

Building Blocks for Resource Parent Recruitment and Retention

By Susan Foonsness & Angela Pittman, Public Consulting Group, Inc.
October 2016



Peruse almost any newspaper or article about child welfare, and you'll find that across the nation, there's a shortage of family foster homes for children in foster care. While we know family settings are better for youth in care, we also know that there are significant challenges to recruiting and retaining resource parents within our current child welfare system.

The shortage of family foster homes can lead to increased use of congregate care – many of these children would be able to live in a family setting if one was available and appropriate support was provided. While recruitment of resource parents is critical, our work does not stop there. Retention of these homes will increase by offering resource parents the tools they need to manage behaviors of children in their homes who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹ and by addressing their own secondary trauma caring for these children.

Active recruitment and retention is not only a local and state priority, but is a federal focus as well. For some time, the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) has focused on reducing the numbers of children in congregate care facilities due to poor outcomes for children who stay longer than medically needed. ACF continues to explore ways to further the focus on family versus residential settings, which will continue to help move the child welfare system beyond its current capacity.

Recruitment and retention is not a new issue to child welfare, but it has reached the tipping point and requires new, innovative thinking, trying new ideas and committing resources that will cultivate homes where children can feel safe and thrive. Many child welfare directors feel the frustration of trying to move the needle on family settings for children when resources are already constrained. However, there are strategies that agencies can implement now, in order to recruit and retain resource parents within your community. This piece highlights three strategies to implement quick and inexpensive building blocks for a robust recruitment and retention program.

Active recruitment and retention is not only a local and state priority, but also a federal focus.

¹<http://www.acestudy.org/index.html>

Resource parents as community recruiters

Child welfare agencies can begin leveraging data to understand resource parent recruitment needs. By using data to geographically map their currently licensed resource parents and the removal homes of the children in care, agency directors, staff, and the community can visualize key needs, including: houses where children have been removed; communities with the greatest need for foster homes; and areas to target recruitment efforts. Once priority communities are identified, the agency can identify current resource parents or adoptive parents within that community to hire as recruiters within their own community.

Both the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Report (2002)² and US Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2015)³ found that using current resource parents to recruit is the most effective and most underutilized recruitment tool. Since resource parents live in and are known to their community, they are better able to identify locations to hold recruitment sessions, informally recruit others through their social networks, and leverage their connections within the schools and faith community to bring attention to the need in their community.

Hiring resource parents to partner with recruiters within the agency will yield a higher number of potential resource parents for training and, ultimately, licensure for a specific community. The areas of need identified through this strategy can serve as pilots, allowing leaders to set goals for recruitment and compare this recruitment strategy to other communities without resource parent recruiters. Some agencies have also been successful offering a financial incentive or gift card to any current resource parent that successfully refers a new family. Either strategy requires resource parents to receive some level of training, or at least talking points and materials, to ensure consistency in how resource parents introduce the opportunity to others.

Hiring resource parents to partner with recruiters within the agency will yield a higher number of potential resource parents for training and, ultimately, licensure for a specific community. The areas of need identified through this strategy can serve as pilots, allowing leaders to set goals for recruitment and compare this recruitment strategy to other communities without resource parent recruiters. Some agencies have also been successful offering a financial incentive or gift card to any current resource parent that successfully refers a new family. Either strategy requires resource parents to receive some level of training, or at least talking points and materials, to ensure consistency in how resource parents introduce the opportunity to others.

²US Office of Inspector General. (2002). Recruiting Foster Parents (OEI – 07-00-0060). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

³ US Government Accountability Office. (2015). HHS Could Do More to Support States Efforts to Keep Children in Family Based Care. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office

⁴See overview of ARC at <http://www.traumacenter.org/research/ascot.php>

⁵See overview of RPC at <http://nctsn.org/products/caring-for-children-who-have-experienced-trauma>

Resource parent tools for success

All children in foster care have experienced some type of adverse childhood experience or trauma, which often manifests through maladaptive behaviors in the foster home. It is critical that resource parents and kinship caregivers understand how trauma affects the behavior and outcomes for the children they care for in their homes. Foster home disruptions often occur because the resource parents don't understand these trauma-related behaviors nor do they have concrete strategies about how to deal with the child's behavior. Agencies can increase placement stability and potentially increase resource parent retention by providing resource parents with trauma-informed strategies to help children struggling with these issues.

Foster home disruptions often occur because resource parents don't understand trauma related behaviors.

There are several programs to address trauma that give resource parents the tools they need in order to be able to manage behaviors effectively and foster understanding of how to support children who have experienced trauma. Both Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) from the Justice Resource Institute and the Resource Parent Curriculum (RPC) from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network have demonstrated significant success in helping foster parents and kinship caregivers to:

- Understand how trauma impacts children's emotions and behaviors and how placement disruptions compound that trauma.
- Demonstrate the link between trauma the child has experienced and the behavior resource parents are seeing in their homes.
- Teach concrete skills that resource parents can use in their homes to address challenging trauma-related behavior.
- Educate resource parents about evidence-based trauma treatment and advocacy for needs of children in their homes.

Some agencies have success incentivizing resource parents to attend these programs by offering a stipend or gift card and providing childcare, meals, and gas assistance. These training programs may also help resource parents meet their annual required trainings for licensure or be integrated into the existing training curriculum for new resource parents. It's also critical that child welfare staff themselves participate in the same or similar training to understand how to best support resource parents and understand what foster parents and kinship caregivers are learning.

Addressing secondary trauma for resource parents

Just as child welfare social workers experience secondary traumatic stress, often leading to burnout and turnover, resource parents are also susceptible to secondary trauma. The children in their homes bring their own stories of abuse and neglect, and exhibit challenging behaviors related to their own trauma. In order to retain healthy resource parents who can care for children with high needs, resource parents' secondary trauma must be acknowledged and addressed.

Agencies can address secondary trauma through initial educational sessions with resource parents about how it impacts critical thinking and other areas of their lives, and ways to manage it in order to be able to continue to care for children. Some child welfare agencies contract with a mental health professional that specifically addresses secondary trauma within the workforce. This person could also be utilized for resource parents to access in order to address their secondary trauma. Options for addressing secondary trauma can be in a group setting (e.g., "lunch and learns," webinars, monthly resource parent meetings, etc.) or individualized sessions, based on the need. A referral to a therapist can occur if more in-depth issues are identified.

Resource parents are susceptible to secondary trauma in the same way as child welfare social workers.

Further, if resource parents are involved with a child where a critical situation or a child fatality has occurred, agencies should ensure they participate in the debriefing of that situation. This is critical to addressing their secondary trauma. One model that is frequently used for first responders is Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), which is a peer support model that includes a variety of methods that allow the people involved in the situation to debrief immediately, as well as address ongoing trauma that can occur from that situation. Resource parents can become a part of the peer support network attending the training, which allows them to lead these sessions for others in the future.

Finally, resource parents can create their own resource parent wellness team that focuses solely on the support resource parents need from the agency in order to successfully continue to care for children. This includes not only secondary trauma supports, but also other ideas for improving recruitment, retention, and training that allow resource parents to continue long term. This model works best when a resource parent leads the group, allowing for issues to be brought up in a solution-focused and proactive way. The lead facilitator is partnered with one of the key agency staff, who is focused on recruiting and retaining resource parents. This model allows for ongoing feedback, opportunities to create additional support for resource parents, and authentic partnering between the child welfare agency and resource parents.

In addition to these three strategies, Public Consulting Group's Child Welfare team has additional solutions for recruitment and retention of resource families and the child welfare workforce. Contact us at (828) 214-3650 or at apittman@pcgus.com to learn more.