AdoptUSKids

Making the Most of Your Recruitment Efforts: Effective Response System Strategies

Value of an effective response system

Many child welfare systems are experiencing a significant need for more foster, adoptive, and kinship families that can meet the placement and permanency needs of children and youth in foster care. As you seek effective strategies for building a pool of families, you may be focusing primarily on recruitment of new families. However, your response system—how you respond to, engage, and begin supporting inquiring families—is equally important. By welcoming inquiring families beginning with this initial interaction with them, your system can help families start building their relationship with your system, deepen their knowledge to help them continue their self-assessment about whether to move ahead with foster or adoptive parenting or kinship care, and start connecting to family support.

A thoughtful, effective response system provides many benefits for child welfare systems, families, and ultimately children, including:

- Helping ensure children's needs are met

- Helping ensure families can feel comfortable and able to meet children's needs

- Connecting families with support early and on an ongoing basis as their—or their children's—needs change

Shift from a focus on "retaining" families to actively developing families

Many child welfare systems are concerned about retaining families in order to have a large enough pool of appropriate placement options for children and youth in foster care. However, we encourage child welfare systems to take an active, intentional approach to developing and supporting both prospective and current foster and adoptive families. This approach will be more beneficial than taking a more passive "retention" approach not guided by a plan. By meeting a family's needs, you increase their ability to address each child's specific needs, while also strengthening their relationship with your child welfare system. The traditional view of retention suggests passively holding onto families. In contrast, development and support involves building and nurturing a relationship with families so they feel like part of the team and continue to feel equipped to meet the needs of children and youth. This approach of actively developing and supporting families should start at the beginning of your interaction with prospective parents and continue through to post-placement.

- Continuing to build families' knowledge and confidence

- Helping with additional recruitment because families share their positive experiences

Characteristics of an effective response system

Response systems can take many forms and be organized in diverse ways, including:

- Being centralized or de-centralized (e.g., at a regional, county, or local level)

- Being operated and staffed by the public child welfare agency or contracted out to a private agency partner

- Prioritizing online forms of intake and information (e.g., website intake forms and initial information) or phone calls

- Having a combination of these elements and structures

Regardless of the specific structure and approach within a child welfare system, effective response systems often have common characteristics. These systems tend to:

- **Be accessible and engaging** — Have multiple ways for prospective parents to inquire, such as by phone, through your website, and through email and social media. Provide welcoming and engaging responses regardless of how people contact you and offer information about how they can move forward with next steps.

- **Be supportive** — Start supporting prospective parents right away, including providing a positive message and interaction that helps

them feel valued and encouraged to stay connected to your system. Share information about ways that they can connect with various forms of support throughout the process, including early on (e.g., participating in "while you wait" groups).

- **Be data-driven** — Use your data to inform the information you provide to prospective parents. For example, when people inquire about foster parenting or adoption, share information on how many children are in foster care; for which children you have the biggest need for families (e.g., sibling groups, older youth, children under age five); the percentage of children in foster care who get reunified each year; and other relevant data.

- **Have consistent messaging** — Have consistency in the information you provide to prospective parents both across all staff involved in your response system and across all of the teams and agencies involved in orientation, pre-service training, and licensure or approval of families (e.g., information on licensing requirements and which requirements can be waived, details on how long each step in the process will take). Having this consistency of messaging and information helps build the relationship with families and helps families trust that they are getting accurate information from each staff person. Identify major communication points that your staff should share with inquiring families, such as information about the characteristics of children and youth in foster care, characteristics of successful foster and adoptive families, the effects of trauma, and your child welfare system's licensure or approval requirements (including background

checks and disqualifiers so people know early on whether they should move forward with the process or if they will be ineligible).

- **Have feedback loops with development and support** — Use information and insights that your child welfare system gathers from current parents about their needs for support, development, and information to shape the information you provide to prospective parents early in the process. For example, if you are getting requests from current parents for additional support to help support sibling connections, add more information to your response system messaging about the importance of sibling connections and ways that your child welfare system promotes and supports keeping siblings together and the need for families who will keep siblings connected.

- **Develop families** — Use the initial interactions with prospective parents to begin building and developing their knowledge and understanding about children in foster care, what skills and strengths help people be successful in meeting the needs of children in foster care, how to connect to support services, and other information that will help them deepen their knowledge. Taking this developmental approach helps you support prospective parents in beginning or continuing their own self-assessment process to determine whether foster or adoptive parenting is a good fit for them right now.

Connect your response system to your other practices

Making sure your response system has connections and consistent messaging with your other recruitment, development, and support efforts will help improve the effectiveness of your whole process of recruiting and sustaining a pool of families for children in foster care. Below are examples of ways to connect your response system to your other efforts:

- **Recruitment efforts, including use of national or local recruitment campaigns** — Provide your response system staff with data and talking points related to the focus of your recruitment messages. For example, if your recruitment messages highlight the need for families for teens, make sure your response system staff have data on the number of teens in foster care and information about support available to families parenting teens so they can include the information when they talk to inquiring people.

- **Social media efforts** — If your child welfare system uses social media for outreach and recruitment, prepare your response system to have additional capacity at times when you'll have special or increased messaging on social media platforms. This coordination will help ensure that people get a timely response.

- **Photolisting** — Just as it is important to have strengths-based narratives that respect children's privacy for use when photolisting children, your response system should use similarly positive messaging and protect the privacy of specific children in foster care. You can help inquiring parents learn more about the overall needs and characteristics of children in foster care while highlighting the importance of protecting individual children's privacy, safety, and dignity by not sharing private details with prospective parents who aren't yet licensed or approved to adopt.

- **Family support** — Provide information to inquiring families about how prospective parents can get support as they go through the licensure/approval process as well as about the kinds of support that are available to families after having a child placed with them.

Additional tips and ideas for an effective response system

Selecting, preparing, and supporting staff

- Assign knowledgeable, friendly, and supportive staff to respond to inquiries and reinforce your expectations for the ways that staff will interact with prospective parents.

- Provide talking points for staff who are responding to inquiring people. Instead of requiring staff to read from a script, consider bullet points that support your communication objectives in a conversational way.

- Provide ongoing training and supervision to staff on topics that help build and sustain their sensitivity about the reasons people are inspired to inquire about fostering or adopting. For example, help staff develop skills for engaging with people who may express their interest using wording or ideas that may not sound strengths-based or trauma-informed; build your staff's skills in remaining open and helping prospective parents learn more rather than excluding people who are likely early in their process of learning about foster care and adoption.

- Include experienced foster, adoptive, and kinship families in your response systems, where appropriate, so prospective parents hear directly from them early in the process. This could take the form of hiring or contracting

with experienced parents to be part of your response system or getting input from families—including youth—for messaging and information to share with people who inquire.

Engaging and developing families

- Encourage self-assessment rather than seeking to screen families in or out. Help prospective parents understand that they can explore whether this role is right for them as they learn more. Provide information about characteristics of successful foster and adoptive parents (e.g., patience, sense of humor, flexible), common characteristics of children who have experienced trauma, and the primary goal of birth family reunification for children in foster care so prospective parents can consider whether this is a good fit for them. For people inquiring about children who may not match the characteristics of the children in foster care in your system, share information about the population of children in foster care and the need for families for those children. Help prospective parents also consider other possible ways to help children if they choose not to pursue foster or adoptive parenting.

- Provide information about the licensing requirements, grouping the steps into clear phases for families so that it feels clear and achievable and offer clear details on next steps. Let prospective parents know how to move forward at the right pace for them. Help them understand the various steps in the process for pursuing licensure or approval, as well as that they can take time to decide whether or not to move forward. This also gives the opportunity for staff to encourage and celebrate with families as they complete each phase.

- Use a customer-service approach for interacting with prospective parents. Be responsive, engaging, and supportive as people begin the important process of considering foster or adoptive parenting. Anticipate questions that people are likely to have and provide clear information. Begin building the relationship with prospective parents and help them navigate the process.

- Consider ways to respond to and engage people who may prefer to communicate in various languages or formats (e.g., Spanish-speaking families, American Sign Language). Be sure to think about how people will be able to work with other parts of your system (e.g., licensing, training, post-placement support) so that you're able to set clear expectations from the beginning. For example, if your response system can communicate with people in Spanish but other parts of the licensing process aren't available in Spanish, prospective parents will likely face great frustration being handed off to another step in the process that can't communicate with them in their preferred language.

Developing infrastructure and organizational culture

- Fit your response approach to your child welfare system. While using ideas from the field and borrowing examples from other systems, design your response system to fit with the way your agency is structured and with your communities. For example, if you have a de-centralized (e.g., county-level, localized) approach to recruitment, licensing, and support for families, consider having your response system operated and staffed at the same local level. If your training and licensing or approval

services are privatized, look for ways to have a seamless connection between your response system and the agencies that you refer families to for the next steps in the process.

- Have a tracking system in place to record where families are in the orientation and licensure or approval process (e.g., attended orientation, submitted application, attending training). Establish ways to track the progress of families that your agency refers to private agencies and county agencies (if the tracking system is at the state level in a county-administered system).

- Continuously review your system's requirements for families to become approved and look for opportunities to make the process more efficient and less intimidating for prospective families. For example, instead of providing families with a complete set of all of the paperwork that must be completed to become approved, offer families an application and forms associated with clearances at the onset of the licensing process. So families are clear on all of the expectations, you can also provide them with a checklist of all expected requirements throughout the process so they are prepared ahead of time.

- Establish an organizational culture that supports not only greeting inquiring families in a friendly and welcoming manner, but establishing a rapport during that engagement. Establishing a rapport should be based on active listening in hopes of helping families to feel comfortable with asking questions they may otherwise assume might eliminate them from being considered as a foster or adoptive family. For example, if a member of the inquiring family's household has a

misdemeanor criminal charge from 10 years ago, families should feel comfortable asking if this criminal background would be a barrier to being licensed.

- Make an organizational commitment to responsive engagement with prospective parents. Responsive engagement may be defined in terms of:

1. Committing to "live" engagement of inquiring families during office hours.

2. Trying to return families' emails or calls on the same day when possible. Otherwise, committing to responding to email or voicemail messages within 24 hours (or the next business day if message is received on last work day of week or over the weekend).

Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org to find out about our capacity-building services to help you strengthen your response system.

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Children's Bureau