



WASHINGTON STATE Department of Children, Youth, and Families



Report to the Washington State Legislature

OFFICE OF INNOVATION, ALIGNMENT, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Addressing Foster Parent Complaints and Concerns

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is prepared in compliance with HB 1661 Sec 104(2)(k), which requires the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF, or the Department) Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability (OIAA) to submit to the Governor and the appropriate policy and appropriation committees of the Legislature:

- (i) A review of the current process for addressing foster parent complaints and concerns through the Department and through the office of the family and children's ombuds established in chapter 43.06A RCW that includes an examination of any deficiencies of the current system; and
- (ii) Recommendations for expanding, modifying, and enhancing the current system for addressing individual foster parent complaints to improve child welfare, the experience of foster parents, and the overall functioning of the child welfare system.

This report provides a broad review of the processes in place for the Department to learn of, and respond to, foster parent concerns; and a brief review of data on foster parent complaints and concerns. In addition, it summarizes steps the Department is taking to enhance system responsiveness to foster parent concerns.

(a) A review of the current process for addressing foster parent complaints and concerns.

- There are multiple current processes by which foster parent complaints and concerns are brought to the attention of Department leadership to be addressed.
- Data from each of these processes is included in this report to illustrate the type of information currently received by the Department on foster parent complaints and concerns.

(b) Recommendations for expanding, modifying, and enhancing the current system for addressing individual foster parent complaints to improve child welfare, the experience of foster parents, and the overall functioning of the child welfare system.

- DCYF leadership recognizes the importance of creating an agency that is responsive to the concerns of foster parents, in order to improve the overall functioning of the child welfare system and ultimately to improve outcomes for children and their families.
- The Department intends to pursue improvements in the licensing of foster homes including automating processes and substantially reducing time to licensure.
- Additionally, in FY 2019, the Department will enhance the current system by adopting a best practice framework for supporting caregivers, and will work with foster parents and kinship caregivers in the upcoming year to identify indicators of success and priorities.
- Adopting such a framework will allow the Department to better implement performance improvement around foster parent supports, as well as provide greater transparency for monitoring improvement.
- Given the existing processes for addressing individual foster parent complaints, the Department is recommending enhanced systemic monitoring that will allow a more robust performance improvement response.

CURRENT PROCESSES FOR ADDRESSING FOSTER PARENT COMPLAINTS AND CONCERNS

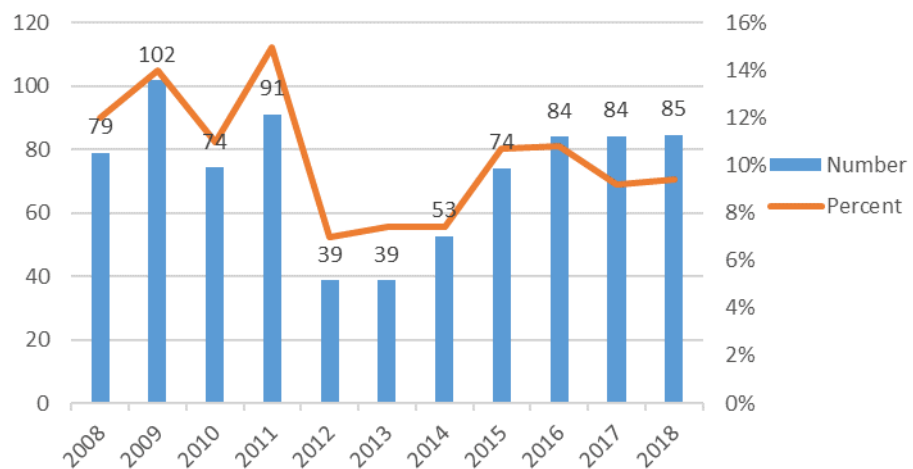
Foster parents and other caregivers serve a vitally important role in Washington state's child welfare system, and the Department is committed to a strong and productive relationship with all caregivers.

Currently there are multiple established, regular mechanisms by which foster parent complaints and concerns are brought to the attention of the Department to be addressed: 1) The Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds (OFCO), 2) DCYF Constituent Relations, 3) Foster Parent 1624 Consultation Team, 4) the annual Foster Parent Survey, and 5) Foster Parent Rights & Responsibilities.

1. The Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds, established in chapter 43.06A RCW in 1996. The main purpose of the OFCO is to ensure that government agencies respond appropriately to children in need of state protection, children residing in state care, and children and families under state supervision due to allegations or findings of child abuse or neglect. The office also promotes public awareness about the child protection and welfare system, and recommends and facilitates broad-based systemic improvements. The OFCO produces an annual report detailing the number, type, and trend of complaints as well as specific recommendations for improvement.

In its 2018 report, the OFCO reports that 9.4 percent, or approximately 85 of the total complaints they received in the past year, were from foster parents. Figure 1 at right details the percentage of total OFCO complaints received each year that were from foster parents (right axis) and the total number of such complaints (left axis), by year of OFCO report from 2008 to 2018.

Figure 1. Percentage and Number of OFCO Complaints from Foster Parents, by Year 2008-2018



Source: Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds Annual Reports

OFCO has included recommendations to the Department (and in previous reports to the former Children's Administration) regarding its relationship with foster parents. In its forthcoming 2018 report, OFCO addresses the placement shortage and repeats two recommendations from its 2017 report related to the Department's work with foster parents:

- Provide an adequate supply and range of residential placement options to meet the needs of all children in state care; and
- Expand programs that support foster and kinship families and prevent placement disruptions.

2. DCYF Constituent Relations, in 1991, 74.13.045 RCW directed the Department of Social and Health Services to develop and implement an informal, non-adversarial complaint resolution process to be used by clients of the department, foster parents, and other affected individuals who have complaints regarding department policies, procedures, and their application. As with OFCO, the work of the DCYF's Constituent Relations office is not limited to taking complaints and addressing concerns of foster parents; however, foster parents make up an important constituent of the Department and thus many avail themselves of this avenue. With the merger of Children's Administration and Department of Early Learning on July 1, 2018, the DCYF Constituent Relations office (with its three staff) is operating as a part of the DCYF Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) office. DCYF Constituent Relations staff compile complaint resolution data and produce a report for CQI leadership every six months.

In the report ending July 31, 2018 the DCYF Constituent Relations office received 206 contacts, including contacts from 17 foster parents and 10 kinship caregivers. Although the biennial reports do not break out foster parent concerns separately, the report identifies customer service broadly (including customer service to foster parents) as an area needing further improvement. The concerns expressed in this area include lack of timely response to a parent(s) or caregiver's voice mail/email from the social worker or supervisor; generic rather than specific staff cell phone messages; callers unable to leave voice mail messages because voice mail not set up or is full; staff answering the phone with "hello", causing caller to believe they have misdialed; parent(s), caregivers going to their local DCYF office to meet with their assigned social worker or supervisor only to be informed that the appointment needs to be rescheduled.

The data collected by Constituent Relations staff represent an important resource in understanding and responding to foster parent complaints and concerns.

3. Foster Parent 1624 Consultation Team, in 2007 the legislature passed and the Governor signed ESHB 1624. This legislation requires the Department to consult at least quarterly with foster parents for the purpose of receiving information and comment regarding how the department is performing its duties and meeting its obligations regarding recruitment of foster homes, reducing foster parent turnover, providing effective training for foster parents, and administering a coordinated and comprehensive plan that strengthens services for the protection of children.

Foster Parent 1624 Consultation team meetings occur quarterly at both the regional and state levels. Because the purpose of the meetings is primarily for the Department to receive information and comment, the agenda setting for these meetings belongs to foster parent representatives. The statewide consultation meetings are supported by Department staff and include ten appointed Department leadership representatives. Video conferencing technology is used to ensure foster parents from each region have the opportunity to participate. Agendas and minutes are posted on DCYF's public website.¹ In 2017 and 2018 agendas for the statewide meetings have included standing agenda items related to civility/respect/communication, developing a rights and responsibilities document for caregivers, visitation issues, update on a foster parent initiated permanency project, lack of available/accessible child care for working foster parents and kinship caregivers with infants, and DCYF community conversations.

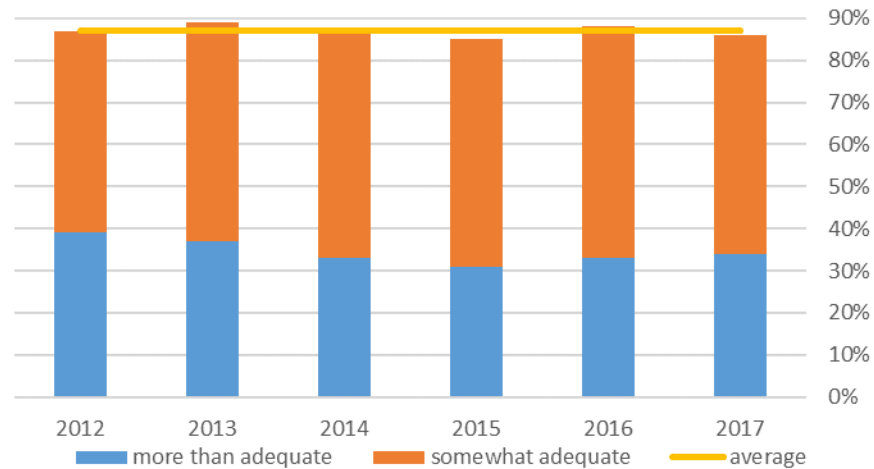
¹ Foster Parent 1624 Consultation Team
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4. Annual Foster Parent Survey since 2007, the former Children’s Administration (now DCYF) has contracted to complete an annual survey of a representative sample of foster parents in Washington. The first such survey was conducted in 2007 by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at WSU as a part of the Braam Settlement Agreement. Since 2013 the annual survey and report have been conducted by the Research and Data Analytics (RDA) unit of DSHS. Annual survey reports are available to the public on the DCYF website² and the RDA website.³

Given the longitudinal nature of the questions asked repeatedly over years, as well as the quality and detail of the RDA survey reports, the Department is able to examine trends over time and identify potential areas for improvement. For example, Figure 2 at right summarizes responses to one

question that historically has received quite high marks: Overall, how adequately has the training you have received prepared you to care for the basic needs of foster children placed in your home? The average share of foster parent respondents indicating “more than adequate” or

Figure 2. Foster Parent Responses on Adequacy of Training

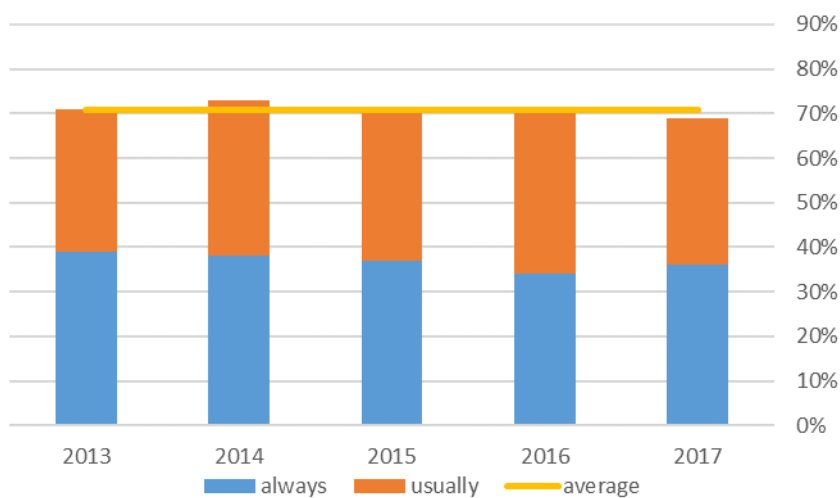


responses to one

question that historically has received quite high marks: Overall, how adequately has the training you have received prepared you to care for the basic needs of foster children placed in your home? The average share of foster parent respondents indicating “more than adequate” or

“somewhat adequate” has been 87% between 2012 and 2017, and 87% responded this way in 2017.

Figure 3. Foster Parent Responses on Information Received



In contrast, Figure 3 at left summarizes responses to a question that historically has received lower marks: Did you get adequate information about the needs of the children placed with

you, such as medical, behavioral, developmental, and educational needs? The average share of foster parent respondents indicating “always” or “usually” has been 70.8% between 2013 and

² Survey of Foster Parents and Relative Caregivers in Washington State

³ Foster Parent Survey: DSHS Foster Parents Speak

2017, and 69% responded this way in 2017. Of note, this question was added in 2013, and not asked on the 2012 survey.

In addition to straightforward quantitative report of answers to questions, RDA completes a rigorous qualitative evaluation of comments received from foster parents while completing the survey. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data from the RDA Foster Parent Survey provides a rich longitudinal source of information about foster parent concerns and needs that are available to help inform performance improvement efforts.

5. Foster Parent Rights & Responsibilities, soon after establishing the new DCYF in 2018, the Department worked with foster parents to finalize the Foster Parent Statement of Rights and Responsibilities⁴, as directed in HB 1661. This document contains a section on Support and Complaint Resolution describing additional methods by which foster parents may submit complaints to the Department and have them resolved. This section lists multiple resources including the chain of command, foster parent liaisons and resource peer mentors, DCYF Constituent Relations, Foster Parent Regional Representatives (1624), the Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds (OFCO), the Foster Parent Association of Washington State (FPAWS), and the Afterhours Caregiver Support Line.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPROVING THE FOSTER HOME LICENSURE EXPERIENCE

DCYF leadership recognizes the need to improve the licensure experience for prospective foster parents. To this end the agency is exploring options to automate the licensure application experience, to allow foster parents to monitor the progress of their license, and to substantially reduce the time to licensure. In addition the Department intends to work to identify and address barriers to licensure for kinshipcaregivers.

BEST PRACTICE CAREGIVER SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

In FY 2019, the Department is adopting a best practice framework for foster parent and kinship caregiver supports that will allow it to better identify and implement performance improvement in supporting caregivers as well as provide greater transparency in these efforts.

Shortly after the merger of the Children's Administration and the Department of Early Learning, the new DCYF Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability (OIAA) undertook a review of evidence-based and best practices in caregiver support systems. While the issues related to foster home recruitment and retention are acutely felt in our state, Washington is not alone among states experiencing such challenges. The search for an evidence-based or best practice framework was led by the OIAA in its role to lead and support reform efforts. Although the search revealed little in the way of frameworks or support systems that have been empirically tested, the Office was able to locate two best practice frameworks recommended for use by child welfare agencies in building systems of supportive services for kinship and foster caregivers.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) framework described in the 2016 report "A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting"⁵ appears to be the most comprehensive from among those reviewed. This report elevates the critical role that foster parents and kin play in the safety and well-being of children/youth in the child welfare system, and finds that a new approach to supporting caregivers is needed in order to provide greater stability for children/youth in placement. The framework presents the challenges in terms of the need for a focus on improved systems in child welfare agencies. This systemic approach, using a best practice framework such as that described in the AECF report, may be a productive tool to help move the DCYF toward a better and more supportive relationship with its foster parent and kinship partners, and ultimately to help improve outcomes for children and youth in care.

The best practices in the Annie E. Casey Foundation report come from strong consensus among key informants: foster care alumni, foster parents and kinship caregivers, agency leaders and frontline workers, judges, attorneys, service providers and other community stakeholders. Using this best practice framework, over the coming year DCYF will work with foster parents, kinship caregivers, partners, and staff to identify priorities and associated indicators of success around the priorities. Depending on the priorities and indicators of success chosen, the Department will consider creation of a reporting dashboard that may be used by leadership and program staff as a transparent means of monitoring progress toward improvements. The Department will implement and share progress on the indicators of success so that there is transparency in monitoring.

The AECF framework is structured around three main objectives: ensure quality caregiving for children, forge strong relationships with foster parents, and find and keep amazing caregivers.

⁵ The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016). [A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting](#).

In mid-September of this year, the OIAA introduced this framework at the FPAWS (Foster Parent Association of Washington) mini-conference held in Grand Mound, Washington in a session of about 60 foster parents. Overall, the foster parents present were responsive to the framework, and identified four priority areas that they would like to see addressed in the near term, in order of priority: 1) engaging foster parents as a full and respected partner in child-centered decision-making; 2) ensuring adequate support to meet the needs of children in foster care (the need for behavioral health resources was specifically cited); 3) strengthening foster parent recruitment efforts; and 4) strengthening the network of supports for foster parents.

OIAA also introduced the framework at a smaller webinar of foster parent leaders from around the state in late September, and again found that the framework generally resonated with the foster parent leaders present. The latter group requested further examination of the research literature, and explicit comparison to other best practice models. In response, a comparison crosswalk between the AECF and the Redlich Horwitz Foundation⁶ framework is included in Appendix A of this report. The reader will note that the two are complementary, with much overlap. Additionally, OIAA has reached out to both AECF and the Horwitz Foundation to learn more about how the frameworks may have been used in other states and how they may have been researched. While the framework is described using the AECF categories, the intent of the Department is to draw from both reports as both represent best practice in caregiver support.

Summary of components and subcomponents of AECF caregiver support framework:

1. Ensure quality caregiving for children:
 - Deliver a robust training and education program
 - Pre Service Training
 - Targeted learning opportunities
 - Opportunities to hear the perspectives of youth, foster parents, and birth parents
 - Develop a strong network of support for foster parents
 - Dedicated foster parent support staff
 - Access to trauma-informed interventions
 - Support for grief and loss
 - Help in making decisions about adoptions and guardianship
 - Peer mentoring networks
 - Respite care
 - Kin and non-kin support groups
 - Social events and public recognition
 - Ensure adequate financial and other resources to meet the needs of children in foster care
 - Adequate financial support to meet children's needs
 - Access to basic services for children
 - Equitable support for kinship and non-kinship foster parents
 - Funding for age-appropriate activities and unexpected expenses
 - Eligibility for family and medical leave
 - Access to liability insurance
2. Forge strong relationships with foster parents:
 - Engage foster parents as full and respected partners in child-centered decision making
 - Treating them as full members of the child's foster care team
 - Ensuring that foster parent voices are heard in children's court proceedings
 - Emphasizing 'partnership culture' in joint staff and foster parent trainings
 - Supporting foster parents' judgments and decision making

⁶ Redlich Horwitz Foundation (2017). *Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory*
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- Expanding the foster parent voice to improve agency policies and practices
 - Establishing foster parent advisory boards and expanding participation in agency work groups
 - Encouraging foster parent advocacy and leadership opportunities
 - Ensuring that the foster parent partnership is prioritized in funding decisions
 - Updating foster parents on critical decisions that affect the child welfare agency
 - Promoting broader community understanding of foster parent authority
 - Promoting the agency-foster parent partnership with internal and external partners
3. Find and keep more amazing caregivers
- Consider promising approaches
 - Having a better understanding of the needs of children in foster care
 - Creating more accurate foster parent inventories
 - Using child-specific recruitment efforts
 - Conducting targeted recruitment for foster parents interested in working with specialized populations
 - Supporting foster parents and others as recruiters
 - Partnering with faith communities
 - Investing in technological solutions for recruitment and matching
 - Acknowledging and rewarding experienced foster parents
 - Developing a licensing process that promotes safety and quality caregiving
 - Creating more flexible licensing process
 - Adopting model licensing standards

PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Given the existing processes for addressing individual foster parent complaints, the Department is not recommending additional processes be put in place at this time. Rather the Department will implement an enhanced systemic monitoring of foster parent supports using these and other sources of data that will allow greater leadership engagement and a more robust systemic performance improvement response.

In addition to response processes put in place since the creation of DCYF on July 1, 2018, the Department will:

- Work with foster parents and kinship caregivers to identify priorities and develop indicators in the categories of best practice identified in the AECF framework
- To the extent data are appropriate, the Department will develop a data dashboard related to foster parent and kinship caregiver support and monitor and report data transparently
- The data dashboard will include data from the sources described in this report, along with other available data
- Incorporate foster parent and kinship caregiver support indicators into its systemic agency-wide performance improvement efforts
- Department Executive Leadership Team will receive regular briefings from the program lead and QA staff on the indicators of foster parent and kinship caregiver support, and will address barriers to improvement

APPENDIX

A: CROSSWALK OF FRAMEWORKS FOR SYSTEM SUPPORTS FOR FOSTER PARENTS AND KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

From A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016)	From Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory by Redlich Horwitz Foundation (2017)
"Strong consensus" among key informants: foster care alumni, foster parents and kin, agency leaders and frontline workers, judges, attorneys, service providers and other community stakeholders.	Consensus from the field about the key steps needed to find and keep amazing kin and non-kin foster parents
ENSURE QUALITY CAREGIVING FOR CHILDREN	
Robust training and education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-service training • Targeted learning opportunities • Opportunities to hear the perspectives of youth, foster parents and birth parents 	Use trauma-informed pre-service and skills training curricula <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-quality pre-service training for kin Ongoing training focused on skills for both kin and non-kin foster parents
Develop a strong network of support for foster parents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated foster parent support staff • Access to trauma-informed interventions • Support for grief and loss • Help in making decisions about adoption and guardianship • Peer mentoring networks • Respite care • Kin and non-kin support groups • Social events and public recognition 	Create a foster parent support position or unit Celebrate foster parents Provide ongoing support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis intervention • Peer support and exchange • Respite care
Ensure adequate financial and other resources to meet the needs of children in foster care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate financial support to meet children's needs • Access to basic services for children • Equitable support for kin and nonkin foster parents • Funding for age-appropriate activities and unexpected expenses • Information about tax benefits • Eligibility for Family and Medical Leave • Access to liability insurance 	Provide ongoing support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help meeting special needs • Ensure adequate financial support Treatment foster care, including kinship treatment foster care
FORGE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOSTER PARENTS	
Engage foster parents as full and respected partners in child-centered decision-making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treating them as full members of the child's foster care team • Ensuring that foster parent voices are heard in children's court proceedings • Emphasizing "partnership culture" in joint staff and foster parent trainings 	

ADDRESSING FOSTER PARENT COMPLAINTS AND CONCERNS

From A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016)	From Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory by Redlich Horwitz Foundation (2017)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting foster parents' judgment and decision making 	
<p>Expanding the foster parent voice to improve agency policies and practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing foster parent advisory boards and expanding participation in agency work groups Encouraging foster parent advocacy and leadership opportunities Ensuring that the foster parent partnership is prioritized in funding decisions Updating foster parents on critical decisions that affect the child welfare agency Promoting broader community understanding of foster parent authority 	<p>Listen to the voices of foster parents</p> <p>Create special initiatives for system improvements with foster parent involvement (e.g., Mockingbird Family Model)</p>
<p>Promoting the agency-foster parent partnership with internal and external partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactively communicate the value of foster parents in all of their community interactions Cultivate foster parent leaders as spokespeople Hold providers accountable for having strong foster parent partnerships Collaborate with public and private partners on trainings, data analysis and the development of foster parent leaders 	

FIND AND KEEP MORE AMAZING CAREGIVERS

<p>Recruiting efforts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a better understanding of the needs of children in foster care Creating more accurate foster parent inventories Using child-specific recruitment efforts Conducting targeted recruitment for foster parents interested in working with specialized populations Supporting foster parents and others as recruiters Partnering with faith communities Investing in technological solutions for recruitment and matching Acknowledging and rewarding experienced foster parents 	<p>Identify and engage kinship caregivers for a child's first placement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family search and engagement strategies Kinship firewall Search engines, social media and other resources Relative notification letters <p>Recruit excellent foster parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand children's characteristics Conduct foster family utilization review Engage in child-specific recruitment Engage foster parents as recruiters Engage the faith community <p>Customer service mentality with prospective foster parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good first impression
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ADDRESSING FOSTER PARENT COMPLAINTS AND CONCERNS

From <i>A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting</i> by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016)	From <i>Foster & Kinship Parent Recruitment and Support Best Practice Inventory</i> by Redlich Horwitz Foundation (2017)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging orientation • Easy-to-understand home study and training process <p>Make thoughtful matches</p>
<p>Developing a licensing process that promotes safety and quality caregiving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating more flexible licensing processes • Adopting model licensing standards 	<p>Streamline the licensing process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a policy and process for expedited approval of kinship caregivers <p>Develop a kin-friendly licensing process</p>