

How Family Support Helps You Achieve Recruitment Goals

All child welfare systems have a goal to recruit families who can meet the needs of children in foster care. Many need families for specific types of children, including sibling groups, teens, and children with higher medical or behavioral needs.

Using effective recruitment and response strategies is important. But finding and keeping a pool of families requires more than just good recruitment practices.

Providing effective, accessible family support and ensuring that families are aware of those services is key to meeting your recruitment goals. Sharing information early about available support can help encourage more prospective parents to come forward and stay engaged.

Anticipate prospective parents' questions and address their concerns

Some questions they may have are:

- What are the needs of children in foster care?
- Will I be able to meet their needs? Do I have the right skills and knowledge to help the children? How do I learn more?

- Will I be able to get help when I or my child need it? Is help easy to access?
- What don't I know that I really need to consider? What questions am I not thinking to ask?
- Where can I learn how to work with birth parents and other family members?
- Can I really do this? Will I be on my own if something serious comes up?

Answering these kinds of questions and providing information to families early on will let prospective parents know how you will train and support them throughout the process.

How support services help your recruitment efforts

Helping recruit more families. Word-of-mouth recruitment is some of the most effective recruitment. If current families are well-supported, they are more likely to talk positively to others about their experience. When they trust your system, these families can also help you access their community connections. With their help, you can connect to their faith communities, community centers, and school groups—all potential places to find more prospective parents.

Decreasing recruitment needs. One main reason systems need to recruit more families is because many families drop out before approval or after a brief time providing care. Supporting current families helps improve outcomes for children and reduces turnover.

Increasing the capacity of current families. Well-supported families are also more likely to help other children in foster care. They may be more willing to open their homes to new placements, larger sibling groups, teens, or children with higher needs than they previously considered.

Keeping families engaged. Providing clear information about the kind of support you provide to families will help reassure prospective parents that you will help them meet children's needs. Knowing this could make them more likely to keep moving to approval and placement.

Developing families from the beginning. When you connect families with support early, it deepens their understanding of the needs of children in care and the skills and strengths they need to be successful. It can also help them meet experienced parents who can encourage them to move forward in the process.

Helping families understand specific support needs. You can also share tailored information about supports that may help with specific types of children you are recruiting for. For example, if you need more families for teens, provide information to prospective parents about teen mentoring or activity programs, driver's education, after-school programs, and job opportunities. Showing prospective parents the supports you have available for specific youth can help them better understand the children in care and what their needs are.

Normalizing support. Telling prospective parents about the support available helps them learn that it is normal for families to use support. It's important for parents to see support as an everyday part of parenting children who have experienced trauma and loss.

Strategies for connecting support to recruitment efforts

Share information about support services with prospective parents early and often. Include how they are helpful, when they are available, and how to access them. You can also include information about support in your recruitment and early response messaging (for example, "Children and teens in your town need caring parents. And we'll be here to support you on your parenting journey!").

Have experienced parents talk with prospective parents. Experienced parents can share insights during recruitment activities, orientation sessions, and pre-service trainings. They can discuss the value of support, ways to access support, and what to expect. Prospective parents may be more likely to believe information they hear from experienced parents, both about the value of support and how normal it is to need it. Providing these opportunities to connect can also help prospective parents build their peer support network and see the benefits of peer support.

Ensure all your recruiters understand and can explain your services. Compile and share clear information with all staff and partner organizations about support services, including services available from other agencies and providers.

Prepare staff to be open to families' questions.

This includes questions about financial assistance and other forms of support. Make it clear to staff that they should encourage prospective parents to ask questions about anything that will help their family succeed. Some staff may be hesitant to talk with prospective families about financial support, perhaps out of fear that they are encouraging those with financial motivations. It is completely legitimate for families to ask about this type of support. Prospective parents need to make informed decisions, and information about financial support is a key part of decision-making.

Making it work in your system

As you consider the ideas above, think about how each fits with your specific support, recruitment, and response strategies. No matter what you do to link recruitment and support, we encourage you to conduct continuous quality improvement reviews so you can learn about what's working well and make needed adjustments.

It's also important to gather feedback from families about support needs and recruitment messages, and to share the ideas with your recruiters. This will help you see new ways of connecting support services to how you recruit and respond to prospective parents.

Keep in mind that it is crucial to keep the promises you make to prospective parents about the support that your system will provide. Highlighting support services only works to strengthen recruitment in a sustainable way if families are able to access that support when they need it.

Tips for helpful messaging

Create a flyer or brochure describing the range of available services. Make the flyer available in print and digital formats. You might hand it out at orientation sessions, mail or email it to prospective parents as part of an interest packet, post it on websites promoting adoption or fostering, and distribute it at recruitment events.

Be honest about what support is available and what isn't. Being transparent about limitations in services (such as geographic restrictions, limited eligibility, anticipated wait times) is the right thing to do and helps build trust with families.

Anticipate questions and provide answers before parents ask. You can draw on questions or feedback you've received from parents who have already gone through the process. Just be careful not to overload them with details. Taking this approach helps prospective parents know you are anticipating their needs, which can help them feel more confident moving forward.

Encourage prospective parents to start thinking about their own support needs early on. Help them consider what additional skills, attitudes, and strengths they may need.

Helpful resources

Several AdoptUSKids resources can help your child welfare system leverage your support services to strengthen the impact of your recruitment efforts. Find these resources and more at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

- Recorded webinar: *Strengthening Family Recruitment by Offering Post-Placement Support*
- *Integrating Family Support from Inquiry Throughout Placement*
- *Using Integrated Recruitment and Support to Build a Strong Pool of Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families*
- *Support Services Assessment Tool* and companion guide
- *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*



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