

# *Using Integrated Recruitment and Support* **TO BUILD A STRONG POOL OF FOSTER, ADOPTIVE, AND KINSHIP FAMILIES**

## **What do we mean by “integrated recruitment and support”?**

In many child welfare systems, recruitment of foster, adoptive, and kinship families occurs separately from the work done to prepare, license, and support these families. The planning and implementation for these parts of the work may be done by different units or divisions and may involve staff who are using different sets of quantitative and qualitative data to inform their work. When this work is fragmented, and with parts of the work done in isolation, it creates challenges for conducting effective family recruitment, development, and support, which ultimately makes it harder to achieve positive outcomes for children.

We encourage child welfare systems to think instead about taking an integrated approach to recruiting, developing, and supporting foster, adoptive, and kinship families.<sup>1</sup> By “integrated recruitment and support” we mean a comprehensive, connected approach to recruiting, responding to, training and developing, and supporting foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Whether conducted by the same staff or not, this integrated approach would be based on shared data to inform the planning and implementation of each part of the process and would have well-established feedback loops so that each of the activities—recruitment, training and preparation, licensing, and post-placement support—is shaped by lessons learned from the other parts of the work.

## **How do recruitment and support happen now?**

Frequently, child welfare systems’ efforts for recruitment and support occur in isolated steps, both for families and for child welfare staff. Different staff—and sometimes completely different divisions or contracted agencies—are responsible for each part of the process. For example, one unit determines the child welfare system’s recruitment needs based on the children in foster care and plans recruitment efforts, while a separate unit schedules family orientation and training sessions and decides on the content, locations, and key messages for those sessions. Matching and placement decisions may be made by other staff who haven’t built relationships with families through the preparation and approval process. Yet another unit provides support—to varying degrees—to families during the licensing or approval process. Then, after placement, families receive support from a different unit or possibly a separate agency than the family worked with prior to placement. Each unit likely uses separate pieces of data to determine needs or assess success, and there may not be many, or any, meaningful formal connections or feedback loops among these units. There can also be gaps and significant delays between each step, especially if the work is handed off from one unit to another or from one agency to another (e.g., between a public and private agency, between a state-level agency and a county-level agency or tribal agency, etc.).

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1 Much of the information in this publication was developed based on discussions and insights from a convening of child welfare leaders on diligent recruitment and family support, held in January 2014. The participants were from public and private agencies, representing both state-administered and county-administered child welfare systems.



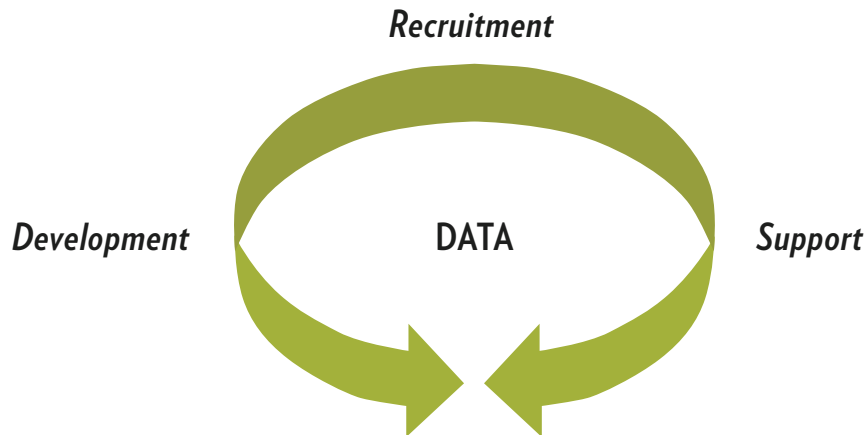
This siloed approach to recruitment and support of families has the potential to create artificial divides—such as prompting workers to view support as something that is only provided after a family has a child placed with them—rather than support being something that is provided to families from their initial point of contact, through training and licensing, to long after placement. This divided approach can also create or reinforce narrow understandings about the goals of recruitment and support work. For example, if a unit is responsible for bringing in a specific number of inquiries about foster or adoptive parenting, but then hands off the inquiries to a separate unit that is disconnected from the initial recruitment work, staff in both units may not be well-positioned and supported in trying to recruit and engage the families who are most likely to be able to meet the needs of children in foster care. That staff may instead be focused on meeting the requirements for the number of prospective parents they recruit or move on to the next step in the process.

## A vision of integrated recruitment and support

In an integrated approach to family recruitment, development, and support, there would be continuous feedback loops and shared data informing planning and implementation for the full continuum of recruitment, development, and support. Recruitment, development and support goals would be coordinated and aligned with needs identified in the child welfare system's data. For example, as a child welfare system uses its data to identify a need to recruit more foster families, it might identify a specific need for families for teens. That child welfare system would then implement targeted recruitment efforts with messaging about teens and concurrently plan revisions for its prospective family orientation sessions to include current foster families caring for teens and, if possible, teens in foster care. The system would also compile additional information to share with prospective parents about resources available to address the needs of teens and families caring for teens, such as information on how to help teens in foster care get their driver's license, and information about college financial aid available for older youth who have been in foster care.

The child welfare system would also develop specific supports for families who become licensed and have teens placed with them. This support could include identifying current foster families who can provide peer support, ensuring ongoing training events related to parenting teens, providing support and leadership development activities for teens, and developing other tailored support. The child welfare system would gather input from foster and adoptive families who are parenting teens about what forms of preparation and support were most helpful and would use that input to inform future efforts to recruit, develop, and support families for teens. The child welfare system could also gather information from families about what helped them move forward to become licensed and parent teens; this information could help the system strengthen its response and preparation processes for prospective parents in the future. The system could use data about successful foster, adoptive, and kinship families of teens to guide efforts to recruit other families with similar characteristics. The system would continue to

collect information and feedback from families long after a foster care or kinship placement or adoption finalization to help guide what forms of support families need. The child welfare system would use that information both to refine its family support in order to sustain a more satisfied pool of families and to refine its recruitment and family preparation efforts.



### ***Examples of what you might see in a system with integrated recruitment and support.***

These are examples of some of the ways that integrated recruitment and support might play out in a child welfare system. This is not a comprehensive list, nor would all of these examples necessarily be present in every system using an integrated approach to recruitment and support.

- Child welfare leadership, staff, and partners would understand the connections between recruitment, development, and support.
- Services would be aligned with children and families' needs, rather than driven by existing organizational structures or silos.
- Data would be available and used to inform development and support in meaningful ways. Data from each step of the work would inform the other steps, such as having quantitative and qualitative data on families' support needs shape recruitment planning and messages, as well as family preparation and support services.
- Staff doing each part of the work (e.g., recruitment, licensing, support) would be in the same chain of command—or would have formal connections and communication channels with each other—and would receive consistent messaging about how the work is interconnected.
- Families would have the same worker throughout the process of being recruited and approved and having a child placed in their home.
- Staff would use qualitative and quantitative data to explore questions such as “What are the characteristics of families that are good at meeting the needs of the children entering care?” and “How

do we define ‘successful families’ to guide our recruitment efforts?” Using the answers to these questions and partnering with individual families, staff would continually develop and support families to help ensure that they have the ability and capacity to meet the needs of children placed with them.

- After placement, families would have ongoing support to meet the needs of the children they are parenting, with the available support services informed by previous feedback and lessons learned about how the child welfare system can support placement stability and permanency.

## Why are we promoting this idea?

Through our work with state and tribal child welfare systems, we know many systems struggle with efforts to recruit families for children and youth in foster care and to prepare and support those families through the approval process and after placement. We also see gaps in the use of data-driven recruitment and support efforts. Based on extensive discussions with child welfare leaders in public and private agencies, we believe that taking an integrated approach to recruitment and support of families would improve the effectiveness of efforts to build and sustain a pool of well-prepared foster, adoptive, and kinship families who can meet the specific needs of children in foster care. This would, in turn, help child welfare systems provide placement stability and permanency for children.

## Benefits of Integrated Recruitment and Support

- More effective and efficient recruitment planning and implementation
- Improved coordination among staff and partners, including breaking down silos that can create disruptions and delays in interactions with prospective and current families
- More child- and family-centered approaches that support effective family engagement
- Improved family preparation based on data on what other families need
- Increased placement stability and permanency through a better prepared and supported pool of families for children in foster care
- A pool of families that feel better supported, so they share more positive information in the community that can help make other prospective parents more receptive to recruitment efforts
- A pool of families that may be able to parent more children or have a longer tenure as foster parents, which provides more placement options for the child welfare system
- Improved child and family well-being through better prepared and supported families

## How do you move toward more integrated recruitment and support?

Our work with child welfare systems provides a strong reminder that system change is a challenging and often slow-moving process. We know that it will not be simple for most child welfare systems to have fully integrated family recruitment and support given the complexity of current organizational structures, funding streams, staffing requirements, policies, and other constraints within child welfare systems. However, these potential barriers don’t mean that child welfare systems can’t begin moving

toward more integrated recruitment and support in incremental steps. Infusing some of the ideas of integrated recruitment and support into current child welfare practices and systems can be beneficial, even on a small scale.

## *Should you start big or start small?*

Some child welfare systems will want to hear about how to do the large-scale systems-change work that would be involved in implementing integrated recruitment and support while other systems will want to hear about small steps they could take to begin down this path. Below we share ideas for how to begin this work on integrated recruitment and support, with sections on what you can do in one month, in six months, and in a year. You can jump to whichever section fits best for you. You may also want to think about working on these various steps concurrently (e.g., making some smaller changes while also working on the deeper system changes that will take more time to implement).

### **Addressing your data needs**

As mentioned throughout this publication, data is a crucial tool for taking an integrated approach to recruiting, developing, and supporting families. This publication is not designed to provide in-depth guidance on collecting and using data effectively, but there are many useful resources available to help child welfare systems use data for planning and continuous quality improvement (CQI) efforts. Our publication, "[Data-Driven Recruitment: Key Data Elements on Foster and Adoptive Families](#)" is a good place to start for considering what data elements and questions to prioritize as you deepen your understanding of your recruitment, development, and support needs and strengths. Our archived webinar, "[Data-Driven Diligent Recruitment: Partnering and Prioritizing to Strengthen Your System's Use of Data](#)" also provides helpful information about ways to build your system's capacity to use data related to your pool of current and potential foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Our website ([www.nrcdr.org](http://www.nrcdr.org)) also provides information on other ways we can support child welfare systems in their use of data.

## *Things you can do to move toward integrated recruitment and support*

### *Steps you could take in one month*

- Begin discussions with individual staff about the idea of moving toward a more integrated approach to family recruitment and support. Help staff each think about what an integrated approach might mean for their part of the work, including what the benefits could be for them.
- Convene staff involved in recruitment, family orientation/training, licensing, placement, and post-placement support to brainstorm ways they could increase the ways that they share information, coordinate planning, and connect their work in other ways.
- Determine what data you currently have available related to recruitment, response, training and preparation, licensing, and post-placement needs. Determine whether the data you have is accurate and comprehensive (e.g., whether it is available for your whole jurisdiction or only for some geographic areas, only from some contractors, etc.) Explore which data would be most helpful to inform other parts of the work (e.g., what data on support needs should inform recruitment planning, etc.).

- Begin sharing data across practice areas of recruitment, training, approval, placement, and support. If any of this work is conducted by contracted partners, engage those partners in the data sharing to the extent allowed. If relevant in your area, include tribal agencies in this data sharing.
- Meet with family support groups to hear about parents' experiences going through the process.
- Identify new data elements needed that your child welfare system might be able to start collecting, even if you can't begin that data collection yet.

### ***Steps you could take in six months***

- Develop an integrated recruitment and support planning committee to provide leadership and creativity for planning and implementing increasingly integrated work.
- Review data on why families withdraw from the process or stop fostering. Explore what the implications are for recruitment efforts, orientation and training, and family support.
- Begin collecting new data that you have identified as being needed to inform integrated recruitment and support. Develop a system for sharing the data among different practitioners involved in recruitment, development, and support.
- Involve experienced foster and adoptive families in recruitment and family orientation and training.
- Explore how your child welfare system's structure related to recruitment, development, and support of families came to be set up the way it is and why the work is divided or connected in its current structure. Even if you and your colleagues don't have the background information on why the structure was set up in its current design, consider what the intent and thought process might have been: What were leaders attempting to achieve? What problems were they trying to solve? Pausing to consider the motivation and ideas behind your system's current structure can be helpful as you think about options for shifting the way your system works.

### **Example from the field—Santa Cruz County, CA**

Some child welfare systems are already implementing the idea of a more integrated approach to recruitment and support of families for children in foster care. As part of its Diligent Recruitment Grant from the Children's Bureau, the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department in California employed a liaison who conducts recruitment events and provides information and support to prospective families from the initial point of inquiry through the approval process. The person in this position helps keep prospective families engaged in the process, particularly helping families who are interested move forward during points in the approval process when families often withdraw. The liaison helps families understand the approval process, complete paperwork, and know what to expect, but more importantly the liaison provides emotional support to help families address concerns or challenges that arise during the process (e.g., addressing grief and loss). Having continuity in a point of contact across the recruitment, preparation, and approval processes helps families hear consistent messaging and understand each step in the process.

- If any part of the recruitment, response, training, approval, or support process occurs in separate units or agencies, including tribal agencies, coordinate with the appropriate leaders in the other units or agencies to discuss ways to integrate your work more closely.

### ***Steps you could take in one year***

- Take a new, integrated approach to developing and writing your diligent recruitment plan in your Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR). For example, you could have your integrated recruitment and support planning committee work together on the diligent recruitment plan, rather than dividing up responsibilities for writing the plan across recruitment and support staff positions or having only one person write the plan.
- Explore options for partnering with adoption exchanges, foster/adoptive parent support groups, and other key groups to strengthen coordination and integration among partners working with families before and after approval and placement of children.
- Identify revisions you can make to your data system, including creating improved data reports that support integrated approaches.
- Review policies and organizational structures to identify system changes that will be needed to support more integrated approaches to recruitment and support.
- Plan new approaches for your agency's contracts with service providers (e.g., explore possibilities for building in collaboration or coordination between recruitment contractors and family support contractors; build in requirements for sharing data among organizations and agencies conducting recruitment, training, approvals, and support).
- For exploration purposes, develop a proposed approach for organizational restructuring to support a truly integrated system, demonstrating a structure that would have recruitment, development, and support under the same leadership.

### ***Special considerations for county-administered or privatized child welfare systems***

For county-administered systems or privatized systems, explore ways to include individual counties (or state-level staff if you are working at the county level), tribes, and private providers in these discussions and steps. Engaging the key partners involved in implementing child welfare work in your system is crucial to ensuring that you are best able to integrate recruitment and support efforts at all of the appropriate levels. In these systems, integration may require working across agencies and levels of jurisdiction, rather than just across divisions of one agency, so you may need to build in more time for strengthening relationships, discussing ways to share data, developing memoranda of understanding, and taking other steps to allow for integrated work.

### ***Special considerations for tribes and tribal child welfare systems***

Some tribal child welfare systems may be better positioned to implement increasingly integrated approaches to recruitment and support, due to factors such as their use of different funding streams for some child welfare activities, having systems that have more flexibility or fewer silos than state child



welfare systems, or having staff who have multiple roles within the child welfare system. For example, some tribal child welfare systems have the same person conducting recruitment events, conducting licensing or approval reviews, and providing post-placement support. In many tribal child welfare systems, child welfare staff are deeply connected to the communities they serve and may already be using highly integrated recruitment and support practices, even if they don't describe their work that way.

## Key considerations for implementing more integrated recruitment and support

Moving toward a more integrated approach to recruitment and support of families for children in foster care will take thoughtful planning and implementation. As with all implementation efforts, it is important to address multiple drivers, including data, leadership messaging and support, staff skills and attitudes, and policies and organizational structures. Below are some tips to keep in mind as you implement integrated approaches to recruitment and support on small or large scales:

- Be data-driven. Use both qualitative and quantitative data about recruitment, development, and support of families and use the data comprehensively (e.g., use data about families' support needs to guide recruitment and orientation messaging).
- Engage colleagues and stakeholders outside of your usual groups, working to break down silos and model integrated approaches to exploration and planning.
- Highlight the voices of youth and families to deepen your understanding of how increased integration can benefit families and youth and help make the case to key stakeholders for implementing new approaches. For example, hearing from youth about what they wish their foster, adoptive, or kinship families had known earlier can help inform your recruitment and orientation messages. Hearing from families about what kind of information and support would have helped them be better prepared to meet the needs of children they are parenting can help demonstrate the value of having the information for planning training and other preparation steps for prospective families.

### Idea from the field—One worker throughout the process

One idea that has been tried and that child welfare systems may find useful is providing continuity in the worker for prospective adoptive families throughout the steps of recruitment, orientation and training, the homestudy process, being matched with a child, and support after placement. By offering a family the same worker from recruitment until after adoption finalization, this approach can help families experience a smooth progression through the process. Because they are able to build a trusting relationship, the family and worker can develop a strong understanding of the family's strengths, capacity to meet children's needs, and support network, which help the worker assist the family make decisions about possible child matches. The worker can continue to provide support—both structured and unstructured—to families after they have adopted, including facilitating peer-to-peer support for families and their children.



- Identify multiple champions for the work, so there will be many people who can maintain momentum and help the work move forward even as staff leave or change roles.
- Be aware of parallel processes and the importance of modeling integrated approaches. Consider what changes will be needed both by internal and external staff and partners and the structures they work in so that they can be more integrated in their recruitment and support work. Consider what internal and external forces will either facilitate or block efforts to have a more integrated approach. For example, if units or agencies have strong restrictions against sharing data, it will be difficult for staff to increase their use of feedback loops and integrated, data-driven efforts and for them to believe that it is an agency priority to become more integrated in their work.
- Offer development and coaching to staff and partners to help them build their understanding of the value of integrating recruitment and support and develop the skills needed to transition to a more integrated approach to their work.
- Acknowledge structural barriers to integrated approaches, but don't let them stop you. Work with staff and partners to develop strategies to overcome structural barriers, such as existing organizational structures that divide staff working on recruitment and support. Focus on identifying solutions rather than on reasons why it may be challenging to conduct integrated recruitment and support.
- Structure and facilitate discussions in thoughtful, productive ways. As you bring groups together to discuss ways to plan and implement recruitment and support in more integrated ways, you may need to find ways to help the groups focus on using data, rather than relying on anecdotes or long-standing assumptions about your system's needs, strengths, and opportunities related to recruitment and support. Without new approaches to structuring these discussions, the groups may find it challenging to shift their thinking about recruitment and support. One strategy for a new approach to structuring these discussions is to use our customizable [Diligent Recruitment Navigator](#). This tool provides suggested discussion questions that can help keep conversations focused on making data-driven decisions and identifying solutions rather than staying focused on challenges.



More free resources at:  
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[nrldr.org](http://nrldr.org)

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