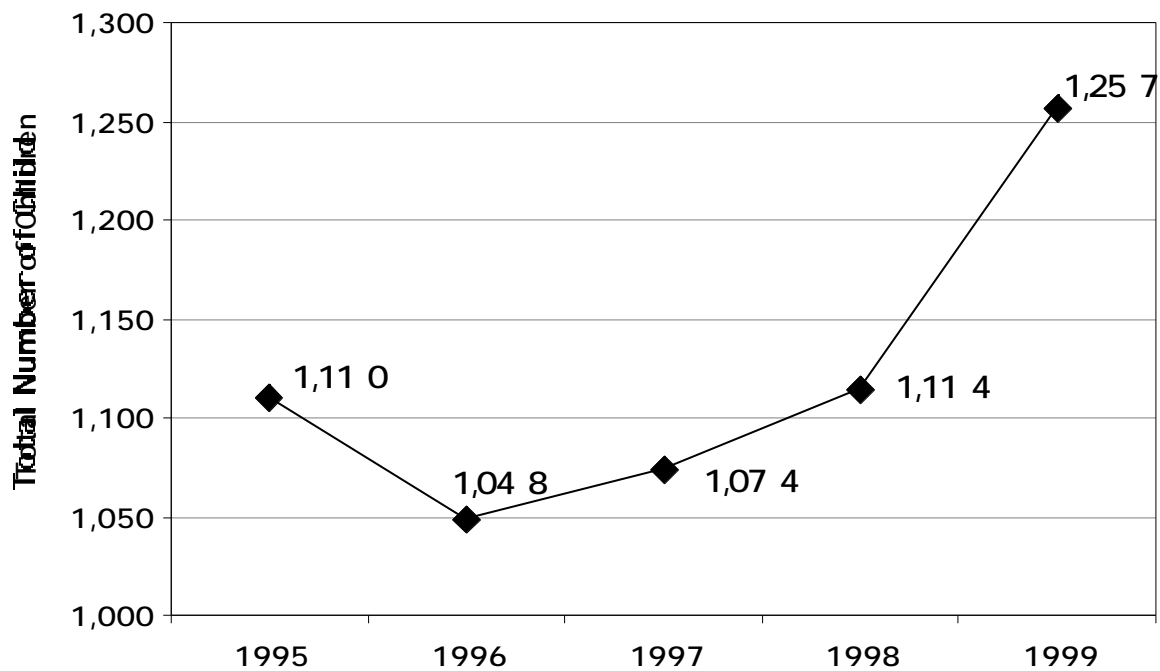
**District 2: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**



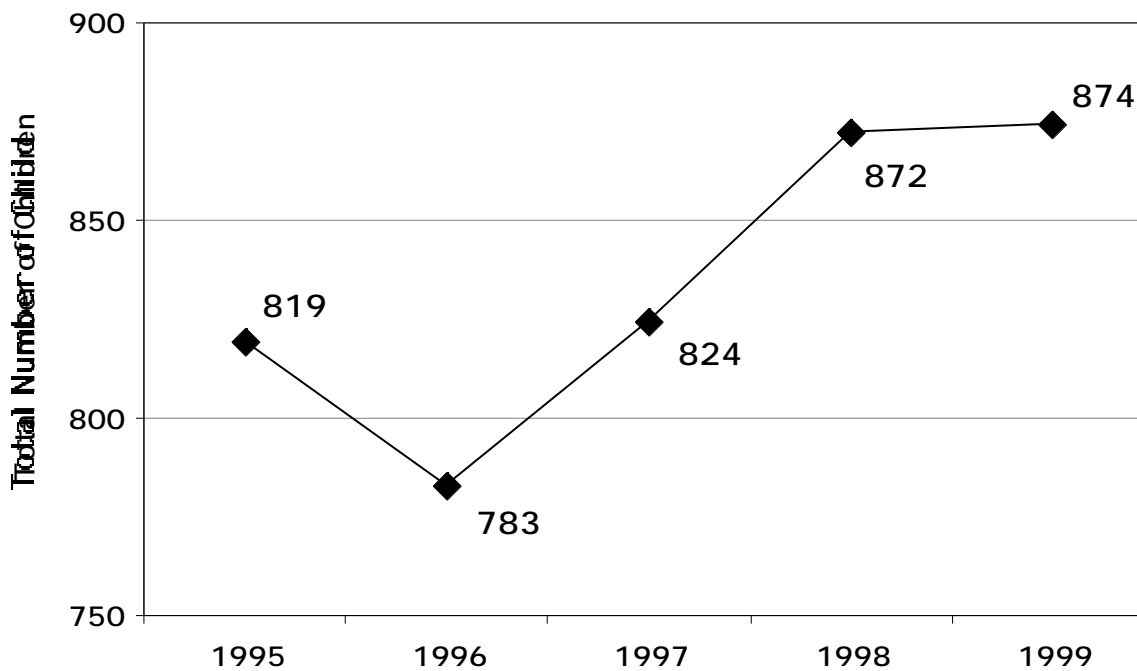
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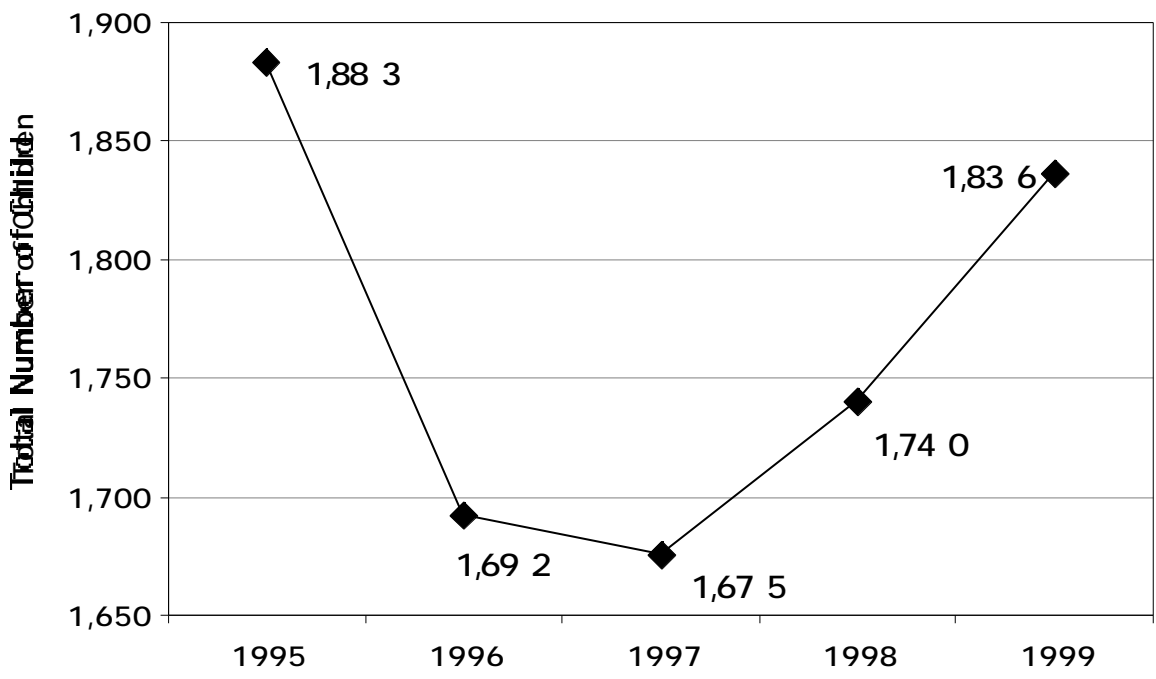
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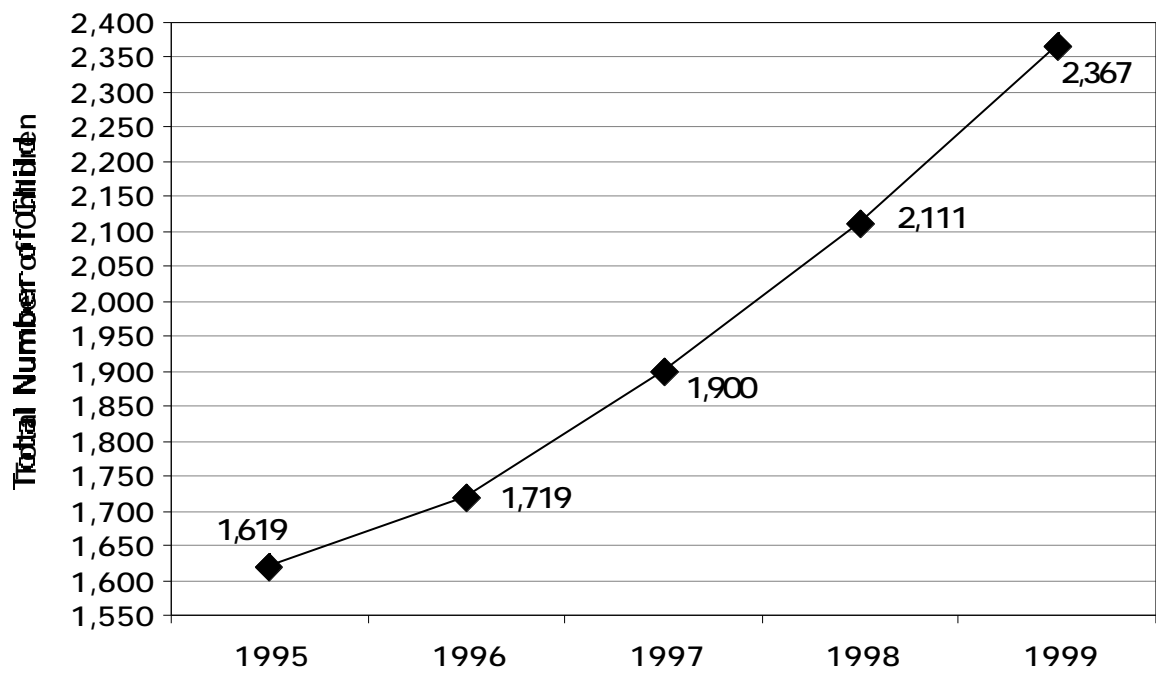
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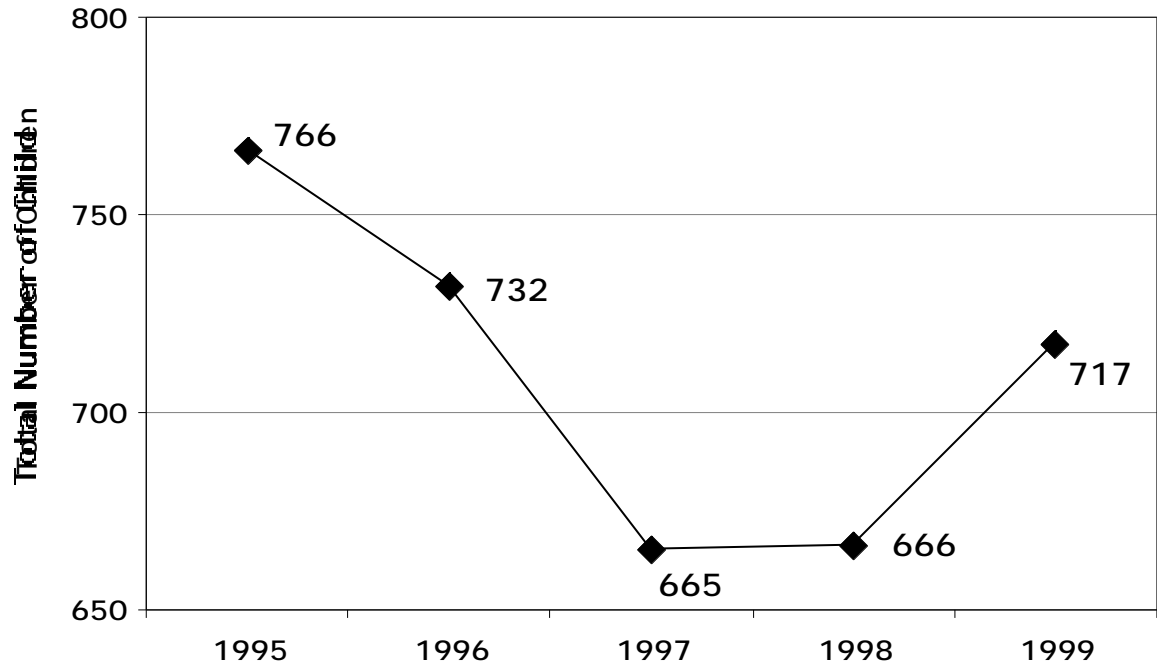
District 6: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999



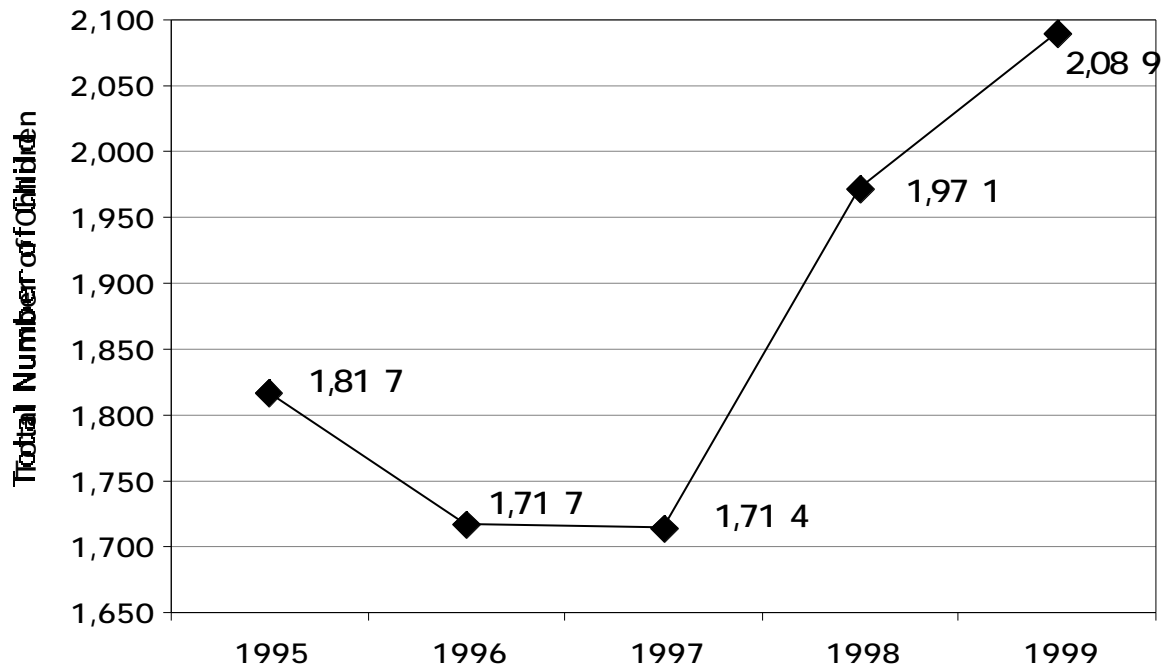
District 7: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999



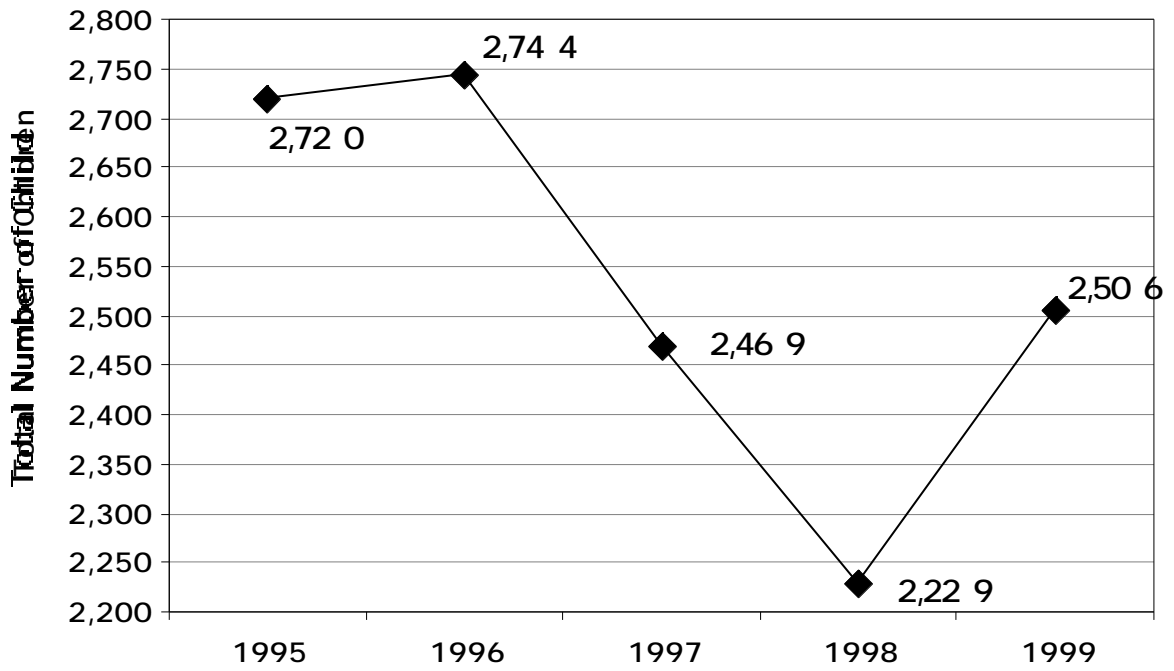
**District 8: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**



**District 10: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**



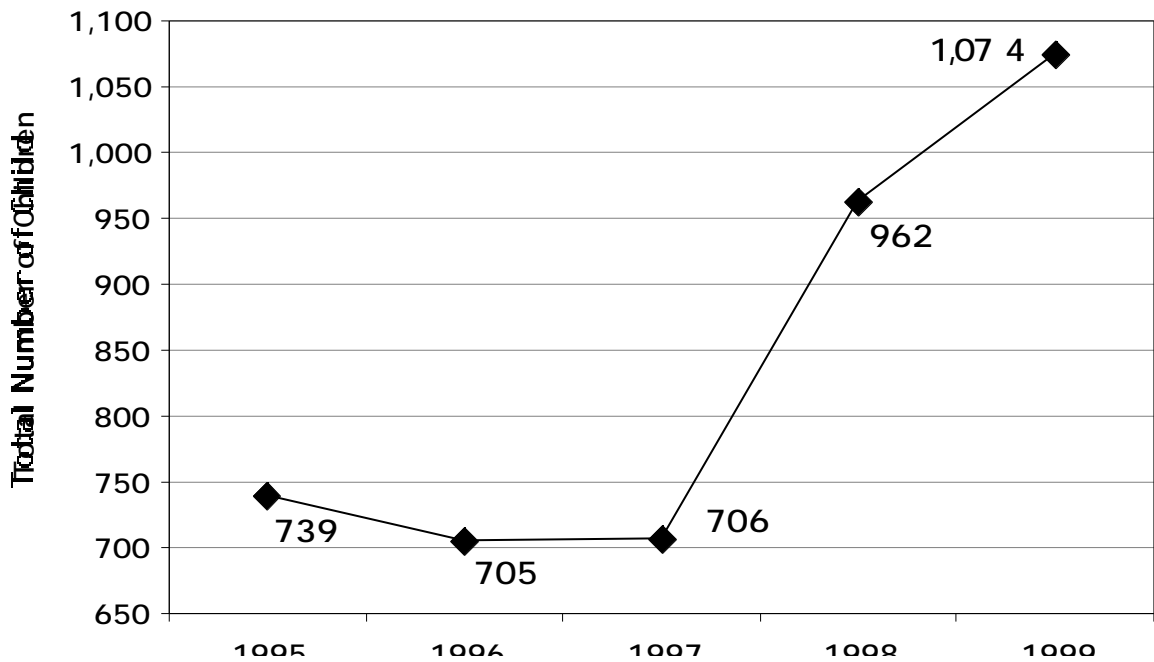
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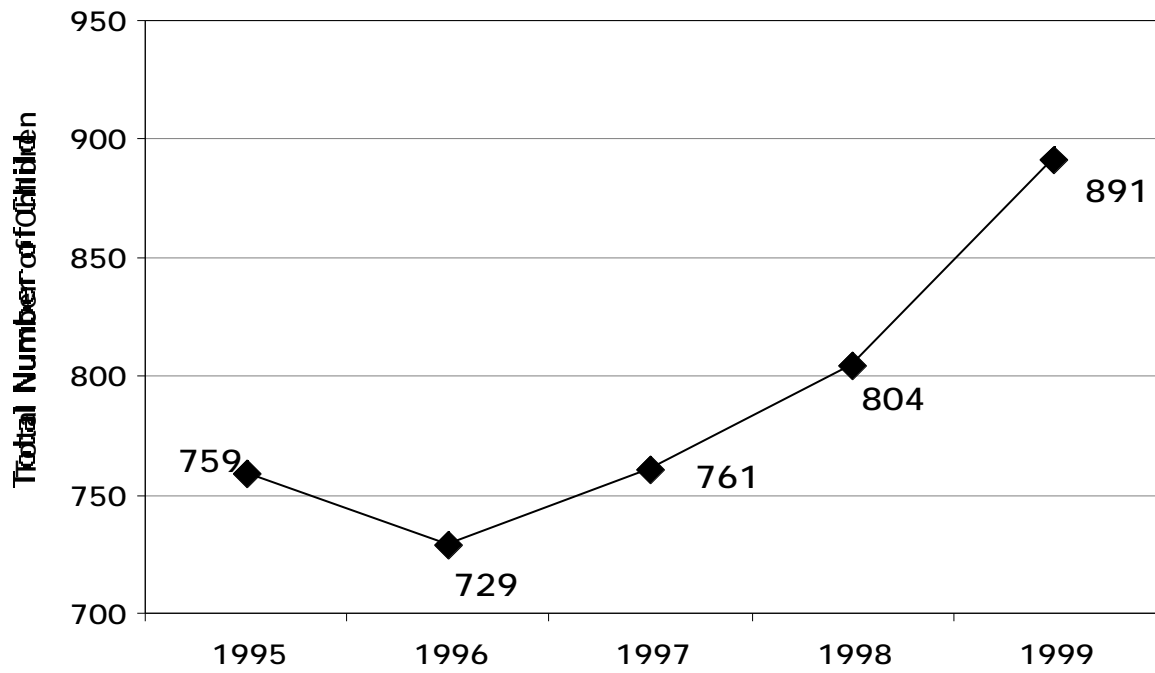
**District 12: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**



**District 13: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**



**District 14: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**



**District 15: Total Foster Care Caseload, 1995-1999**

