

Strategies For Recruiting LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER FOSTER, ADOPTIVE, AND KINSHIP FAMILIES

By the National Resource Center for Adoption, the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, and the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids

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Introduction

The Need to Expand the Pool of Prospective Parents

Recruiting and retaining enough qualified foster, adoptive, and kinship parents is a challenge facing nearly every jurisdiction in the United States. States, Tribes, and Territories constantly seek resources and creative strategies for recruiting prospective parents who can meet the needs of children and youth in foster care. They continually look for ways to improve the placement stability for children who need foster care placements and to achieve permanence for children who cannot return to their birth families.

Approximately 408,000 children are currently in foster care in the United States.¹ These children have diverse needs; therefore, child welfare agencies need to have a diverse pool of foster parents who can provide temporary, loving care for the children as they await permanency. Of those 408,000 children in foster care, 107,000 are waiting to be adopted. These children have been in foster care for an average of 37 months. In addition to the children still waiting for a permanent family, nearly 28,000 youth aged out of foster care in 2010 without a permanent family connection. All of these children—and the

children who will enter foster care in the years to come—deserve our best efforts to recruit and retain prospective foster and adoptive parents who will provide them with the love, stability, and safety that they need.

For jurisdictions that continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining enough qualified foster and adoptive parents, looking to previously untapped or underutilized groups of prospective parents—including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults—may be a key step in providing placement stability and permanency to children in foster care.

LGBT Adults as Prospective Parents

For many LGBT people, foster parenting and adoption is not a second choice, as it may be for heterosexual men and women who are infertile, but rather a first choice.² Although LGBT adults have been historically discouraged from fostering or adopting, changes in legislation and policy over the past 10 years in some States reflect a more open attitude towards them as parents.

LGBT adults in the United States have created families through birth, adoption, foster care, and the establishment of kinship networks in

¹ The AFCARS Report, Preliminary FY 2010 Estimates as of June 2011. (18)

² Turner, C. S. (1999). *Adoption Journeys: Parents Tell Their Stories*. Ithaca, NY: McBooks Press; Hicks, S. and McDermott, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Lesbian and Gay Fostering and Adoption: Extraordinary yet Ordinary*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

a wide variety of ways.³ In some cases, LGBT individuals became parents without disclosure or discussion of their sexual or gender orientation with adoption and foster care agencies, often due to concerns about whether agencies would be open to working with LGBT prospective parents. However, as many LGBT individuals are able to live their lives more openly, more are considering parenthood in ways they might not have thought possible in the past. Although a growing number of LGBT individuals are applying to adopt and foster, and a growing number are successfully caring for children and youth, they frequently remain an under-used resource. Agencies' under-use of LGBT prospective parents may be driven by multiple factors, including:

- legal or policy restrictions—in the past or still in effect—against LGBT adults becoming foster or adoptive parents
- misinterpretation of policies or perceived barriers to agencies being able to approve LGBT individuals for foster care or adoption
- personal attitudes and biases about LGBT prospective parents.

Recognizing Strengths of LGBT Parents

Reaching out to—and welcoming and supporting—LGBT prospective foster and adoptive parents does more than simply increase the number of potential parents for children in foster care. It may also provide agencies with foster and adoptive families who bring special strengths to the challenges of parenting children who have experienced and persevered through abuse, neglect, loss, and isolation. As highlighted in the findings from AdoptUSKids' 2010 study "Barriers and Success Factors in Adoption from Foster Care: Perspectives of

³ Weston, K. (1991). *Families We Choose: Gay and Lesbian Kinship*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Lesbian and Gay Families," LGBT families can bring particular strengths to parenting children in foster care. These strengths include:

- LGBT parents can relate to adopted children's feelings of differentness.
- Adoption decision is very intentional by LGBT parents.
- For LGBT families, adoption is most often their first choice.
- LGBT parents may be more resourceful and may know where to find help.
- LGBT parents may be more aware of support systems.
- LGBT parents can expose children to a diverse world and acceptance of differences in people.

LGBT foster parents have similar strengths as noted by Mallon (2006) including:⁴

- The ability to scan one's environment for safety—a valuable skill for children and youth in foster care to develop.
- Foster care decisions are very intentional by LGBT foster parents.
- LGBT foster parents have learned to navigate a potentially negative child welfare system to be able to parent, demonstrating an ability to overcome barriers.
- Foster parents who are LGBT identified have well-developed support systems of fictive kin and biological kin.
- LGBT foster parents are not usually bound by rigid gender roles or roles in the home.

"LGBT Adoptive and Foster Parenting" by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections and AdoptUSKids pro-

⁴ Mallon, G.P. 2006. *Lesbian and Gay Foster and Adoptive Parents: Recruiting, Assessing, and Supporting an Untapped Resource for Children and Youth*. Washington, DC. Child Welfare League of America.

vides a useful overview of the research findings related to children raised by LGBT parents:

“More than 25 years of research on the offspring of non-heterosexual parents has yielded results of remarkable clarity. . . . Regardless of whether investigators have examined sexual identity, self-esteem, adjustment, or qualities of social relationships, the results have been remarkably consistent. In study after study, the offspring of lesbian and gay parents have been found to be at least as well adjusted overall as those of other parents.”⁵ Children of LGBT parents seem to “benefit from egalitarian co-parenting” and “grow up as successfully as the children of heterosexual parents.”⁶

There is no evidence “that the children of LGBT parents are more likely to be abused or to suggest that the children of these parents are more

⁵ Patterson, C.J. Nov. 2009. “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents: Psychology, Law, and Policy.” *American Psychologist*.

⁶ National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections and AdoptUSKids. Oct. 2010. “LGBT Adoptive and Foster Parenting” Available online at: www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/LGBTAdoptiveandFosterParenting.pdf

likely to be [LGBT] themselves. Children will, in fact, be who they are.”⁷

While research specifically addressing adoption by LGBT parents is more limited, it points in the same direction.⁸ Additionally, “[a] wide variety of professional organizations have official positions recognizing the scientific research on GLB parents and stating that sexual orientation should not be a determinative factor in assessing the ability of individuals to raise children through adoption, foster care, or second parent adoptions.”⁹

⁷ Mallon, G.P. (2008). Social work practice with LGBT parents. In G.P. Mallon (Ed.). In *Social work practice with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people*, (p. 269-312). New York: Routledge.

⁸ Howard, J. 2006. “Expanding Resources for Children: Is Adoption by Gays and Lesbians Part of the Answer for Boys and Girls who Need Homes?” New York. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Retrieved August 5, 2010, from: http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/2006_Expanding_Resources_for_Children.php

⁹ Gates, G., Badgett, L.M.V., Macomber, J.E., Chambers, K. 2007. “Adoption and Foster Care by Lesbian and Gay Parents in the United States.” The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law & The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. Retrieved August 4, 2010, from: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411437_Adoption_Foster_Care.pdf

Recognizing and Reducing Personal Biases

It is important that agencies and social workers be prepared for issues that will arise, both professionally and individually, in working with LGBT prospective parents. As is good practice for serving families and children in culturally competent ways, social workers need to examine their own personal attitudes and biases and find ways to prevent those personal attitudes from affecting their work.* The gender and sexual orientation of a potential parent does not, of itself, indicate anything about her or his ability to care for children in foster care. As child welfare professionals, we need to explore openly with each individual or couple their experience and skills in relation to caring for a child or adolescent.

* The National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids has a resource entitled “*Moving Toward Cultural Competence: Key Considerations to Explore*” that provides a helpful framework for thinking about building cultural competence (available online at: adoptuskids.org/images/resourceCenter/Moving-Toward-Cultural-Competence.pdf)

Of course, as with all prospective foster and adoptive parents, agencies should assess adults on an individual basis to determine whether they will be able to meet the needs of children in foster care. As with any group of prospective parents, workers should not assume that all LGBT prospective parents will be a good fit for children in need of foster or adoptive placements. Being mindful, however, of the strengths that many LGBT families may bring to foster and adoptive parenting can help agencies see the value in welcoming LGBT prospective parents. A September 2011 webcast by the NRCPPFC on parenting older adolescents, featuring a lesbian foster and adoptive mom and her daughter, may provide viewers with insights into some of the particular values and strengths of LGBT parents. One insight highlighted in the webcast is the perspective from some teens that LGBT parents can make good foster and adoptive parents because they are able to be very understanding of the challenges and hardships youth face, based on their own experiences facing challenges. To view the archived webcast, visit: www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/archives.html.

The importance of building agency capacity to welcome LGBT prospective parents was reinforced in an April 2011 Information Memorandum (IM) from the Children’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF). ACYF Commissioner Bryan Samuels stated in IM-11-03: “Agencies that have not already done so should develop mechanisms to recruit, train, and provide ongoing support to families, including LGBT individuals and families, who are able to provide a safe, loving family placement for young people who are LGBTQ and are involved with the child welfare system.”

LGBT individuals represent a largely untapped resource of potential parents for some of the large numbers of children who need foster and

adoptive families, including LGBTQ youth and non-LGBTQ youth. LGBT adults should be considered as a possible resource for any child or youth in foster care, looking at prospective parents on a case-by-case basis as a possible match.

By keeping a focus on the importance of expanding the pool of qualified parents to care for children in foster care—either as foster parents or adoptive parents—child welfare professionals can pursue strategies to seek out and welcome all prospective parents, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Reality: Child Welfare Systems Are Already Working with LGBT Prospective Parents

Even if your agency isn’t already actively targeting recruitment efforts towards LGBT prospective parents for children in foster care, the reality is that child welfare agencies are already working with LGBT prospective and current parents whether they know it or not. LGBT pro-

LGBT Adults Are Already Fostering and Adopting

According to a 2007 report from the Urban Institute:*

- Gay and lesbian parents are raising three percent of foster children in the United States.
- Gay and lesbian parents are raising four percent of all adopted children in the United States.
- An estimated two million gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are interested in adopting.

*“Adoption and Foster Care by Lesbian and Gay Parents in the United States,” available online at www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=411437

spective parents may not self-identify to agencies as LGBT for a variety of reasons, including not trusting that they will be treated fairly and welcomed by child welfare agencies. Even if they aren't aware of it, however, agencies across the country are interacting with LGBT adults, both as this population explores the process for becoming foster and adoptive parents, and as agencies seek relatives and other adults who may be permanency options for children in foster care.

Understanding and implementing good fundamentals for effective recruitment practices with a focus on working effectively with LGBT individuals can improve your agency's recruitment efforts and expand the pool of foster, adoptive and kinship families for children who need them.

The following sections of this publication highlight key considerations and provide practical suggestions on ways to recruit LGBT parents effectively, whether your agency is simply wanting to create a welcoming environment for all prospective parents or wanting to develop targeted recruitment strategies to engage LGBT prospective parents.

Special Considerations in Recruiting LGBT Parents

Recruiting and welcoming LGBT prospective parents involves applying the basics of targeted recruitment strategies in seeking to develop a pool of prospective foster and adoptive families who can meet the needs of children in foster care. Although agencies may need additional information, training, and awareness-building efforts to effectively recruit and retain LGBT individuals, most agencies already have experience and expertise in engaging with diverse communities. Agencies can draw upon and

apply their prior knowledge and experience as they seek to reach and welcome LGBT individuals and couples.

Viewing recruitment of LGBT adults as a natural extension of your agency's existing recruitment practices will help your agency ensure that LGBT prospective parents are not isolated or treated as a separate population, but rather are recognized as simply an additional community that your agency seeks to actively engage. As with any new effort to reach out to a community that has not been previously engaged, it is important to think about how to work in culturally competent, effective, and respectful ways.

Acknowledging Barriers that LGBT Prospective Parents Face

Like most prospective foster and adoptive parents, LGBT prospective parents are likely to face barriers as they pursue foster or adoptive parenting. Along with the common barriers to adopting from foster care, LGBT adults report encountering additional challenges, including¹⁰:

- Often needing to deal with various state laws regarding adoption when not legally partnered
- Challenges finding a judge or attorney to do the second parent adoption
- Being told that the child's agency wouldn't place because they [female applicants] were lesbian (even though the family's agency was supportive)
- Some agencies feel that LGBT families should only be matched with children who are considered "hard to place" because those families will take any kind of child

¹⁰ AdoptUSKids. 2010. "Barriers and Success Factors in Adoption from Foster Care: Perspectives of Lesbian and Gay Families." Available online at: adoptuskids.org/images/resourceCenter/LGBT-Barriers-and-Success-Factors-in-Adoption.pdf

- Being told they were turned down because they were gay and white
- Never being told why they were turned down

LGBT prospective parents have also likely experienced discrimination and exclusion from other organizations and agencies because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Therefore, they may interpret unexpected delays or non-responsiveness from your agency to be signals that they aren't encouraged to pursue foster or adoptive parenting. Being aware of the additional barriers that LGBT adults may face as they consider fostering and adopting can help agencies anticipate prospective parents' concerns, be intentional about communicating, and identify strategies to assist LGBT prospective parents through the process.

Assessing Your Agency's Capacity and Readiness to Recruit LGBT Parents

Although your agency may already be working with many LGBT parents, you may face questions, concerns, or resistance if your agency makes a more focused effort to welcome LGBT prospective foster and adoptive parents. Being aware of, and preparing for, the potential for uncertainty and concerns of staff, stakeholders, and partners can help ensure that your agency is equipped to respond to questions and continue to keep the focus on the needs of children in foster care.

Building on other works from Mallon (2000, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011), the following are important questions for your agency to consider and address when seeking to recruit LGBT foster and adoptive parents:

- Is your agency's senior management supportive of specifically recruiting LGBT parents? If not, how can this be addressed?

- What training is available to social workers, managers, and training panel members in relation to LGBT adults fostering and adopting? Where can such training be accessed?
- Are LGBT families visible anywhere in your agency publications? Are pictures of LGBT families and African-American, Latino, and Asian LGBT families featured along with other families in your agency's materials, or in photographs displayed throughout the premises?
- Does your agency have a welcoming statement to all families? Is it inclusive of LGBT applicants?
- Do your forms say "applicant 1" or "foster/adoptive parent" or do they ask for "male and female" applicants or "husband and wife"? Do your forms have options for relationship status other than "single" or "married"?
- Is your training inclusive of diverse parents? Are LGBT adults depicted in case studies and in examples given or used on training panels?
- What support services is your agency able to offer to families? Are other LGBT parents available as mentors or is a support group offered for LGBT parents? Is your agency staff familiar with resources for LGBT-headed families?

Assessing your agency based on these—and similar—questions will help you identify existing strengths for welcoming and supporting LGBT prospective parents. This assessment will also highlight areas for improvement in order to serve LGBT adults in a respectful and effective way.

Preparing for the Possibility of Negative Reactions

Concerns about negative responses from politicians, church leaders, community partners, and the media have made some States and adoption agencies reluctant to publicize their willingness to recruit LGBT individuals and couples. Agencies that are dedicated to inclusive recruitment, however, can prepare themselves to respond to negative reactions. Individual workers and managers should prepare for negative comments and develop confidence in challenging the myths and stereotypes often associated with LGBT parenting. Your agency can take concrete steps to build internal capacity to head off and, if necessary, respond to negative reactions.

Developing Internal and External Communication Strategies

As with any change in policies or practices, you can benefit from developing a strategy for communicating internally as well as externally with stakeholders about your agency's new or expanded effort to reach and welcome LGBT adults. Having a clear communications plan can help support your implementation of new or intensified recruitment plans and facilitate the integration of the new effort into your agency's overall work.

Tips for Developing and Using a Communications Plan Related to LGBT Recruitment

- Develop key messages that agency leaders and staff can use both internally and externally to promote and build support for the new (or intensified) effort to recruit and retain LGBT prospective parents.
- Send consistent, strong messages within your agency so that staff hear their leaders supporting and encouraging the agency's effort to welcome LGBT prospective parents.

- Have clear descriptions and explanations of how your agency's efforts to recruit and retain LGBT parents aligns with other agency priorities and initiatives (e.g., recruiting LGBT parents supports your agency's efforts to improve placement stability and permanence for youth in foster care by expanding the pool of qualified foster and adoptive parents available to care for children in need of both temporary and permanent placements).
- Empower staff with clear talking points and information about your agency's commitment to welcoming all qualified foster and adoptive parents, including LGBT parents, so that staff can be prepared to respond to questions from current and prospective parents, community members, neighbors, and others.
- Be up front and open about your agency's commitment to welcoming LGBT prospective families. Mixed messages about whether your agency is truly open to engaging LGBT families will make it hard for LGBT prospective parents to know if they are truly welcome and will make it harder for staff and community partners to know whether your agency is actually committed to becoming more inclusive.

TIP: Send Strong, Consistent Messages Internally And Externally

Have agency leaders communicate to staff that working with LGBT families is a supported, expected practice as part of a professional agency with professional practice models.

Send frequent and routine messages to staff about the agency's commitment to inclusion, which involves serving LGBT parents well and welcoming all qualified prospective families.

- Consider making simple, clear announcements to the public (e.g., through letters to the editor of local newspapers, press releases) stating that your agency is continuing to seek qualified, loving foster and adoptive families and that includes welcoming LGBT prospective parents.

General Recruitment Strategies: Welcoming LGBT Families as Part of Your General Recruitment

The Importance of Word of Mouth

In a 2000 study, more than half of the current parents interviewed said that they had come to hear and learn about fostering through relatives and friends or through their work, especially social care jobs.¹¹ The authors conclude, “from the comments we had, it became obvious that the experience of past and current parents are crucial in shaping a public image of fostering.”¹²

A 2002 report from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of the Inspector General focusing on foster parent recruitment reinforced the importance of word of mouth as the means for attracting new foster parents.¹³ Countless agencies and organizations across the country as well can speak to the importance of word of mouth in recruiting foster and adoptive parents.

Just like other prospective foster and adoptive parents, many LGBT parents approach agencies through hearing about experiences with foster care and adoption from others within their network. Experiences of discrimination, rejection, or indifference from child welfare agencies become well known within the community. Prospective parents can be deterred from pursuing

foster or adoptive parenting if they believe that they will not be welcomed and respected due to their sexual orientation. Agencies and workers need to acknowledge the importance of providing consistently welcoming and respectful interactions with all prospective parents and ensuring that all staff members—from receptionists to senior managers—are comfortable and professional in working with LGBT adults.

Use Welcoming Messages in All Recruitment Efforts

Many parents speak to the importance of seeing recruitment materials and advertising (e.g., on billboards and busses) that specifically mention LGBT parents’ being eligible to become foster and adoptive parents. They report feeling more comfortable and confident about approaching agencies that use such welcoming and specific recruitment messages. Consider the effects of various messages from the perspective of a gay prospective parent:

“When I saw that ad it said to me that they must have given some thought to us being parents, it also signalled to me that I would be welcome to apply and that we might be valued and given a positive response to foster parenting. If they have been more vague, I might not have gotten that message. In the same way, when I recently saw an ad on TV in a western state for foster parenting, they used the words, ‘Single and Married may apply.’ That very word ‘married’ signalled to me that they weren’t talking about me.”

Many agencies do not use the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender in their eligibility criteria; they may use phrases such as “in a stable relationship,” or “irrespective of sexuality” – but these terms can be unclear or misleading. Use of the terms “lesbian,” “gay,” and “LGBT” sends a powerful and welcoming message to those who might want to be considered as adoptive or foster parents. Given the vast differences across States in the laws governing foster and adoptive

¹¹ Triseliotis, J., Borland, M., and Hill, M. 2000. *Delivering Foster Care*. London: BAAF

¹² IBID. Triseliotis, J., Borland, M., and Hill, M. P. 55.

¹³ Office of the Inspector General. Department of Health and Human Services. 2002. *Recruiting Foster Parents*. Washington, DC.

parenting, there are instances where it may not be possible for agencies to explicitly say that LGBT adults are welcome to pursue fostering or adopting. However, when there are not explicit laws or policies to prevent it, being direct and explicit about LGBT adults being eligible is best.

Targeted Recruitment Strategies: Reaching Out Specifically to LGBT Prospective Parents

Why Develop Targeted Recruitment Strategies for LGBT Parents?

As jurisdictions all across the county know, finding sufficient foster and adoptive parents who are qualified to care for children—especially sibling groups, older youth, and children with special needs—presents an ongoing challenge. The variety of needs among children in foster care points to the necessity of welcoming every individual who may have capacity to meet those needs.

With a growing number of children and young people awaiting placement into temporary foster care settings or into permanent adoptive settings, agencies may now be more open to considering individuals and couples who may have been traditionally overlooked as prospective foster and adoptive parents. LGBT adults, in particular, are being looked to as valuable resources because they bring individual and collective strengths to the adoption and fostering task. Without preconceived notions of what constitutes family, many LGBT adults are receptive to adopting or fostering older children, sibling groups, and children with special needs. Many have also experienced adversity in their own lives and as such bring strengths to children and youth who themselves face challenges.

In light of the history of LGBT adults' being frequently excluded—explicitly or in subtle ways—from engaging with child welfare agencies, tar-

geted outreach may be needed in order to send clear messages to LGBT prospective parents that they are, in fact, encouraged to consider becoming foster and adoptive parents. Developing targeted, intentional recruitment efforts to reach LGBT adults will make it much more likely that agencies will be able to build valuable community connections and reach many more potential foster or adoptive parents.

Using Good Targeted Recruitment Practices to Engage LGBT Parents

Successful targeted and diligent recruitment efforts—including effective strategies for recruiting LGBT prospective parents—are built on key recruitment fundamentals. Agencies with successful targeted recruitment strategies share these qualities:-

- **They use data-driven and data-informed decision making.** Effective targeted recruitment efforts are based on a clear understanding of the characteristics and needs of the children in foster care and the characteristics, strengths, and skills of parents who are successful at meeting the needs of these children. By using this data, agencies can develop specific recruitment strategies to reach more prospective parents—including LGBT adults—with similar characteristics and strengths.
- They deliver the right messages and use media targeted to attract families who reflect the diversity of children in care. Developing targeted messages and recruitment strategies aimed at adults who are likely to be able to meet the needs of children in foster care helps you make strategic use of your recruitment funding and efforts. If you are seeking to engage LGBT prospective parents, think about ways to express that your agency is welcoming to, and supportive of, LGBT adults who are

pursuing foster care, adoption or kinship care. See page 11 for more discussion of the use of both targeted and mainstream media to reach LGBT prospective parents.

- **They are culturally competent.** As LGBT individuals consider working with a child welfare agency, they are likely to look for indicators that your agency is competent at working effectively and respectfully with a diverse array of prospective parents, such as having non-discrimination policies that specifically mention LGBT individuals, using forms that include options for relationship status other than just “single” or “married,” and using inclusive language such as “parent 1 and parent 2” rather than “husband and wife.” Cultural competence in working with diverse communities goes much deeper than simply using the right words and pictures, of course, but these kinds of steps can help create a welcoming environment.
- **They are retention focused.** Truly effective recruitment depends on effective retention. A literature review by the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids found 21 articles citing effective support services for foster, adoptive, and kinship families as the single most important factor in successful recruitment. Surveys of resource families found that the most important service is a trusting and responsive relationship with the child’s case manager. These findings highlight the importance of building strong, respectful relationships with LGBT prospective parents so that they trust their workers. Establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with LGBT prospective families—as with all prospective families—will help increase your retention of prospective parents up

to, and through, the licensing or home study process and beyond.

- **They are community based.** As with all targeted recruitment efforts, understanding and connecting directly with the community that you seek to engage is critical to the success of your recruitment. For agencies looking for ways to begin reaching out to LGBT prospective parents, finding people who can be ambassadors between your agency and LGBT community groups can be a useful step.

Strategies for Reaching LGBT Prospective Parents

Building upon previous work by Mallon (2004), we offer the following strategies for reaching LGBT prospective parents:

Promote Positive Word of Mouth

As agencies experience time and time again, working well with current foster and adoptive parents can play a key role in attracting other prospective foster and adoptive parents. This pattern is true with LGBT adults as well. Many LGBT prospective parents approach child welfare agencies after hearing about positive foster parenting and adoption experiences of others in their networks, especially if their peers speak highly of an agency’s inclusive environment, non-discrimination policies, and respect for LGBT prospective parents. Just as an agency can be harmed by earning a negative reputation among LGBT adults based on challenging interactions with the agency, an agency can become known as a welcoming organization that supports LGBT prospective foster and adoptive parents. Building and sustaining such a positive reputation can be invaluable as part of your agency’s effort to recruit LGBT adults.

Participate in Community Events

Some States have found that having a presence at community events such as Lesbian and Gay Pride events or a Lesbian and Gay Expo has

worked well in attracting interest in fostering and adoption. Taking recruitment actively into the community affirms that an agency values and is interested in the community. Similar lessons have been learned in the effective recruitment of African-American, Latino, and Asian parents.

Use the Press

Media in many forms—including feature articles in newspapers, TV, and radio—play a role in raising awareness about the need for foster and adoptive parents. Using media is one key way that agencies invite interested adults to find out more about foster care and adoption. As agencies consider reaching out to LGBT prospective parents through the press, they may want to pursue multiple strategies for spreading their recruitment messages.

- **Targeted Press:** As is often effective in targeted recruitment efforts, some agencies have made good use of advertising in the press and publications aimed at LGBT adults—such as *The Advocate* and *The Blade*—to reach out to LGBT prospective foster and adoptive parents. Advertisements that include images of LGBT couples and individuals with children are particularly useful as a means to recruit families, helping to communicate that your agency welcomes and supports LGBT adults becoming foster and adoptive parents. If your agency is interested in specifically recruiting African-American, Latino, and Asian LGBT foster and adoptive parents, you could pursue advertising in African-American, Spanish language, and Asian community newsletters and publications.
- **Mainstream Press:** Many agencies also recognize the importance of using specific advertising for LGBT parents in mainstream newspapers and magazines in order to target people who are

not specifically engaged with the LGBT community and may not buy publications specifically aimed at LGBT individuals. Those who have used these forums have found that advertising in the LGBT-aimed press attracted white, mainly middle-class parents; using the mainstream press has helped to widen its pool of prospective parents from different backgrounds and ethnic groups.

Welcoming LGBT Prospective Parents Who Contact Your Agency

Whether LGBT prospective parents contact your agency in response to specifically targeted recruitment efforts or in response to general recruitment strategies, it is important for your agency to have the capacity to welcome and support them—as you would any prospective parents—as they explore foster care, adoption, and kinship care. As with all high-quality recruitment efforts, having an attitude of seeking to rule prospective parents in, rather than to rule them out, will help you create a welcoming atmosphere for all prospective parents. A “rule-in” approach will help your agency identify a larger pool of parents who can meet the needs of children in foster care.

Initial Contact with Your Agency

The way in which your agency greets prospective foster and adoptive parents when they first make contact has significant impact and sets the tone for future interactions. When LGBT prospective parents initially contact your agency, they may be looking for indicators that they will be welcomed and respected.

A less-than-warm initial response to a phone call, or during an initial interview, may discourage some potentially successful adoptive or foster parents, regardless of whether they are LGBT. Many foster and adoptive parents

describe how they had to be determined and persistent in order to actually make it through the licensing or home study process. Some have expressed fear that other potentially good applicants may not survive what they see as an obstacle course designed to keep them out.

A discouraging agency response reflects the experience of many LGBT parents when they initially make contact. Some face outright rejection and hostility. For others the experience is more subtle but still includes signals that the agency is not welcoming, such as being asked early on in the initial phone call, “What is your husband’s/wife’s name?” One lesbian foster parent recalled having to deal with a social worker’s embarrassment and confusion when she realized she was taking an inquiry from a lesbian couple. “If she couldn’t deal with that, what did it say about the agency and how they would treat us. Clearly, they had not given any thought to the fact that lesbian and gay couples might apply. It also meant I had to come out in response – it did not feel positive, welcoming or comfortable.”¹⁴

Another lesbian adoptive couple recounted their experience when they first contacted the State agency. They had asked about the State’s previous approvals of gay and lesbian couples and were told that they had “recently placed a child with a gay couple, he was a child that was so handicapped that he would never know that they were lesbian.” This couple did not pursue adoption through that agency.

As these examples demonstrate, the initial response to prospective families inquiring about becoming foster or adoptive parents plays a

¹⁴Mallon, G. & Betts, B. 2005. *Recruiting, Assessing and Retaining Lesbian and Gay Foster and Adoptive Families: A Good Practice Guide for Social Workers*. London: British Association of Adoption and Foster Care.

TIP: Look For Ways To Frame Statements In Inclusive And Affirming Ways

Avoid using forms, questions, and words that reflect any assumptions that all prospective parents fall into particular groups. Even seemingly innocent questions can send a message that you aren’t welcoming to LGBT prospective parents. For example:

- Instead of asking if an applicant is married—whether on a form or in a conversation—you can ask if someone has a partner or will be co-parenting.
- Instead of using the words “husband” and “wife” on forms that prospective or current parents must complete, use more neutral words such as “Parent 1” and “Parent 2” or “Applicant 1” and “Applicant 2.”

TIP: Remember, A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Words

Review the photos and images your agency uses in recruitment materials, publications, and around the office to ensure that the families in the photos reflect the diversity of prospective families you wish to engage, including same-sex couples and single parents. If prospective LGBT families don’t see families like themselves in any of your agency’s images, they may find it more difficult to trust the agency and feel welcome.

crucial role in communicating whether or not an agency is welcoming and responsive to LGBT prospective parents. As is true for initial contact with all prospective parents—LGBT or not—agency responses need to be friendly, prompt, respectful, and encouraging.

Information and Resource Packs

All prospective parents—whether LGBT or not—benefit from receiving accurate, helpful written materials about the process required to become a foster or adoptive parent. These materials should include eligibility requirements, characteristics of successful foster and adoptive parents, support available from your agency and other community organizations, and the needs of children and youth in foster care.

Information and resource packs can be a valuable tool in welcoming LGBT applicants. These packs can provide helpful details, lists of resources, and examples of diverse foster and adoptive families that your agency has worked with. For LGBT prospective parents, clear information about eligibility guidelines and the licensing and home study process is particularly important to clarify unclear or misleading information often circulated about whether LGBT individuals and couples are eligible to foster or adopt. By providing written information with clear statements about non-discrimination policies and eligibility criteria, your agency can send a strong, explicit message to LGBT prospective parents about welcoming them into the process of becoming foster and adoptive parents. It is also helpful to provide suggested reading materials that reference LGBT parents and lists of partnering community organizations and support services that are inclusive of, and welcoming to, LGBT parents.

Parent Preparation and Training

Agencies can continue to create a welcoming and inclusive environment by integrating

content on LGBT parents into the pre-service training for foster and adoptive parents. Having LGBT parents mentioned along with all other kinds of parents helps convey the message that your agency welcomes all prospective parents.

Closing Thoughts

Child welfare work is a demanding and rewarding endeavor, with a precious mandate to care for vulnerable children and older youth. We all face the ongoing challenge of adapting our work and approaches to meet the needs of children in foster care. By keeping a focus on the children who need foster and adoptive families, agencies can see how recruiting and retaining LGBT parents can help achieve better outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

There are many specific steps that agencies can take to be inclusive and affirming of LGBT resource families. Here are a few ideas from *LGBT Adoptive and Foster Parenting* by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections and AdoptUSKids:¹⁵

- Develop clear statements in support of LGBT adoption and foster parenting and include sexual orientation and gender identity in your agency’s non-discrimination policy. Make these statements and policies accessible (i.e. on your agency website).
- Develop contacts and partnerships with the LGBT community in order to engage in genuine, informed outreach.
- Provide staff training on LGBT adoption and foster parenting. Help workers, supervisors, and agency leaders examine their attitudes and beliefs about LGBT parenting.

¹⁵ National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections and AdoptUSKids. Oct. 2010. “*LGBT Adoptive and Foster Parenting*” Available online at: www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/LGBTAdoptiveandFosterParenting.pdf

- Affirm the value of LGBT individuals and families by including them in outreach, training materials, parent panels, newsletters, and on your agency website, and by utilizing inclusive paperwork.
- Recognize that the main focus of work with LGBT families should not be on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, some supports needed for the parent or family may be specific to their being an LGBT family. Different families will have different needs.

An important component to include in discussions about recruiting LGBT parents is the voice of LGBT adoptive families themselves, providing insights based on their own experiences. LGBT participants in the 2010 AdoptUSKids' interviews and focus groups identified the following points they would like workers to know about LGBT families:

- Staff should feel comfortable asking questions if they don't understand something about the family.
- Workers should be provided with more training on cultural sensitivity.
- Agencies should be provided funding to train staff on how to work with diverse families.
- LGBT adults may be extra sensitive to personal questions due to their life experiences.
- LGBT adults want to feel included and acknowledged but not treated differently.
- Workers should be honest with LGBT prospective parents about the difficulties in the process.

Suggested Resources

This publication provides basic, introductory information and ideas for recruiting LGBT prospective foster and adoptive parents and

highlights the importance of finding way to engage with LGBT adults who may be interested in parenting children in foster care. More resources are available to help agencies build their capacity to recruit, assess, retain, and support LGBT prospective and current parents. The list below provides suggestions for finding additional resources and learning about creative work being done by other agencies to reach out to LGBT adults.

Recommendations from LGBT Families to Agencies*

- Every family is different and the needs of families (gay or straight) should be evaluated individually.
- Agencies must re-evaluate their entire approach to recruitment and retention of LGBT adopters. It is not enough just to do a single campaign.
- LGBT families should be integrated throughout the process, not given "special preference."
- Agency staff need to be educated about LGBT parenting and adoption so that LGBT families don't have to fight against prejudice or work to overcome the stereotypes about the LGBT community.
- Agencies should be honest with LGBT families about the challenges that they will face in the adoption process as an LGBT prospective parent.

* Recommendations from AdoptUSKids' 2010 study "Barriers and Success Factors in Adoption from Foster Care: Perspectives of Lesbian and Gay Families." Available online at: adoptuskids.org/images/resourceCenter/LGBT-Barriers-and-Success-Factors-in-Adoption.pdf

In addition to the resources listed below, many members of the Children's Bureau's Training and Technical Assistance Network are available to provide free training and technical assistance to States, Tribes, and Territories to help them work in effective and culturally competent ways with LGBT adults and LGBTQ youth. More information about the Training and Technical Assistance Network is available online at: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/tta/

- The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections has extensive resources related to working with LGBT adults and LGBTQ youth available online at: www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/lgbtq-issues-and-child-welfare.html
- The Summer 2010 issue of *Permanency Planning Today* by The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections focused specifically on inclusive child welfare practice with LGBTQ populations and provides in-depth information and helpful resources. The publication can be downloaded at: www.nrcpfc.org/news-letter/ppt-summer-2010.pdf
- AdoptUSKids has resources available on recruiting and retaining LGBT foster and adoptive parents available online at: adoptuskids.org/for-professionals/free-resources/quick-tips-and-tools-for-recruitment-and-retention#working-with-diverse-communities
- Child Welfare Information Gateway has a collection of resources on working with LGBT families available online at: www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/cultural/adoption/lgbt_families.cfm

- In April 2011, the Children's Bureau issued *Information Memorandum (IM) 11-03* on "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth in Foster Care." IM-11-03 is available online at: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws_policies/policy/im/2011/im1103.htm

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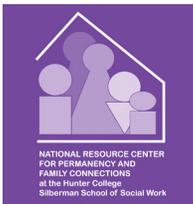
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