

V. Susan Alford, State Director

**South Carolina
Department of Social Services
2017 Annual Progress and Services Report
Update to the Foster and Adoptive Parent
Diligent Recruitment Plan
2015 – 2019
Child and Family Services Plan**

Objectives for the Foster Parent Recruitment Plan

Approach

This plan is designed to **clarify and unify** the SCDSS recruitment campaign for prospective foster parents. The framework for this plan is strongly influenced by two reports: *Effective practices in foster parent recruitment, infrastructure, and retention*, December, 2014 Casey Family Programs; and *Foster parent recruitment and retention: Developing families for Washington State's children in care*, 2009, Partners for Our Children (POC).

Retention is recruitment. This is a theme emphasized in both of the above publications. It is a sentiment strongly expressed by Carl Brown, President of the SC Foster Parent Association. The ability to recruit foster parents is influenced by several factors including: the overall public perception of the Agency; the Agency's responsiveness to foster parent needs and concerns; the actual infrastructure and capacity of the Agency to process applications and grant licenses, among other factors.

Agency initiatives, such as increasing the number of licensing and support workers assigned to continued support of foster families and improving the business processes for licensing are key to rebuilding the Agency's reputation and laying the groundwork for success in foster parent recruitment. The Casey Family Program document warns: "Without careful attention to the process of receiving and developing interested foster parents, it is futile to spend the time and resources necessary to recruit them." (p. 7)

Key also in this recruitment plan is strategic timing in recruitment efforts - prior to regional and local launches, the infrastructure in Regional Licensing and Support Offices will be secured to accommodate the number of new homes needed in each county/region.

The message. Until Fall 2015, **messaging** around recruitment **was not coordinated**. Regions, counties and contract partners employed different tag lines and different message priorities. **It was essential that the Agency unify the message to potential foster families and that this message clearly convey the expectations of the agency.** The Agency needs parents who will be advocates for the children who enter care *and* who are willing to engage with the parents of those children toward reunification. Greater detail on this messaging is found later in Strategy Three.

Underutilized foster homes. SC Foster Care Caseworkers and Supervisors report that it is not uncommon for foster homes to refuse to accept children. This phenomenon was noted by Washington State in its review of foster care to be as high as 17% continuously and 35% within the year.

Current SC Foster Homes will be surveyed to discover what will improve under-utilization and to inform targeted recruitment efforts. If this survey reveals that marketing to current foster parents is useful, strategies should be included in future plans.

Strategy One: Continue to refine the business process redesign in Foster Home Licensing and add staff to Regional Foster Family Support Units to ensure interested parents are moved through the process expediently and current parents are strengthened, supported and retained.

Overview

The SCDSS worked with Bill Bott of Change & Innovation Agency to review the barriers and processes causing backlogs in foster parent licensing at the agency. Based on his recommendations, the Agency redesigned the licensing business process as described in the tactics below. As a result of the strategy proposed, additional staff have been added to the Initial Licensing Division.

The Agency has also built the infrastructure for improved foster family support in its Regional Foster Family Support Units.

Tactic 1: Revised intake application and process to readily identify homes that will meet licensing standards and provide for the needs of the children they would serve. Will customize reports for quality reviews to ensure intake process is efficiently providing applications of which the majority reach licensure. Intake process will be honed as needed.

The intake duties of our partner agency, Heartfelt Calling, were revised so that so more information is collected and shared with the applicant at that initial phone call.

Sub-tactic 1a: Developed new application to include all upfront information and get it approved

Sub-tactic 1b: Trained Phone Staff

Sub-tactic 1c: Reviewed information packet going to family and determine best way to communicate the information (mail, email, web)

Sub-tactic 1d: Scheduled pre-service training and fingerprinting of applicants to remove further time barriers in the application process

Tactic 2: Created a centralized Initial Licensing Team and standardized home visits in order to reduce paperwork and to make collection of information more efficient so that time spent with family is of greater quality and time with the family is maximized.

All Foster Home Licensing staff work for the State Initial Licensing Unit, are housed in regions and centrally, and are overseen by an Initial Licensing Manager. The role of this staff is focused on initial licenses only.

Sub-tactic 2a: Created job descriptions, positions and organizational chart

Sub-tactic 2b: Finalized the number of staff needed and in each region

Sub-tactic 2c: Hired Staff

Sub-tactic 2d: Trained staff

Sub-tactic 2e: Standardized checklists

Sub-tactic 2f: Developed new forms for the interview style autobiography to be done at the first and second visits

Sub-tactic 2g: Ensured only one review of home studies conducted by supervisor

Tactic 3: Revised medical and financial forms and standardized other licensing forms for statewide consistency.

Sub-tactic 3a: Approved financial and medical changes

Sub-tactic 3b: Standardized forms for alternate caregivers, firearms and pets

Tactic 4: Removed restrictions so that licenses cover all ages, genders and capacities so that time-consuming exemptions and license amendments are eliminated and placement workers gain flexibility.

Sub-tactic 4a: Added tab for preference in CAPSS, the Agency's SACWIS.

Tactic 5: Will craft a plan with the SCDSS internal fire inspectors to supplement the current corps of State Fire Marshals with the goal of ensuring that the capacity of inspectors meet the need for the required fire safety inspections for homes pending licensure.

Sub-tactic 5a: Identify the areas where department staff could meet the needs

Sub-tactic 5b: Work with existing agency to determine staff needs

Sub-tactic 5c: Train Foster Licensing Workers how to schedule department staff

Tactic 6: Built infrastructure for specific foster family support by creating the Foster Family Support Unit.

Sub-tactic 6a: Hired a statewide director for the Regional Foster Family Support Unit.

Sub-tactic 6b: Hired program coordinators and for each region

Sub-tactic 6c: Trained staff as they hired with curriculum developed with partner University of South Carolina.

Tactic 7: Placed standardized forms and processes on the Foster Parent recruitment website to give foster families additional support.

The website revision includes electronic copies of information and forms, the new checklists, a more complete FAQ and roadmap for new applicants, seamless connection to Heartfelt Calling intake, and current contact numbers.

Strategy Two: Leverage the power of the Governor's Office to support foster families and encourage new interest in the Foster Care Program.

Overview

The Governor can help launch the recruitment effort and support existing foster families with 4 main tactics.

Tactic 1: The Governor joined the SCDSS and other partners in launching the Foster Parent Recruitment Campaign.

In this message, the Governor let the state know that not having enough Foster Homes is yet another crisis facing South Carolina. But this crisis is not as apparent because, in part, it involves children who have been removed from their families due to abuse and/or neglect.

South Carolina has too few Foster Homes to adequately protect children and keep them safe.

Subsequent to the campaign launch, and ongoing, the Governor can continue to describe the consequences of the Foster Home shortage to children

- children placed far from their homes and communities creates even more trauma and makes it more difficult for the family to heal and reach stability
- placement of children in Group Care settings when placement with a family is more appropriate

- placement in a home that might not meet the needs of the child because there are no options for matching children and families
- over use of the few existing Foster Homes which can burnout current Foster Parents

The Governor will also reinforce the SCDSS messaging about the types of parents needed by the agency. Those who:

- will be committed to what is best for the child;
- show tolerance, cultural competence and open-mindedness;
- use effective parenting skills;
- show commitment and resilience;
- have personal integrity and reliability;
- show investment in interests, commitments and hobbies of their children;
- help youth make smart decisions.

The Governor will shape this as not an agency's responsibility but as the state's responsibility. It is our responsibility to invest in the state's most valuable resource—our children—and to protect the most vulnerable—children who come into Foster Care.

The Agency can license and support the families, but it cannot parent the children. It is up to families to come forth and make the commitment. The Governor knows that South Carolinians will respond because she has seen the best of South Carolina come through in the responses to our state's most recent tragedies.

Tactic 2: Video tape a message recognizing how Foster Parents exemplify South Carolina at its best.

This video will be displayed on the SCDSS main website, Foster Parent Recruitment Website, promoted through the SCDSS social media, and played in recruitment events around the state.

In this video, the Governor honors current Foster Parents and encourages all SC citizens to consider whether they might choose foster parenting or choose another means of supporting Foster Parents, such as providing child care, mentoring, tutoring a child in Foster Care, becoming a Guardian ad Litem, contributing to a young person's academic success by helping the Independent Living caseworkers at the SCDSS. (See provided script.)

Tactic 3: Enlist the support of cabinet agencies in supporting and recruiting foster families.

Overview

All SC Cabinet Agencies touch the lives of children, families and Foster Families; some more than others. Cabinet Agencies can support recruitment and retention of Foster Parents in the following ways:

- Governor Haley and the SCDSS in creating a culture of respect and support for foster parents;
- Ask all Cabinet Agencies to link to the SCDSS Foster Parent Recruitment Website (www.sc.families.org);
- Help identify and recognize Cabinet Agency employees who are Foster Families;
- Be an advocate for Foster Parents and foster parenting in your community groups, your schools and your recreational organizations;

- In your churches, advocate for foster parenting by asking your church to host the SCDSS recruiters and place announcements in the bulletins and by asking your Pastor to help recruit by recognizing Foster Families within the congregation and announcing the need for Foster Families;
- Distribute recruitment materials;
- Help connect children and families to the services that the Agency provides;
- Provide assistance to Foster Parents in navigating services from their respective agencies (for example, by virtue of their legal status with the child, Foster Parents may face challenges in obtaining services; find ways to support this population).

Examples of agencies and their administrative roles that touch foster parents or children are below:

- SCDMV
 - Help the SCDSS with obtaining drivers licenses for teens in care; it is very difficult to get licenses, a parent or legal guardian is required to sign.
- SLED/DPS
 - Help make Officers aware of the challenges facing children in Foster Care.
 - Help train mandated reporters on their responsibilities.
 - Work collaboratively with local Law Enforcement Offices and the SCDSS Offices to identify and address sex trafficking; children in Foster Care are often targets.
 - Help train the SCDSS staff on sexual abuse investigation and impact.
 - Train Law Enforcement Officers on the importance of their first contacts with children at risk of harm.
- SCDMH
 - Be a part of educating people on the needs of children and families.
 - Raise awareness with educators, the public and families about behaviors they may see in traumatized children; put the behaviors into a context or perspective.
- SCDHHS
 - Help make access to Medicaid and health care as easy as possible for children and their Foster Parents.

Strategy Three: Continue to utilize a consistent internal and external agency messaging, processes, and materials for foster parent recruitment.

Overview

The message to potential foster parents must be a positive and realistic one. The message will include.

The agency needs Foster Parents who:

- understand that the job of parenting is challenging no matter who the children are and who can be accepting of the special challenges for children who have experienced trauma;
- are willing to accept the children most in need of homes—teens, sibling groups, and African American adolescent males;
- are local residents and within close proximity of neighborhoods that see the most children removed from their families;
- are tribal members of the Catawba Indian Nation to meet the cultural and environmental needs of affiliated children;
- enjoy the pursuit of helping teens prepare for adulthood;

- embrace the role of helping to provide permanence for the child and understand that permanence, in the best case, means a child can safely return home; and
- see themselves as part of a team supporting children and families.

“Denise Goodman recommends that an agency should avoid messages such as “give a child the gift of a family.” This type of message implies that children in Foster Care do not have their own families, and therefore is likely to be more powerful with families that want to adopt, but not as effective at recruiting Foster Families that share the Agency’s goals of reunification.” (Casey, p. 5)

Through focus groups held with potential Foster Parents, Anu Family Services learned that “most individuals interested in fostering were being held back by fear, and that potential Foster Parents needed to be assured that they would not face challenges alone but would be supported throughout the process.” (Casey, p. 8)

It can take parents as long as a year to make a call to apply. The last two points prove how important a role county directors have in communicating a message and maintaining relationships with Foster Parents.

Tactic 1: Gather demographic information on current SC foster parents.

The better we know the current, active foster parent population, the better we will be able to target additional parents and, especially, to fill gaps where they may be.

Tactic 2: Gather demographic information on current SC children in Foster Care and their placements to define the areas in which additional Foster Parents are most needed.

Tactic 3: Coordinate message with all agency-supported training that involves Child Welfare Caseworkers and Foster Parents.

The recruitment and retention message must align with messages delivered during training. Training venues where this is relevant are: the SCDSS Shared Parenting, the USC Child Welfare Basic, Foster Home Licensing training, and certification and ongoing training delivered by The Foster Parent Association.

Tactic 4: Ensure the SCDSS County Directors, Child Welfare Caseworkers and Supervisors, IFCCS and Adoptions Staff are aware of and using the recruitment message by having Regional Licensing and Support Staff regularly participate in regional meetings and conference calls.

Tactic 5: Support Foster Parents by gathering and distributing their positive stories.

These positive stories are of Foster Parents, youth who have transitioned out of care, successful adults who were in Foster Care, and families that have been reunited with the help of supportive Foster Parents. Gathering the positive stories and distributing them can begin to shift the general public’s perception of the Agency.

In addition, Foster Parents are the most successful recruiters, and this storytelling gives them a chance to contribute to recruitment and can provide materials for future in-person sessions held by Foster Parent Recruiters.

Tactic 5a: Conduct interviews, videotaping sessions and photography sessions to record and produce the stories.

Tactic 5b: Prepare versions of the stories to be “broadcast ready” and offer the media to TV stations.

Tactic 5c: Prepare the SCDSS County Directors to contact their local families to honor and congratulate them when their stories run.

Tactic 6: Manage a microsite for Foster Parent recruitment so that prospective Parents can easily find needed information, current Foster Parents can find needed resources and both can find regional support contact information.

Tactic 6a: Ask community partners and other cabinet agencies to link to the SCDSS Foster Parent Recruitment Website from their organization websites and social media sites.

Tactic 6b: Survey licensed and newly licensed Foster Parents for their input for the microsite so that it meets the needs of its intended audiences.

Tactic 7: Identify, train and support “Foster Care Ambassadors” {speaker’s bureau}.

The most effective recruiters of Foster Parents are other Foster Parents. Speakers will be identified at the regional and county level. These speakers will be trained and supported in delivering the message at recruitment events described in the next strategy.

Tactic 7a: Develop processes, tools and support mechanisms for scheduling and preparing Foster Parent Ambassador.

Tactic 7b: Prepare talking points and presentation materials and leave-behinds for Foster Parent presentations.

Tactic 7c: Train Ambassadors on presentations.

Tactic 7d: Prepare video messages of Foster Parents to be used when they are unable to attend recruitment events.

Tactic 8: Continue to monitor and manage the contracts currently in place with state universities who are providing logistical assistance to statewide recruitment events.

Tactic 9: Conduct profession-specific and faith-based recruitment events.

Faith-based institutions are a natural fit to foster parent recruitment because of their service orientation and emphasis on helping others. Other natural fits are in the healing and education professions. Recruitment materials should be delivered to hospitals and doctor’s offices, schools, school district offices, PTOs and PTA, Home School Associations, events such as SC Education Association conference, yoga studios, chiropractors and other centers of integrative healing.

Tactic 9a: Work with faith-based organizations that have shown success in their outreach to faith communities

Tactic 9b: Recruit foster families who attend as many of the identified churches as possible to speak at their churches. Because foster families are the best recruiters, events at churches should include the voices of the parents.

Tactic 9c: Approach the interfaith groups in South Carolina to determine how to hold recruitment events with their participants.

Tactic 9d: Develop a focused and continuous recruitment program for hospitals and out-patient clinics in Columbia, Greenville and Charleston.

This recruitment program will include providing materials in breakrooms; identifying employees who are also foster parents who can speak at outreach events; including human interest stories about foster families in hospital newsletters.

Tactic 9e. Create a list of healing centers with the assistance of regional team leaders and make contact with them to leave printed information in their businesses.

Track the interest generated by this set materials and conduct more aggressive recruitments with these healing professionals. Include healing professionals in the digital media efforts.

Tactic 9f. Contact local and statewide professional organizations such as attorneys, accountants, etc. to enlist support and/or offer to speak at a group meeting.

Tactic 9g: Work with local civic organizations who are already invested in children's issues to further the message that quality Foster Homes are needed.

Tactic 9h: Create events and initiatives to benefit children in Foster Care and to encourage fostering with service fraternities and sororities.

Tactic 10: Market to existing Foster Parents who do not have placements.

The reports by Regional Foster Care Leaders are that it is not uncommon for Foster Parents to refuse placements. This phenomenon was noted by Washington State in its review of foster care to be as high as 17% continuously and 35% within the year.

Determining the reason(s) for the underutilization will help shape the subsequent marketing to currently licensed homes.

Sub-tactic 10a: Identify foster homes that are under-utilized.

Sub-tactic 10b: Conduct phone interviews with a random sample to determine reasons they are currently not parenting and to determine how frequently they have no children in Foster Care.

Sub-tactic 10c: Use the research information to form an appropriate marketing strategy.

Tactic 11: Use Effective Timing and Strategy Matrix for Recruitment Events

The timing of recruitment events will be driven by the need in the counties and the level of preparation to answer the calls from and applications of interested parents.

Tactic 12: Create a Foster Parent Recruitment Strategy Matrix to manage tasks.

Sub-tactic 12a: Identify all potential audiences for recruitment.

Sub-tactic 12b: Identify communication objectives for each audience.

Sub-tactic 12c: Develop a broadcast, digital and print media plan with media placement experts that will target the desired demographic and at the zip code level.

Sub-tactic 12e: Set priorities for media development.

Tactic 13: Develop appropriate marketing materials for the identified audiences.

Sub-tactic 13a: Develop and distribute a series of talking points packets that can be used for targeted, in-person presentations to audiences such as churches, civic groups, yoga centers, health organizations, teachers, Boy Scout and Girl Scout leaders, etc.

Sub-tactic 13b: Develop SC-focused PSAs to run on broadcast media

Sub-tactic 13c: Develop digital media for placement in web venues as identified by Buonasera Media.

Sub-tactic 13d: Develop appropriate print media and a distribution plan for print materials.