

The Data Tells ALL...Are You Doing ALL you Can To Support Your Foster Families?

The demands of the child protection services system continue to be overwhelming: more then ever before we are seeing a steady rise in complex abuse and neglect complaints with families that have multiple and multi-layered problems; a mounting and often false perception of eroding commitment by the public to support those families; a less reliable base of traditional foster care homes; an explosion in the number of children who need protection. Because of enormous changes in our broader society, over which we have little control, there are more children in foster care, with projections that the number will continue to rise, while the supply of foster care homes continues to decrease. Without a major focus and attention to how we approach, license and support foster families, our nation will not be positioned to meet the many and varied needs of children who must be separated from their families. **One indicator of the deterioration of the system has been the steady decline in the pool of available foster families at the same time the number of children coming into care has been increasing.** The number of children coming into care is likely to increase with the recent enactment of P.L 105-89: Adoption and Safe Families act and who knows, the jury is still out as to whether or not Welfare Reform will negatively impact the number of children who must be removed from their homes due to neglect. Over the past four years PCSAO has worked to help raise the consciousness of agencies and their staff regarding the support and care of foster families already licensed and to provide additional methods for doing so. Working closely with agency staff and with foster families, we have seen first hand, as an objective third party, what supportive TALK looks like and what supportive "WALK" looks like.

Agencies need to come to terms with how they think and feel about foster parents as evidenced by how the:

- Agency's administration include and involve foster parents in all aspects of decision making from case planning involvement to policy and procedure development that directly effects them;
- Agency programs support and provide incentives to foster families to participate in a family centered, neighborhood based approach to reunification and permanency planning;
- Supervisors, in ALL program areas educate their staff and hold them accountable for supporting foster parents;
- Social Worker responds to foster families and speaks about foster parents to peers and colleagues;
- Agency's public information effort is geared at educating the community on the importance of foster care as a primary example of "it takes a village to raise a child."

The following Quiz has been developed to challenge agency staff to gather, informally and formally review their approach to foster care and foster families and to plan to pro-actively and rigorously retool its approach so that licensed foster homes continue to foster and to increase the odds that additional caring and interested community citizens step up and become foster families.

QUIZ: Give your agency 10 points for each affirmative answer. Only answer YES if it is being carried out consistently and with regularity throughout your system. It is ALL for ONE and ONE for ALL - if a supportive approach to fostering is not championed by ALL, then answer NO and zero points should be earned.

_____ The agency treats foster parents as members of the child's treatment team on a regular and consistent basis (as demonstrated by being invited to case planning and review sessions, receiving the case plan and amendments within 2 weeks after completion, being updated on case plan progress, written in the case plan to support the child and family as appropriate to the family's readiness level, etc.).

_____ The agency provides staff and program support to families who participate in a family centered, neighborhood based approach to reunification and permanency planning (reimbursements for birth and foster family joint activities; support when crisis between the families emerge, partnering with the foster family to identify the level of "relationship" appropriate to the family's progress on the case plan, reimbursing for child care to attend family planning meetings, etc.).

_____ The agency staff respond to the needs, questions, concerns and interests of foster parents (phone calls returned in a timely manner, problems are discussed and permanent solutions to the problem at hand are found).

_____ Foster parents are considered an asset to the agency and the lives of the children and families served and are approached, responded to and treated with respect by ALL agency staff at ALL levels.

_____ Foster parents receive a Letter of Agreement for the services they provide which includes the expectations of the agency for fostering and the expectations the foster family can hold foster parents accountable to as the administrators of the program. *Both parties are held accountable for meeting these expectations.*

_____ Foster parents receive a foster parent handbook that is updated by the agency and which includes the rules and regulations they are held accountable to and given annual training on rule changes and policy changes in the agency regarding foster care and licensure requirements.

_____ Foster parents are given at least two weeks notice on all planned review and planning sessions for non-emergency meetings.

_____ The agency involves foster parents in the planning, program development and implementation of any programs and policies that have a direct impact on children in foster care and foster families.

_____ The agency has a planned, systematic method of communicating changes and updating foster families in a timely, professional and complete manner.

_____ Providing the community with information and education regarding the importance of fostering in the life and well being of the community, children and families.

If you earn less than 100 points - the agency needs to return to the drawing board - involving staff and foster families to find strategies to be more responsive. While financial constraints may limit how much can be "spent," the capacity of our staff, agency and COMMUNITY to find creative ways to support foster families is not. ■