A Community Outreach Handbook for Recruiting Foster Parents and Volunteers

Kathy Barbell & Lisa Sheikh
A COMMUNITY OUTREACH HANDBOOK FOR

Recruiting Foster Parents

AND VOLUNTEERS

KATHY BARBELL & LISA SHEIKH

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Acknowledgments

In 1998 KCTS Seattle Public television, with generous support from Casey Family Programs and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, produced Take This Heart, a sensitive and dramatic documentary about a very special group of children in foster care. These funders and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation also funded a companion national outreach program. Its purpose was to use Take This Heart as the catalyst for public television stations to partner with community-based agencies all across the country to build awareness about foster care and mobilize citizens to take action to improve the lives of children in foster care. The Child Welfare League of America was the national community outreach partner for the project and developed the resource materials for the television stations and communities. With support from Casey Family Programs and the permission of KCTS, the Take This Heart Toolbox has been adapted and expanded into this volume – A Community Outreach Handbook for Recruiting Foster Families and Volunteers. The authors wish to thank all of these organizations for their interest in foster care and help in promoting community awareness and involvement in the lives of children in foster care.
Introduction

Recruiting foster families and volunteers for the foster care system is a formidable task even under the best of circumstances, and most agencies are not blessed with the best of circumstances. Caseloads are large and growing, and resources in many agencies are shrinking.

Yet, just as with any battle that seems uphill, you can significantly increase your chances of successfully finding foster families and volunteers by designing a carefully planned strategy for engaging the community in foster care. This handbook was developed for that purpose. It provides you with tools to help assess your agency's needs and determine its priorities, guidelines on how to craft very specific messages for the public, tips for working with the media to communicate your message, suggestions on how to lead a community discussion about foster care, and other outreach ideas.

Community outreach has a number of purposes. First and foremost, it informs the general public and prospective foster parents about the value of foster care. In addition, it educates the public about the need for foster families, the roles community members play in helping agencies to meet this need, and the supports community members can provide to the agency. Outreach campaigns can dispel common myths about foster care while creating a positive public perception of foster parenting (Child Welfare League of America, 1998).

The ultimate goals of your outreach efforts will be threefold:

1. increasing the number of qualified foster families,

2. retaining current foster families, and

3. increasing the number of volunteers to help support foster families and children.
The resources in this handbook provide you with a starting point for designing a successful outreach campaign. As you read through the chapters, you are likely to come up with ideas of your own that are even more effective in your community. Your own personal knowledge of your community's strengths and needs will help you decide how best to spend your time and resources. For example, in some communities the leading newspaper may play a vital role in encouraging charity and volunteerism among the public. In that case, your agency will want to make full use of opportunities to publicize its needs through letters to the editor, special columns, and stories about foster care. In other communities the leading newspaper may be weak on encouraging volunteerism, but a popular civic organization might be able to assist you in publicizing your needs.

Designing an effective outreach strategy is generally a matter of trial and error. This handbook will assist you not only in finding qualified foster families and volunteers to meet your most pressing foster care needs but also in developing a blueprint for future outreach campaigns.
Getting Started

Before you can reach out to the community for help in recruiting foster parents and volunteers, you have to know more specifically what your needs are and the ways in which the public might be able to help you.

Following is a list of opportunities for public involvement in foster care (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA] 1998). This list is followed by two sample assessment tools – a short version and a long version – that can be used by your agency in their existing form or adapted as desired. The short version is intended for agencies that wish to obtain a quick overview of their foster care needs, and it will help gather basic information and assess your most pressing needs. The long version will help you gather more detailed information, which can be used for making presentations to the public. The long version is especially useful if you are collecting information in concert with other agencies in order to obtain a complete picture of foster care needs in your community.

This chapter also provides tips for ranking your most pressing needs and then establishing your goals.

Sample Opportunities

Become a Foster Parent

- For an infant
- For a grade-school child
- For a teenager
- For a child or teenager with developmental disabilities or behavioral problems
- For an infant with special needs
Provide Services for Foster Families

- Free haircuts
- Free dental care, speech therapy, and counseling
- Short-term (respite) child care for a few days
- Drive children to meetings, doctors, and therapists
- Offer a discount at your place of business
- Perform work to make a house wheelchair accessible
- Free space in a child care program

Teach and Help Children and Youth

- Teach life skills such as budgeting or job seeking
- Tutor
- Start or volunteer in an after-school program
- Sponsor a child for a team, club, or organization
- Mentor a child
- Take a child in foster care on a service project in the community
- Offer a scholarship for a space in your gymnastics, music, or art class
- Offer an apprenticeship in your company
- Offer a job in your company

Help an Agency

- Volunteer on a hotline
- Help recruit foster families
- Provide administrative support such as typing, filing, or answering phones
- Host a social event for foster families
- Offer bulletin board space for public awareness messages
- Become a court-appointed advocate

Help Birth Families

- Teach family skills like communication or anger management
- Teach life skills like sewing, cooking, housekeeping, computer proficiency, or automobile repair
- Provide a job
- Mentor a teenaged birth parent
- Provide transportation
- Offer reduced rent
- Sponsor a space in a parenting class
- Provide babysitting or respite care after reunification

**Contribute Money**

- Provide money for camp or field trips
- Help with holiday gifts
- Provide financial support to a family
- Help with post-high school education
- Contribute to or start a scholarship fund

**Donate Goods**

- Car seats
- Toys
- Sleeping bags and pillows
- Toiletry kits
- Luggage
- School supplies
- Infant supplies such as diapers or formula
- Clothing
- Musical instruments
- Basketball hoop
- Books
- Swing set
- Computer
Sample Needs Assessment-Short Version (KCTS Television 1998b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Need</th>
<th>Specific Need</th>
<th>Priority Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New foster parents</td>
<td>(e.g., teenagers, Latino families, medically fragile infants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster parent assistance</td>
<td>(e.g., respite, babysitting, free or reduced price services)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth parent assistance</td>
<td>(e.g., mentoring, employment, reduced price services)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide services to children in foster care</td>
<td>(e.g., tutoring, mentoring; what age range?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance</td>
<td>(e.g., general or specialized—such as tuition, medical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donate goods</td>
<td>(e.g., band instruments, computer equipment, swing sets)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample Needs Assessment-Long Version (KCTS Television 1998b)

**Part A**

Describe the foster care population in your community.

1. How many children or youth currently reside with foster families in your community?

2. Who are the children or youth?
   - Number of infants under one year of age
   - Number of children between the ages of one and 12
   - Number of teenagers (ages 13 to 18)
   - Number of youth over 18
3. Based on your agency's experience in the past 2 to 4 years, how many children do you expect will need family foster care during the next year?

   - Infants under one year of age
   - Children between the ages of one and 12
   - Teenagers (ages 13 to 18)
   - Youth over 18

4. What is the racial composition?

   - White
   - African American
   - Asian American
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - Native American
   - Middle Eastern
   - Polynesian/Pacific Islander
   - Other

5. What usually happens to the children in your community who are not reunified with their birth parents?

   - Percentage that are adopted
   - Percentage that remain in foster care until age 18
   - Percentage that finish high school
   - Percentage that go to college
   - Percentage that get jobs
   - Percentage that are homeless after leaving foster care

**Part B**

Describe the foster parent population in your community.

1. How many foster parents are licensed in your community?

2. Is the number of licensed foster parents in your community sufficient to meet the needs of children in foster care?

3. If the answer to question #2 is no, provide the estimated number of foster parents needed to meet the existing needs of the community.

4. Are some children placed in residential (group care) settings because no foster parents are available to care for them? If yes, how many?
5. Are children frequently moved from one foster family to another because the families with whom they are placed lack the knowledge and skills necessary to care for their special needs?

6. Are sufficient numbers of foster parents available to care for:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Sibling groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teen mothers and their children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children infected with HIV/AIDS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children with special needs (e.g., behavioral, emotional, learning)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Medically fragile infants and children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children of color</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Are sufficient numbers of licensed foster parents living in the same neighborhoods as children who need foster care?

**Part C**

Describe the children in foster care in your community.

1. To what degree have the following factors contributed to placement of children in foster care in your community? (Check one and give percentages if possible.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MODERATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Substance abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poverty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mental illness of parent(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. To what degree are the following services and resource available for birth parents whose children are in foster care? (Check one and give percentages if possible.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MODERATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment for substance abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent education classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Which of the above two to three services or resources are most critically needed by birth families in your community? Why?

4. To what degree are the following services and resources available to children and youth in foster care in your community? (Check one and give percentages if possible.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service/Resource</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MODERATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral therapy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job training or work experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid for college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy prevention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups for therapy or support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups for learning life skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Which of the above two or three services or resources are most critically needed for children and youth in foster care in your community? why?

6. If applicable, what percentage of children who entered foster care in your organization within the past 3 years eventually were reunited with their birth parents?
7. If applicable, how long did it take, on average, for most of these children to be reunited with their birth parents?

8. To what degree are the following supports and services available for youth in foster care in your community who are preparing for independent living? (Check one and give percentages if possible.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support/Service</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MODERATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid for post-secondary education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisted or supervised transitional living</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Which of the above two or three supports or services are most critically needed by youth in foster care in your community? Why?
Part D

Describe foster parent needs in your community.

1. To what degree are the following supports adequate in your community to help foster parents? (Check one and give percentages if possible.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MODERATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial reimbursement for room and board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respite care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddies or mentors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservice training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-service training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liability insurance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child day care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely access to social workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Which of the above two or three supports are most critically needed by foster parents in your community? Why?

3. What administrative or system problems are interfering with your agency's ability to provide effective services to children and youth in foster care?

   - Administrator turnover
   - High caseload
   - Worker turnover
   - Lack of focus on key outcomes for permanency, safety, and well-being
Court delays  
Lack of preventive services  
Insufficient funding  
Funding the wrong services  
Lack of worker training  
Poor retention of foster parents  
Scarce resources and supports for foster parents  
Other __________________________

Prioritizing Your Needs

After your needs assessment has been reviewed by staff at your agency and specific needs have been identified, the next step is to prioritize your most pressing needs. If you are planning a short-term outreach campaign, you will want to rank your top two or three needs and ensure that they are clearly communicated to the public. Year-round, multifaceted recruitment campaigns can include a greater number of expressed needs. Following is a sample list of needs with a hypothetical ranking (KCTS Television 1998b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLE FOSTER CARE NEEDS</th>
<th>PRIORITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To recruit foster parents for teenagers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To recruit foster parents for newborns and medically fragile infants.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To fund college scholarships for adolescents in foster care.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find job training and work experience for adolescents in foster care.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To educate the public about the impact of welfare reform on children in foster care.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide more adequate support for foster families.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To finance more and better substance abuse treatment programs for birth parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide tutoring for children and adolescents in foster care.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide better training for foster parents so they can handle children's special needs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To educate the public about the various ways in which managed care is affecting foster care.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Defining Your Goals

Once you have prioritized your needs, the next step is to clearly define your goals. At this stage, you may wish to begin thinking in terms of numbers (e.g., number of foster parents or volunteers for specific children) and dates (e.g., to be recruited by May 1st).

When defining the goals of a recruitment campaign, you should first try to answer the following questions (Pasztor & Wynne 1995).

**What does the agency hope will result from this effort?**

Examples of goals:

- To license 10 new foster families for teens in the next 12 months
- To recruit and train five foster parents to be mentors to birth families
- To develop a group of at least eight volunteers to sponsor holiday parties for children in foster care

**How do you plan to achieve your goals?**

Examples of steps you can take to achieve your goals:

- Invite community leaders to get the message out
- Write a weekly column for a local newspaper
- Convene a community recruitment and retention task force
- Select an overall theme and logo
- Select segments of the community to target
- Establish time frames
- Select a kick-off event
- Produce media announcements
- Write feature news stories
- Develop media contacts
- Schedule speaking engagements
- Produce public service announcements
- Develop displays, exhibits, visuals, handouts, bookmarks, bumper stickers, and fliers
- Develop a speaker's kit
- Design billboards and transit advertising
- Publish articles in newsletters
- Engage local service club (e.g., Rotary, Elks Club) to adopt foster care as a year-long issue
- Participate in special community events

**What agency resources, including staff and training, are needed to meet your goals?**

Examples:

- More staff time devoted to the project
- Quicker response to telephone inquiries
- Additional information and training sessions for staff responding to inquiries
- Resources from the community (e.g., marketing consultation)

When determining your goals, you might also wish to consider the following questions:

- To what extent are other businesses or nonprofits in your community willing to help you?
- How extensive are your resources for advertising your needs and developing an outreach plan?
- How much time do you have to meet your goals?

For example, if your agency has an enormous need for creating college scholarships to help teens in care transition to independent living but you have already tapped the business community for support, you may ultimately decide to focus your outreach campaign instead on recruiting mentors and tutors for teens in care. In this way you may be able to find more help for a greater number of teens.

**Building Community Involvement**

Once you have prioritized your needs and set your goals, the next step is to develop a community action plan. At this stage you may be feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand. You may lack expertise in designing media campaigns or conducting public speaking tours. A teamwork approach is most effective. Therefore, if you have not already done so, now is the time to create a community task force, inviting people with influence, resources, knowledge, and compassion to assist you in designing and implementing a foster parent and volunteer recruitment campaign. Community leaders
have expertise in public relations, marketing, and fundraising that family foster care agencies generally do not have (Pasztor & Wynne 1995).

The task force should reflect the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of the children and families to be served. It should include foster parent association representatives, alumni of foster care, and social workers. The agency director should invite someone well known and respected in the community to chair the task force (Rodwell & Biggerstaff 1993).

The first meeting of the task force can introduce the project, tie its needs to community concerns about the protection of children and the role of foster parents and social workers in ensuring their safety, emphasize the importance of community responsibility for children, and provide opportunities to plan next steps (Pasztor & Wynne 1995). If your agency has already conducted a needs assessment and established some preliminary goals, you can share your work with the task force and invite them to express their thoughts. While schedules are tight, it is imperative that your task force meet on a regular basis (e.g., once a month or once every two months) in order to optimize results. Some task forces have found early morning breakfast meetings once a month to be both convenient and constructive. It is also important that the individual roles and responsibilities of each task force member be well defined in order to keep everyone focused on achieving results.

The remaining chapters offer tips and suggestions for you and your advisory committee on how to create a successful outreach campaign.
Working with the Mass Media

Any outreach plan designed to recruit foster parents and volunteers will almost always include the mass media as a component. When working with the media, the task force and agency need to first consider what message they want to create and, second, the format most effective for delivering that message.

Shaping the Message

The literature on foster parent recruitment is divided over the usefulness of various mass media techniques. Some agencies have found, for instance, that generalized campaigns to attract foster parents often attract the applicants who are really not interested or able to help children with very special needs. This may relate to the messages used in the campaign. The result is that agencies often complain that these applicants waste precious time for staff members who conduct the interviews and process the applications.

Other agencies have reported positive results from publicity campaigns on foster care. Campaigns that continue year-round are considered more effective than periodic campaigns in generating a pool of interested applicants. There is evidence that many people think about foster parenting for a year or more, and hear messages about foster care three or four times, before making the initial inquiry call. Therefore, the more frequently people are exposed to positive messages about foster parenting, the more likely they will be to make the call (Pastor & Wynne 1995).

Foster parent recruitment messages often tend to emphasize "open your heart and home" themes. They may feature sad young children and a subtext about "rescuing good children from bad parents" (Barbell 1998). Foster parents interviewed for a 1992 study by the American Marketing Association (AMA) agreed almost unanimously that, for retention purposes, it is best to create honest messages about the many types of children in need of foster care.
Rather than talking about rescuing a sad child, the AMA study listed these as the top five recruitment messages:

- "You are helping a child."
- "You help change someone's life."
- "You are considered a professional parent."
- "You are financially compensated."
- "It is a short-term commitment" (CWLA 1991).

Respondents to a survey by the CWLA (1991) reported using recruitment themes that emphasize the role of foster parents in helping children (85%), followed by the benefits and rewards of fostering (73%), how foster parents help children and their birth families (46%), and how foster parents help the community (42%) (Greenberg Quinlan 1998).

In a more recent national survey by the National Foster Care Awareness Project (Greenberg Quinlan 1998), respondents indicated that they were willing to consider fostering primarily because they believe it gives children a chance to succeed in life (44%) and provides them with a good home (17%). Following are other reasons that the public considered very convincing:

- Children being abused by birth parents
- Best chance for a child to find a safe home
- Child's birth parents abuse alcohol or drugs
- 25,000 babies will lose a parent to AIDS
- Growing need for foster parents to care for infants and children under age 4
- Fostering allows birth parents the opportunity to overcome alcohol or drug addiction
- The children are seriously ill or have parents who used drugs during their pregnancy (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998a)

When working with the media, it is essential to decide which of these messages you wish to convey to your audience. It is also essential to decide which recruitment method to employ. Foster parent recruitment methods often are divided into three types:

- General recruitment
- Child-specific recruitment
- Targeted recruitment

General outreach can focus on a general message of "reach out to a child" or other recruitment themes as just described. Child-specific recruitment can target relatives or
close friends who are able to provide a home to a child they already know and care about. In some cases the children or family may be asked to identify a potential foster parent, like a teacher or coach, for themselves. He or she is then approached by the foster care agency. Another way in which child-specific recruitment can be accomplished is through advertisements in newspapers or on television, such as the "Wednesday's Child" segments on the local TV news (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998a). When advertising the need for foster parents to care for a specific child, proper releases must be obtained from whomever has custody of the child. Check with your agency to make sure you are following the appropriate procedures.

Targeted recruitment focuses on the specific groups of children and teens in need of families and tries to match them with the pool of available families. It can also focus on specific skills needed to meet the needs of certain children. Sometimes, for example, agencies are successful in recruiting health care and mental health professionals to care for children with special medical and psychological needs (Moore et al. 1998).

When designing media campaigns, you will want to consider what kind of message you are trying to create and what format is most useful for that particular message. For example, mass media campaigns may be most suitable for general outreach, but community discussions (as described in the next chapter) might be more suitable for targeted recruitment.

Recruitment material focused on the African American community has been found by some agencies to be effective in recruiting both African American and Caucasian families. If resources are limited and your community needs African American foster families, you may wish to consider focusing your campaign on the African American community (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998a). When recruiting foster parents for children of color, it helps to develop recruitment themes, materials, and agency forms in the language of the targeted group. For example, the theme "Por Los Ninos" has proven effective in recruiting Latino foster families in one community.

In addition, TV and radio announcements are most effective when personalized for the viewer or listener. In personalizing TV and radio announcements, it is important that the children be presented in a realistic way, and that the needs be specific enough for a family to know whether they can help. It is equally important, however, that any personal information broadcast to the community be sensitive to the privacy and other needs of the child and family.

When working with TV, you should consider not just commercial broadcast possibilities but also public television. While public television will not air paid advertising, they will air community outreach spots, which are similar to and sometimes longer than a paid advertisement. The public television station might also help you think about other opportunities for mutual collaboration.
Foster Care and the News

The news media can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Most likely, however, it will have little effect on your efforts to educate the public about foster care unless you adopt a proactive stance with your local news outlets.

For foster care agencies, the news media's tendency to focus on tragedies within the foster care system can be a source of great frustration. Bad news travels fast, and it can discourage the public from getting involved. While it is true that reporters tend to want to focus initially on the more sensational or negative aspects of foster care, agency staff can turn this situation around by giving reporters a more well-rounded view of the foster care system and informing them of the need for foster families and volunteers. Most reporters are glad to publicize these needs.

You can also give the reporters personal stories to put a human face on foster care. In fact, many local media markets have "waiting child" segments (e.g., "Wednesday's Child" segments) during TV news or in newspaper columns. While the number of children actually placed through these efforts may be limited, features are one way of providing visibility for the children and families in need.

The simplest and most direct way to reach reporters is to call them. You should keep an updated press list of reporters and editors at your local newspapers, TV, and radio stations. You can start by purchasing a local media directory, available through press clubs or the yellow pages. Although "beat reporting" is not as common as it used to be, you should be able to get some idea of who is most likely to report on issues related to foster care simply by reading the newspapers and watching TV Who has reported on this issue in the past? Who reports on children's issues generally? Or social services? Also, even though the big city papers have the largest circulation, do not overlook the community newspapers. Their audiences are smaller but often very loyal (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998b).

When you call a reporter, be sure to have not one but a few story ideas to pitch. The first idea you offer may turn out to be something that's already been done or that the editors are not interested in, but the second or third idea might spark some interest. For example, "We're having an orientation for prospective foster parents. Why don't you come and join us, and then do a story about what kind of people come to these orientations and what they learn about foster care?" Or, "Many of our adolescents in the foster care system are having difficulty reading and are in need of tutors. Why don't you interview a few tutors to learn about the types of challenges these kids face and what regular citizens are doing to try to help?"
You can also tie foster parenting into existing stories, such as one about Mother's Day. You might call a few reporters during the week before Mother's Day and encourage them to do a story on a foster mother.

If you pitch a story idea and the reporter decides to do a piece, be prepared to provide the names of people to interview, photos of those involved, facts and statistics, and other important background material. You may also need to obtain releases from the family and agency, or the court if the child is in the custody of the state.

If you are contacted by a reporter for a story, the questions he or she asks generally will be brief and to the point. Think of ways you can expand "yes" or "no" questions to provide more information. Also, use this as an opportunity to pitch some story ideas of your own. If you believe the reporter is going in the wrong direction with a story (e.g., taking an overly negative view or not seeing the whole picture), do not be shy about expressing your opinions. Journalism is a difficult profession. Tight deadlines and space limitations often force reporters to oversimplify things. Your job as a source for the story is to challenge the reporter to examine all the angles.

When time permits, you might also try to arrange some face-to-face meetings with editors and reporters. These meetings are an opportunity to educate journalists about a broad range of issues affecting foster care. Try to make regular visits-at least once a year-to your local editorial board. Building relationships with reporters takes time and must be developed through periodic meetings and phone conversations (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998b).

Faxes and press releases are also an important means of maintaining regular communication with journalists. Press releases should be brief and to the point, informing journalists of breaking news or alerting them to upcoming meetings and events related to foster care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998b).

Press conferences can be useful, too, but they should be used only when you have breaking news. People often think that press conferences are the only way to get the media's attention. This is not true. Press conferences tend to be one-time events that generate one day of media coverage, at best. At worst, they turn out to be a waste of time and money because nobody shows up (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998b).

See Appendix A for additional tips on working with the media and a sample press release.
Free Advertising

Aside from the free publicity you can generate simply by working with reporters, there are endless opportunities for free advertising in your community. One way to advertise your agency's needs is through public service announcements (PSAs). These generally run 15 to 30 seconds in length. You can use them to advertise the need for foster parents and volunteers or simply to educate the public about the role of foster care in our society.

A local TV or cable station may be willing to partner with your agency to produce a PSA with the help of a pro bono advertising agency in your community. Contact your local advertising association to see if they have a pro bono program for government agencies or private nonprofits.

The difficulty, once your PSA is in hand, is getting it aired. Broadcasters are no longer required by the Federal Communications Commission to donate significant amounts of airtime for community education. Therefore, you will be competing for limited free airtime with a variety of good causes. Watch for PSAs on your local TV and cable stations. Knowing what types of spots your local media use can give you an edge when placing your PSA. Call the station and find out who you should contact to place a PSA. Also check the Internet. TV and radio stations usually post PSA placement information on their websites (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 1998b).

Personal contact is key to ensuring placement of your PSA because it gives the station a connection with your issue. A face-to-face meeting with the manager of the station or another executive level employee might make the difference between getting your PSA aired or having it sit on the shelf (Phelps 1989).

Community service programs on cable access stations also provide free airtime. And, in addition to TV, you can obtain free ad space on billboards and mass transit. Local outdoor advertisers will provide free space if your agency pays for the artwork and installation. The same is true for mass transit ads. Contact your mass transit's public affairs office or the local outdoor advertising companies that are listed on billboards for more information.

On a smaller scale, you can publicize upcoming meetings in the metro daily newspaper, community newspapers, and community events calendars. You can also post notices in congregational and community bulletins. You might also try getting your message printed on grocery store bags or getting the local grocery store to distribute flyers. Another possibility would be to persuade local businesses to advertise for your agency on their Web sites.
Paid Advertising

If funding is available and free advertising is not sufficient to meet your needs, paid advertising can be a valuable investment. Paid advertising can take a variety of forms, including display ads in phone books, direct mail campaigns, and utility bill inserts. Some agencies have found advertisements in coupon mailers such as "Val Pak" to be very effective. They offer the added advantage of targeting specific zip codes (KCTS Television 1998a).

You might also wish to ask a corporation in your community if it is willing to barter your PSA with local buys. This means that a major corporation purchases a significant amount of airtime for its own use and negotiates additional free airtime for your PSA. Alternatively, you may wish to invest in paid radio advertising. Airtime on radio generally is much cheaper than TV. By studying the demographics of specific stations and programs, your agency can create highly targeted campaigns for primetime radio listening.

Outreach Ideas

Your agency will no doubt come up with many of its own ideas for getting your message out through the mass media, but following are just a few suggestions to help you get started (Pasztor & Wynne 1995).

**Outreach Idea #1: Publicize the Needs of Foster Families**

Although the needs of families in the foster care system can seem overwhelming at times, even small efforts by your community can make a difference. Partner with a local TV station to create a multipart series educating the public about who these families are and what they need.

For example, your local news station could create a news segment that simply shows some children in foster care, covering the entire age range from infants to teens. Your station could create another news segment in which a few foster parents are allowed to introduce themselves – each from varying age groups, income brackets, and cultural backgrounds; and each with differing marital situations.

**Outreach Idea #2: Recruit Volunteers for the Children**

While recruitment of foster parents ranks high on the list of priorities for foster agencies around the country, not everyone is able to offer their home to a child. Yet, your agency no doubt has many other needs as well, and some of these needs must be filled by volunteers. For example, children in care often have difficulty getting dental care. Thus,
children in foster care need dentists in the community who are willing to provide dental services to children in foster care. The foster care system also needs volunteers to donate other types of resources, such as opportunities for recreation and enhanced learning. For instance, your community may have a popular dance instructor who is willing to reserve a space in her class for a child in foster care. Or perhaps a soccer coach could recruit a child in foster care and pay for his or her registration fee as well as uniforms or other needed equipment. Perhaps a faith group in your community would be willing to provide baby-sitting service to children in foster care, allowing foster parents occasional relief from their responsibilities.

Your agency could work with a local TV station to generate a list of services for which volunteers are needed. Then the station could host a volunteerathon using its pledge set. After reading a list of services for which volunteers are needed, viewers could be encouraged to call in to volunteer their time or resources. They could then be connected with your agency to obtain additional information. Remember that people who start out as volunteers in the foster care system often become great candidates for foster parenting.

**Outreach Idea #3: Explain the Cycle of Substance Abuse for Teens in Care**

Partner with a local TV station to create a half-hour program on the problem of substance abuse for teens in care. Hook your local TV crew up with substance abuse specialists in your community to learn why this cycle develops and what can be done to break it. Also, provide your TV producer with a list of foster parents who are caring for teenagers and willing to share their experience, so that your community can learn about foster parents' concerns for these youth and any strategies they may be using to try to head off this problem. Your local TV producer can learn about teens' attitudes toward their birth parents or peers who may be abusing alcohol or drugs. Also, see if you can locate some foster care alumni in your community who broke free of the cycle. They may be willing to offer some words of wisdom to professionals, parents, and youth alike.

**Outreach Idea #4: Examine How to Remove Obstacles to Foster Parenting**

Foster parenting requires a major commitment of time and resources. Recruit a demographically appropriate subset of the community to conduct a focus group. Together, you can determine the most common obstacles to becoming a foster parent and what might be done to remove those obstacles. With the permission of focus-group participants, you could partner with the local PBS affiliate to televise the focus group, allowing the community at large to benefit from your discussion. Then your agency could generate a report that summarizes key points raised in the discussion. The report could be distributed to policymakers, members of the media, foster care agencies, and other community partners for whom it is relevant.
Outreach Idea #5: Recruit Foster Parents Via Billboards and Advertisements

Using billboards, advertisements on buses, and print brochures displayed in supermarkets, create a community awareness campaign on the need for more foster parents. In this campaign, you could display information about the number of children in need of foster families in your community. You could also list some basic characteristics of the children. In print brochures you might provide a brief list of questions that people can ask themselves to see whether they are both qualified for and suited to becoming a foster parent. Contact local public relations firms to see if any would be willing to contribute time.

This campaign method has been employed periodically by child welfare agencies. In January 1996 the Children's Bureau of Southern California used 400 billboards along more than 300 miles of highway in Los Angeles County to open a conversation with its community on the subject of child abuse. The campaign generated several hundred phone calls from the public in less than three months, 40% of whom were interested in becoming foster or adoptive parents.

Outreach Idea #6: Identify Opportunities to Support and Strengthen Birth Parents

While many birth parents whose children are in foster care are struggling with substance abuse, families are also separated for more traditional reasons, like poverty and homelessness. While poverty and homelessness are complex societal problems, the solutions sometimes can be surprisingly simple. Often these solutions result from identifying the strengths of birth parents and then determining what they need to help them build on existing strengths.

Partner with a local TV station to create a series of 15- to 30-second public service announcements that publicize these needs. If, for example, affordable housing is in short supply, and that factor has contributed to a number of families being separated, a 30-second PSA could highlight the shortage of affordable housing for families and encourage members of the community to help remedy this problem. Your community may have a number of homes or housing projects that require only minimal repair work to make them habitable. Or perhaps a landlord in your community would be willing to rent out one apartment unit at a special rate in order to help reunite a family. Through this outreach effort, your local TV station could encourage call-ins from viewers who have solutions to offer or simply want to volunteer their time.
Leading Community Discussions

Mass media, as described in the previous chapter, is a critical component of any outreach strategy. It allows your agency to reach large audiences with brief but important messages about the foster care system and its many needs. But mass media alone may not be sufficient to accomplish your outreach goals. You will therefore want to consider opportunities for reaching smaller, more specific audiences with a more detailed message, the kind that you can deliver through community discussions.

In planning this component of your outreach campaign, you may wish to develop a speaker's bureau – one that includes foster parents – as a way to share the load and present varying points of view. Involving positive, well-trained, and highly motivated foster parents can be a strong asset when conducting community education (KCTS Television 1998b).

General questions you will want to answer in every presentation include the following:

- What is foster care?
- Who are foster parents?
- What are they like?
- What kind of services do they provide?
- Who are the children and families that need foster care?
- How long does it take to become a foster parent?
- What is the process of becoming a foster parent?
- What are the costs?
- What are the rewards?
- Other than becoming a foster parent, what other ways can the public support the foster care system?
Like many child welfare professionals, you may feel that public speaking is not your forte. You may wish for someone else within your agency, such as a member of the staff or the board of directors, to whom you could assign this task. Yet, if your meeting is well organized, you will actually be doing relatively little of the speaking yourself. To assist you in preparing your presentation, you can order a free copy of the *Take this Heart's Searching for Family Discussion Guide* (call 888/295-6727 or e-mail kbarbell@caseyorg). The discussion guide includes a 19-minute videotape, called *Searching for Family: Moments in the Lives of Children in Foster Care*, and step-by-step instructions to lead community discussions about foster care. *Searching for Family* was created as an educational tool to bring foster care issues to the attention of community groups across the nation. The videotape is crafted from the full-length documentary, *Take this Heart*, produced for KCTS Public Television in Seattle. It follows a state-funded foster family over an 8-month period.

Using the videotape as a focal point, a well-organized discussion can help members of the community to understand the needs of families and children in foster care and motivate them with clear ideas about how they can help. The discussion guide includes information for individuals who have little personal knowledge about foster care as well as for experts in the field who simply need tips on how to lead an effective discussion. Among its contents are the following:

- **Setting Up**
  - Arranging a meeting time and place
  - Promoting your event
  - Preparing handouts
  - Tips on public speaking

- **Facilitating Discussion**
  - Using icebreakers/lead-in questions
  - Anticipating common questions from viewers
  - Keeping track of important points
  - Summarizing the discussion

- **Putting Words into Action: What Your Audience Can Do**
  - Support foster parents
  - Support birth parents
  - Support children in care
  - Support adolescents in care
  - Consider becoming a foster parent
The discussion guide can be used to prepare discussions with

- business leaders,
- religious groups,
- policymakers,
- medical and mental health professionals,
- parent groups,
- educators,
- child advocates,
- civic associations,
- neighborhood associations, and
- professional associations.

Following are highlights from the discussion guide (CWLA 1998).

**Arranging a Meeting Time and Place**

You should first try getting your event onto the agenda of a regularly scheduled monthly meeting. Neighborhood associations, PTAs, service organizations, and chambers of commerce are some examples of groups that meet periodically at a predetermined time and place and frequently invite guest speakers.

If this is not possible, you will need to arrange the time and place on your own. To maximize turnout for your event, you should plan the time and location of your meeting to accommodate the audience you hope to attract. If, for example, you are convening a discussion for business leaders, you probably will want to select a location downtown. Because many business executives work late and want to get home after work, you may wish to schedule a breakfast or lunch meeting and ask a local business to serve as the host, providing a conference room and food. If you are convening a discussion for medical and mental health professionals, the lunch hour at a local hospital might be most convenient. Again, you can request that the hospital sponsor the event, providing a meeting room and serving free food.

If a faith-based group is your target audience, you could request that the group's meeting hall be made available to you after a worship service. If the timing is right, you might be able to dovetail your event onto a free (or lowcost) pancake breakfast that's already scheduled. *Food* is always a strong enticement when you're asking busy people to stop and listen to you. If time allows, you should survey a handful of invitees to see what is the best time and location for them. (Give them a few options to choose from so that everyone does not suggest something completely different.)
Finding a Hook for Your Audience

Your particular audience might have a unique interest in foster care or something special to offer that you can highlight before starting the tape. For example, if you are speaking to the local elementary school's PTA, this group is most likely to be motivated by enjoyment of children. They may possibly know a child in foster care or have a son or daughter whose classmate is in need of a foster family. Emphasize the positive feelings of self-worth that often accompany foster parenting; that they are giving of themselves to a child who is not a member of their own family but is a member of their community; that by taking in a child they will have an opportunity to make use of their special skills in relating to children.

It is imperative, however, that you interest your audience in the work of fostering, rather than attracting their interest primarily by talking about the children and their difficult family situations. Foster care agencies do not wish to attract foster parents who consider themselves on a mission to save a child from his or her "awful" birth parent(s). Also, the children in need of care generally are not healthy babies; they are children of all ages with very demanding needs who will require considerable patience and skill from their caregivers in order to survive and flourish. You should also point out to your audience that opportunities for fostering might exist within their own family. This form of fostering, called kinship care, is now used quite frequently by agencies across the country.

Faith-based groups may be motivated by the fact that some families who need help probably have been members of their religious community. Often churches have religiously affiliated child welfare associations, which you should mention. You may wish to emphasize how foster parenting can provide spiritual fulfillment or help people fulfill their spiritual commitments.

Business leaders are yet another critical audience. Generally speaking, the business community may be interested in teenagers in foster care because these teens are their future employees. If not employable, these youths will become dependent on taxpayers to care for them. Teens in foster care need apprenticeships, mentors, and on-the-job training. You could point out that certain programs allow businesses to receive tax breaks for employing teens in care. The labor department and employment office in various localities can provide additional information about such options. Also, a business that donates time, scholarships, or resources to children or teens in care might be able to get its name on brochures or press releases as a corporate sponsor. By offering to help this particular population, a business could emerge as a community leader, because foster care seldom is considered for acts of charity. Also, by offering foster parents discounts, they could generate new business, albeit at the discounted rate. Youth in care need
apprenticeships, mentors, and on-the-job training. By providing such opportunities, corporations can create a goodwill image for themselves and help expand their business.

As you consider how to engage your audience, consider what their interests are and what you hope to achieve. This will help you pull together the presentation.

Promoting Your Event

Your promotion strategy will depend on the particular audience you wish to attract. If you are an invited guest for a regularly scheduled meeting, you may not need to promote the event yourself. But you should still try to give your promoter some key selling points about the event in order to attract the largest possible audience. In this case, you might emphasize that they have been invited to view a "special video," and that it is part of a "national foster care awareness project." If the target audience has something special to offer foster families, this should be highlighted as well. You should also try to include some local statistics, like the number of children in foster care in your community.

If you are convening a discussion for business leaders, a personal invitation followed by a phone call might be your best bet. If your target audience is a faith-based group, the weekly bulletin is an excellent place to advertise. Other obvious places to advertise are newsletters, local newspapers, radio or cable stations, bulletin boards (ones that are not cluttered!), and e-mail. People generally like to watch short films or videotapes in groups, especially top-quality programs like Take this Heart, so do not be afraid to advertise this as an event that people will find interesting and rewarding. (Again, if free food will be served, be sure to highlight this point!)

Common Questions from Audiences

Anticipating common questions from your audiences will ensure that you are adequately prepared for a fruitful discussion. The following is a list of questions that may arise from various audiences. Some of them include national data that can be supplemented with local data. Those that do not include national data can be answered by your agency with local information (KCTS Television 1998a). (Please see appendix B for background information on foster care.)

- **How many teenagers are in care in your community?**

- **What percentage of teenagers in care drop out of high school?**

  A study by Westat (1991) found that 66% of 18-year-olds discharged from out-of-home care had not completed high school. A study by Barth (1990) found that 55% of youth aging out of foster care did so without a high school degree.
- **How may teens in care have drug problems? If I offer these kids a job, will they pass a drug screening?**

  The data on drug use for teens in care is inconclusive. A study by Barth (1990) estimates that 56% of youth in foster care use street drugs. Festinger (1983) reported that 81% of males and 66% of females in care had used drugs sometime during the preceding year. (Add your local statistics, if available.) If a business requires a drug screening in order to hire youth in care, some will pass and some will not.

- **How old are the children who need foster parents?**

- **How many children who need foster parents in this community are African American? Caucasian? Latino? Native American? Asian?**

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<tr>
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<th>African American</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Latino</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nationwide*</td>
<td>123,106 (51.9%)</td>
<td>73,343 (30.9%)</td>
<td>19,098 (8.1%)</td>
<td>4,004 (1.7%)</td>
<td>1,690 (.7%)</td>
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*27 states reporting

- **Do children in need of foster parents all have emotional problems? Behavioral problems? Physical handicaps? Learning difficulties?**

- **Do birth parents usually stay in contact with their children?**

- **Are foster parents required to help children visit their birth parents? Will the birth parent be coming over to my house to visit her child?**

  More and more, foster parents and social workers are discovering the benefits for children when foster parents and birth parents work together. Sometimes this means that foster parents welcome birth parents into their home for a visit, but this decision is left to foster parents. Also, some birth parents do not feel comfortable visiting their children at the child's foster home.

- **Are foster parents able to adopt a child who has been in their care?**

  Foster parents would have to be approved as adoptive families. According to a CWLA national survey, a majority of 38 responding states reported that almost two-thirds of
the children legally adopted in 1996 were adopted by their foster parents. Conditions that would need to be met would include that parents' rights have been voluntarily relinquished or terminated by a court and the child would consent to the adoption (based on age).

- **What are the requirements for becoming a foster parent?**

- **Can foster parents work outside the home?**

- **What are the rewards of foster parenting?**

  Rewards of foster parenting may include a sense of accomplishment, the chance to help children feel good about themselves, the opportunity to meet and work with new people, and the opportunity to make a lifetime of difference in a relatively short period of time.

- **How much is a foster parent paid?**

- **What kind of support will I receive if I become a foster parent?**

  In terms of financial support, you would receive a monthly payment for the child's care and material needs. In addition, you would work with the agency as part of a planning team. The agency would provide training as part of your approval process, with additional training after you become a foster parent. Various agencies provide different kinds of support, such as respite care, foster parents buddies, and mentors.

- **What is the potential that children in care would harm their foster parents or someone else?**

  Foster parents should be given complete information about the child prior to placement and throughout the placement. If a child has a history of violence and the foster care agency is aware of this, potential foster parents should be informed. But sometimes agencies do not have the child's complete history. The incidence of children in care hurting their foster families or others is low, but it does happen. Foster parent training helps prepare foster parents to recognize warning signs and teaches them how to handle volatile situations.
Identifying Other Outreach Opportunities

Chapters 2 and 3 offered suggestions for working with the mass media and leading community discussions – two of the primary means by which to communicate the many needs of the foster care system. This chapter elaborates on additional strategies for getting your message out to the public and spurring the community to take action. Also included here are two sample outreach action plans and a summary of strategies that have been found to work best for specific recruitment needs.

- **Invite community leaders to help you get the message out**
  
  Community leaders may not have the expertise that you have about the foster care system. What they do have, however, is the ability to get the attention of the press and public. For this reason alone, it can be beneficial to identify respected leaders in your community who may be sympathetic to your cause. Invite these individuals to speak at your events and ask them to mention foster care at their own events. Support from even one politician or leading child advocate can quickly elevate the status of your issue.

- **Select segments of the community to target**
  
  While general outreach to the public is essential throughout the year, foster care agencies may ultimately benefit more from targeted recruitment. Being involved in the community as a volunteer has been found to correlate well with interest in becoming a foster parent. Targeting your recruitment campaign toward volunteer and faith-based organizations might therefore prove fruitful.

Some agencies also report that specialized foster parents are best recruited from among experienced foster families. Other agencies have found success in recruiting foster parents for children with special needs by targeting professionals in such fields as medicine, nursing, mental health care, and child care. Professionals who already have
experience in caring for children with special needs may be much more comfortable with the idea of fostering such a child. A presentation to medical and health care professionals using the Take this Heart video and discussion guide might yield surprising results. A third way in which specialized foster parents might be recruited is through the organizations and support groups for parents whose birth children have special needs. These parents already have experience and generally feel competent to care for such children.

- **Select a kick-off event**

  To make sure that your outreach campaign gets off to a good start, select a kick-off event and invite the media. One example might be to bring existing foster parents together for a special forum and invite a local television station to broadcast it. Through this medium, foster parents could share their experiences and educate the community about the joys and challenges of fostering.

- **Develop displays, brochures, exhibits, visuals, handouts, bookmarks, bumper stickers, and fliers**

  Anything your agency can produce that will help get the word out is useful. Printed brochures and fliers distributed at supermarket check-out counters or in the waiting room of a popular pediatrician's office can help reinforce television and radio campaigns and give the public something they can take home. These materials are most useful if their messages are brief and to the point. Be sure to include all relevant contact information in your printed materials. (See appendix B for background information that can be included in your outreach materials.)

- **Advertise on the Internet**

  The Internet is an increasingly common and cheap way to spread the word about all kinds of needs and interests. The best way for your agency to advertise might be to contact other organizations with websites that reach your target population and ask them to provide a link to your site. For example, a local volunteer organization might be willing to not only advertise some of your agency's needs on its website but also provide a direct link to your site for members of the public who would like additional information.

To maximize results, keep your own website very simple. A couple of pages of relevant information, including the phone number to call for those who wish to know more, should suffice.
- **Participate in special community events**

  Local festivals and conventions often present organizations with opportunities to set up a booth and distribute brochures. When choosing to participate in these events, make sure that the audience you are seeking is likely to be present. Also, consider how likely it is that participants will be interested in hearing about foster care in light of other activities that may be taking place simultaneously. Is your brochure likely to be read, or will it end up in the nearest wastebasket? Careful consideration of these questions can save you time and energy.

**Putting Words into Action**

Following are two sample outreach action plans based on the hypothetical foster care needs identified by the community of BlueSkies, USA (KCTS Television 1998b).
### SAMPLE #1: ADOLESCENTS/TRANSITION RESOURCES

Here in the community of BlueSkies, we have numerous adolescents who remain in foster care until they turn 18, at which point they are expected to live independently. However, few adolescents in our society are able to support themselves immediately upon graduating from high school. Many youth in foster care, if not most, have not graduated from high school by age 18.

Adolescents in foster care generally require more help with education and job training than even the average adolescent may need. We would therefore like to create a foster care awareness campaign primarily for the business community, informing them of the needs of adolescents in foster care.

### GOALS / DESIRED OUTCOMES

To provide educational, mentoring, and employment resources to assist youth early in adolescence who will transition out of foster care. (A Task Force of business leaders, educators, and foster care representatives will be formed to implement this plan.) To secure five college scholarships annually for youths in foster care who wish to go to college; and to create 15 new job-training slots annually for youths in foster care who wish to enter the workforce upon graduating from high school.

### TARGET AUDIENCE

Business and community leaders who have the resources to provide scholarships and job-training opportunities.

### ACTIVITIES / EVENTS

To create a "launch event" for the Task Force, targeting business, civic and community leaders of BlueSkies. The event will be co-hosted by our agency, a local television station and a leading corporation. We will present the 19-minute *Searching for Families* video, followed by a panel discussion on adolescents in foster care, including their job-training and financial needs. The panel leader/host will be a station news veteran or other well-known media personality. Panel members may include a business leader who is a foster care alumnus, an educator, foster care/education specialist, foster care/job placement/training specialist, civic leader with a commitment to foster care and a foster care youth who is a recent high school graduate. Persons invited to the event, in addition to business and community leaders, will include elected officials and heads of
(Sample #1 continued)

foster care agencies, foster parent associations, child advocacy groups, the legal community, and organizations already involved in providing college scholarships or job training to youths.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Our foster care agency will identify foster care alumni and civic leaders with a commitment to foster care. They can take the lead in working with the Task Force, as well as consult with the station on the panel discussion. This will include convening a group of youths in foster care (at least one of whom will be on the panel) whose perspectives will also be represented in the print materials and publicity. A business organization or job-training center may also be involved as community partners.

MATERIALS

The project will develop a print packet on the special needs of older adolescents who must transition out of foster care, and include some success stories of youths and business leaders. Contact information will be provided for foster care and child welfare organizations. The packet will be distributed at the launch event, offered on-air as an outreach message following business and news programming, and mailed to a target list of business, education and civic organizations.

BUDGET

Meeting facilities/dinner at the BlueSkies Convention Hotel; print/mail invitations; print packet; staff time; station overhead costs. If the station decides to produce the panel discussion as a local program, the event will be conducted at the station, and costs will include studio and production expenses.

EVALUATION

Information on the evaluation can include the following: report from youth group on their work; action plan prepared by the Task Force (if available in time); number of people who attended the event (and a summary of the simple evaluation/comment form they completed; number of packets distributed, including those that were requested in response to the on-air offer; and the number of scholarships and job training slots that were created. You should also consider monitoring any increase in community attention to the issue, such as documenting newspaper and television news reports.
SAMPLE #2
INFANTS / RECRUITMENT OF FOSTER FAMILIES

Here in the community of BlueSkies, we have an excellent Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at our BlueSkies Children’s Hospital. Every year, our unit treats more than 200 premature infants with complicated health problems, some of whom, for various reasons, cannot be discharged to their birth parents. Although we have an adequate number of licensed foster families for most children in need of foster care, few are willing and able to care for these infants. We would like to develop a foster care awareness campaign that will educate the public about the need for families who can care for these infants.

We have determined that the success of our campaign will depend, in large part, on our ability to communicate accurately the intense needs of these infants, so that potential foster families and the community will have a realistic impression of what is needed and how they might be able to help.

GOALS / DESIRED OUTCOMES

- To have sufficient foster families available in the community to care for medically fragile infants.
- To recruit 15 new foster parents who are able and willing to care for infants who are medically fragile.

TARGET AUDIENCE

General television viewers, potential foster families and community leaders.

ACTIVITY / EVENT

To create five public service announcements, each 30 seconds in length, to educate viewers about the need for foster families who can care for infants who are medically fragile. The PSAs will involve field shoots and be informative as well as convey human interest/emotions.

Possible Profiles

- Nurse in a Neonatal Intensive Care unit explaining the various conditions/special needs of infants.
- Home nursing care provider on a home visit to help a child/family
- Foster family caring for an infant with special needs who will share their experience and explain why they are involved.
(Sample #2 continued)

- Representative from the local foster parent association telling about training and networking.

- Public or private foster care agency representative giving statistics and contact information.

- Community leader describing the importance of finding homes for infants who are medically fragile.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Our foster care agency will function as the primary contact and information source, including providing statistics and identifying appropriate interview subjects. They will advise the station on the script for the spots. The foster parent association may also suggest contacts. BlueSkies Children's Hospital may also be a partner, perhaps running the spots in patient waiting areas and distributing an information pamphlet. Our agency will develop a plan of action to respond to public inquiries during the period the spots are broadcast. (The station will provide a schedule of the broadcast dates/times for the spots.) This will minimize the risk of losing potential foster families.

MATERIALS

Videotape copies of the spots will be distributed to community foster care, child welfare agencies, and the BlueSkies Children's Hospital. Our agency will distribute a pamphlet on foster parenting for infants who are medically fragile.

BUDGET

Field shooting, script writing and production costs; staff time; tape duplication and distribution; station overhead.

EVALUATION

Information on the evaluation can include the following: number of times the PSAs were broadcast and viewer response (letters, viewer response call-in line); reports by agencies and by the hospital on their use of the videotapes and community response; number of pamphlets that were distributed and where; number of inquiries to agencies from potential foster families, and the number of families that were recruited. You should also consider monitoring any increase in community attention to the issue, such as documenting newspaper and television reports.
Summary of Strategies

Following is a list of strategies that have been tailored by various agencies to meet specific foster parent recruitment needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES</th>
<th>For Infants</th>
<th>For Children of Color</th>
<th>For Siblings</th>
<th>For Adolescents</th>
<th>For Medically Fragile Newborns</th>
<th>For Children w/ Special Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews for newspaper articles</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSAs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking through parents of young children (e.g., through day care centers)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV feature stories about specific infants (e.g., &quot;Wednesday's Child&quot; segments)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking engagements with target audience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking through current foster parents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSAs targeted to specific populations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American or Latino newspapers and talk shows</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasizing the need for keeping siblings together during inquiry calls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting relatives of current foster parents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classified ads</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting organizations that work with youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaried foster families</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teens identifying their own potential foster parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers contacting people they know</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenagers attending preservice training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns targeted at group youth care workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing board rates</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing specialized day care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting hospital staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES</th>
<th>For Infants</th>
<th>For Children of Color</th>
<th>For Siblings</th>
<th>For Adolescents</th>
<th>For Medically Fragile Newborns</th>
<th>For Children w/Special Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct mail to health care professionals</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising in hospital publications</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid advertisements</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns directed at special education teachers and aides</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorariums for foster parents who recruit other foster parents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising by word of mouth</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures in waiting rooms</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a recruiter network to come together and share ideas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up booths at fairs and trade shows</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracting out recruitment to private companies (e.g., child welfare agencies, marketing firms)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving business cards to foster parents so that they can hand them out to people they meet</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying the neighborhoods where the children in need of care typically reside and targeting recruitment in those neighborhoods</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing articles in trade publications and newsletters</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-screen ads in movie theaters</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted recruitment of teachers and coaches</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuffing employees’ checks with information</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster parent recruitment parties hosted by foster parents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>road trip in Winnebago to fairs, churches, and so forth for personal introductions to foster care</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preparing Your Agency's Response

In all of the literature on conducting outreach campaigns, one point is crystal clear: It is a mistake to spend more time worrying about media outreach efforts than planning your response strategy. Therefore, strategies for handling incoming calls warrant serious discussion (Coyne 1986). Some agencies have spent lots of money to create elaborate outreach campaigns and then failed to respond at all to requests for information. Your outreach efforts will be pointless unless you give as much attention to planning your response as you do to your outreach campaign.

Your agency should plan a structured, positive response to inquiry calls. Prospective foster parents may have difficulty making that initial call. It is therefore imperative that the individual receiving the call sounds friendly and supportive. Those who are making a first-time inquiry should receive a call back within 24 hours or the next working day. Other calls should be returned within 2 days. If your agency is short-staffed, current foster parents or other members of the community may be enlisted as volunteers to make some of the follow-up calls (CWLA 1998).

Following is a sample intake form for recording information from callers who are interested in becoming a foster parent or volunteering for the foster care system (CWLA 1998).
Intake Form

1. Contact information for prospective foster parents and volunteers
   
   Name: ________________________________
   
   Address: ________________________________
   
   Phone: _________________________________
   
   Fax: __________________________________
   
   E-mail: _________________________________

2. How did you hear about the need for foster parents/volunteers?

3. Do you know what you are interested in doing? If so, what would you like to do?

4. What can I do for you?
   
   ___ Send more information
   
   ___ Arrange an interview
   
   ___ Accept a donation of goods
   
   ___ Accept a donation of money
   
   ___ Other:

   Date: _________________________________

   Call taken by: _________________________

   Action taken: _________________________
When Members of the Public Call

The following chart can be used to help you prepare for different types of inquiries. The first column shows the three categories of callers:

- those who want general information about your agency and what it does;
- those who are interested in volunteering or becoming a foster parent; and
- those who want to make a donation of money, goods, or services.

The chart provides information on possible ways in which you can respond to each type of inquiry, and what you need to know in advance to prepare yourself for callers (CWLA 1998).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the Caller Wants</th>
<th>How You Should Respond</th>
<th>What You Need to Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Information          | Send a brochure        | • What written material is available  
|                      |                        | • Office procedures for sending mail  
|                      | Give a URL             | • Website address  
|                      | Transfer him or her to the Foster Parent Recruiter or Volunteer Coordinator | • Coordinator’s name, phone number, and hours available  
|                      | Give the message to someone who will call back | • Name and phone number of person who can provide information  
|                      | Make an appointment    | • Person who can provide information  
|                      |                        | • Appointment schedule  
| To volunteer or become a foster parent | Give procedure for volunteering and becoming a foster parent | • Agency procedure for volunteers and foster parents  
|                      | Send an application    | • System for sending application  
|                      | Schedule an interview  | • Person who conducts interviews  
|                      |                        | • Appointment schedule  
| To give a donation of goods | Provide a list of needs | • Needs that have been identified  
|                      | Accept or reject the donation | • List of items that cannot be used  
|                      |                        | • Organizations that may be able to use goods unwanted by your agency  
|                      | Give procedure for donating goods | • Agency procedure for accepting donations, including where and when goods can be left  
| To give a donation of money | Give procedure for donating money | • Agency procedure for accepting monetary donations  

Identifying Information

Please Note: The following information merely provides a sample of the kind of information you might seek from prospective foster parents or volunteers. You need not ask for all of this information during the initial stage of inquiry. In fact, some questions might better be asked once a relationship has been established. Others might never be asked at all. Use your own judgment in determining what information is essential for decisionmaking and what is superfluous (CWLA 1998).

**General**

- Name
- Address
- Phone
- Fax
- E-mail
- Age or date of birth
- Sex
- Social security number
- Employer

**Education**

- Level of education
- High school
- Trade or technical school
- College
- Postgraduate
- Degree(s)

**Skills**

- Carpentry
- Plumbing
- Painting
- Teaching
- Word processing
- Other computer
- Language other than English
Arts or crafts
Other

Volunteer Experience
Organization
Address and phone
Volunteer work performed
Contact

Fostering Experience
Yes
No

Volunteer Interest
Tutoring
Mentoring
Other work with children
Respite for foster parents
Mentoring birth parents
Home repair
Office work
Other

Availability
Days and hours
Health and physical restrictions
Availability of transportation
Geographic preferences and restrictions

Background information
Criminal charges and convictions
Driver's license suspension and revocation
Conclusion

This handbook has offered a framework for helping you and your agency recruit foster families and volunteers for children in your community. As a foster care recruiter, your job will never be easy. You will no doubt have many more needs than can be met by your community at any point in time. Yet, an organized, thoughtful approach to engaging the public should enable you to make maximum existing resources.

The appendixes that follow contain additional information to assist you in the development of your media campaigns. Feel free to copy entire sections of appendix B ("Background Materials on Foster Care") verbatim, or edit them as desired.
References


Appendix A:
Handouts on Working with the Media
A Quick Guide to Working with the Media:
Publicizing an Event

Identify the News Outlets

- Daily and weekly newspapers
- TV and radio stations

Prepare Press Contact List

- Name, organization, address, phone number, fax number, e-mail
  - Reporters who cover social welfare issues
  - Editors and producers
  - Assignment and news desks

Prepare and Distribute News Advisory

- A week before event-send out an advisory to include:
  - What – A brief description of the event and sponsors
  - When – Date and time of the event
  - Where – Exact location of the event
  - Who – The speakers
  - Why – The purpose of the event

Contact Reporters, Editors, and Producers

- Three or four days prior to event, call reporters, editors, and producers
- Ask if they received news advisory
- Ask if they need more information
- Ask if they plan on covering the event

Prepare and Distribute News Release

- Create an exciting headline

1 Source: From National Foster Care Awareness Project. 2000 Foster Care Month Packet. Washington, DC: Author
- Use punchy quotes for person(s) quoted
- Keep it simple, and make it clear
- Explain why it is important to the community or state
- State a time for release – e.g., "For immediate release"

**Prepare a Press Kit**

- Press release
- Background on issues and organizations
- Q&A sheet
- Profile and photo (head and shoulder shot) of key speakers and leaders
- Local association information
- Include information (guidelines) on use of photos

**Organize Press Event**

- Prepare speakers (no more than 4) – brief statement, limit to 5 minutes
- Prepare location – platform, table, chairs, rostrum, microphone, etc.
- Invite participants and audience
- Keep it brief (no more than 45 minutes)
- Keep it lively
A Quick Guide to Pitching a Story to the Media

Identify the Story

- Does the story highlight a major theme or issue?
- Is(are) the persons) willing to talk to the media?

Summarize the Story

- Prepare a one-page summary of the story
- Include name of key person(s), contact phone number, and key facts

Decide Which Media

- Is it a newspaper or TV story or both?
- Who would be most interested in doing the story?

Pitch the Story

- Identify the reporter or producer
- Call the reporter or producer
- Identify yourself and your organizational connection
- Say you have a good story that can highlight and personalize Foster Care Month
- Tell the story
Placing an Op-Ed (Letter to the Editor)

Draft Op-Ed

- Decide what issue or problem is important in your community or state
- Include an anecdote or personal story that the public can identify with
- Make 2-4 arguments in favor of your position
- State what should be done to solve problem – be specific
- Keep it simple; make it clear

Review and Get Comments

- Circulate it to colleagues to get feedback
- Edit it down to 500-700 words
- Include a headline and byline

Contact Newspaper

- Contact op-ed editor
- Say you would like to submit op-ed
- Ask how many words
- Ask how to send it (e.g., mail, fax, e-mail)
## Getting an Editorial Board Meeting

(A joint meeting with the editors of the various sections of the paper, i.e., news department, women's/children's department, housing department, economic department)

### Decide Which Issue
- For what issue do you want editorial support?
- Is there support among a number of constituencies?

### Prepare Package
- Provide fact sheets, research, and contacts
- Provide articles on the topic

### Determine Spokespeople
- Who should meet (not more than three)?
- Which organizations?

### Ask for a Meeting
- Call the editorial editor
- Explain the issue and why it is important
- Ask for a meeting and say who would attend
Appendix B: Background Materials on Foster Care
About Foster Care

More than half a million children nationwide live temporarily with foster parents while their own parents struggle to overcome an addiction to alcohol, drugs, illness, financial hardship, or other difficulties. Because of the hardship or maltreatment they experienced at home, the trauma of being separated from their birth parents, and the uncertainty they face as they enter the foster care system, children in foster care have many needs. They can also be remarkably resilient.

Foster care is frequently confused with adoption. Adoption is a legal process that creates a relationship of parent and child between individuals who generally are not related by birth. The child in this situation becomes a permanent member of a new family, and all legal bonds to birth parents are severed. By contrast, most children reside only temporarily with their foster parents, until it is considered safe for them to return home. A child's stay with foster parents can be as short as one night or as long as several years or more. One large study found that 27% of children in foster care stay for less than 6 months, while approximately 33% remain in care for 2 years or longer (American Public Welfare Association 1993). Eventually some children in foster care may be adopted, but most will return to their birth parents. Approximately one-quarter of the children in care have no plans for being either reunited with their birth parents or adopted.

Children can enter foster care at any age. Between 1995 to 1997, about 20% of all children entering foster care for the first time were infants. Younger children are about twice as likely to enter foster care than older children (Chapin Hall Center for Children 1999). Youth between the ages of 13 and 18 comprise roughly 33% of all children in care. Children in foster care also come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In 1996, 52% were African American, 31% were Caucasian, 8% were Hispanic, and 9% came from other racial and ethnic groups (CWLA 1999).

Children who enter the foster care system bring with them many special needs. Often they are victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect. They may suffer emotional, behavioral, or developmental problems that range from moderate to severe. In more than 75% of foster care placements, parental abuse of drugs or alcohol has been identified as a factor (U.S. General Accounting Office 1994). Children from these homes may have lacked consistent nurturing and caregiving for a significant portion of their childhood, or they may have suffered the effects of erratic and abusive behavior that often accompanies substance abuse.

In addition, children in need of foster care often possess their own unique health and developmental challenges. Infants and young children with medical complications,
physical handicaps, or mental limitations represent the fastest-growing population in need of foster care (U.S. House of Representatives 1989). Children and youth in foster care often have substantial educational needs as well. Having moved from family to family and school to school, children in foster care tend to perform poorly in school and enter the work world with limited job skills (Ohio Department of Human Services 1987).

Teenagers in foster care are particularly vulnerable. Each year, an estimated 20,000 adolescents "age out" of the foster care system. (Committee on Ways and Means 1999). This is because at the age of emancipation (generally 18) the state no longer will pay foster parents for expenses. Their transition to adulthood is particularly difficult because the foster care system lacks the resources needed to prepare teens for living on their own. A recent study by the University of Wisconsin School of Social Work found that 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care, 27% of the males and 10% of the females had been incarcerated, 33% were receiving public assistance, 37% had not finished high school, and 50% were unemployed (Courtney & Piliavin 1998).

Like the children they serve, foster parents come from a variety of backgrounds. They can be single, married, or divorced. They can choose to stay at home with the children or retain outside employment. They can be as young as 21, or they can be retired seniors. People who are interested in becoming foster parents must first demonstrate the qualities and attributes essential to fostering, including attentiveness, tenacity, patience, and empathy, along with a willingness to grow and learn from the experience of fostering and an equal capacity to love and let go. Then, if they can offer a safe living environment, adequate bedroom space to accommodate a child, and sufficient income to make ends meet even without the reimbursement received through a foster care agency, they can learn, through training programs, the other skills essential for effective fostering.

Foster parents are reimbursed by the state for at least part of the cost of caring for the child. In addition, health costs for children in care are covered by Medicaid, the federal health insurance program for the poor and disabled, although Medicaid often does not cover mental health services.

While children are being cared for by foster parents, their birth parents have an opportunity to obtain treatment and services for the problems they are experiencing and to work with the foster care agency and foster parents toward the appropriate permanent plan for each child.

Approximately 142,000 homes nationwide are licensed to provide foster care, and the average foster parent is licensed to care for three children (CWLA 1997). A variety of complex social and economic factors have contributed in recent years to a steady increase in the number of children requiring out-of-home care. Between 1987 and 1998, the
number of children in need of out-of-home care increased by 90%, while the number of nonrelative foster parents available to care for children steadily declined (CWLA 1999). The result has been a shortage of foster parents, particularly foster parents of color and those who are willing and able to care for sibling groups, medically fragile infants, and emotionally disturbed teens. Thus, recruitment and retention of foster parents currently rank among the most pressing needs in the child welfare system.

References


A History of Foster Care in the United States

The evolution of out-of-home care for children provides a crucial context for understanding the issues affecting our foster care system today. In tracing this evolution, we discover the roots of an ongoing debate regarding the significance of birth parents in a child's life. We also witness a dramatic change in our vision of childhood and what it should promise. Historians say the tradition of providing care for children outside their nuclear family has been around since antiquity. Our story, however, will begin with Colonial America.

While life in this country has never been risk-free, life in Colonial America was downright treacherous, for children and adults alike. Medical knowledge was still in a primitive state, so even minor illnesses could take a deadly turn. Backbreaking labor in settings that offered no protection for workers made injury and death on the job commonplace. With few safety nets to provide food and shelter to families who met misfortune, colonial governments routinely confronted the problem of orphaned and abandoned children (Wiltse 1985).

In those days, the most common solution, grounded in English Poor Law, was to "indenture" children to a family. Children were auctioned off in the town square, and young boys were taught a trade by their new masters while girls learned household chores. The children were given food, clothing, and shelter in return for their labor. During the colonial period, everyone's labor was needed for the continued development of the country, so acquiring skills and an occupation was considered essential even for children (Costin 1985). There was no talk during colonial times of trying to eventually reunite these indentured children with their living relatives, nor any commitment to love and nurture them. Although some children did receive good homes through this system, exploitation and abuses were common, and many children received only minimal sustenance.

Children who were not indentured to a family usually were placed in poorhouses, otherwise known as almshouses. By the end of the 18th century, only a few orphanages had been established exclusively for children, so children usually were sent to mixed almshouses, "to live with the aged, the insane, the feebleminded, and the diseased" (Kadushin & Martin 1988b), where their most basic physical and emotional needs were often neglected.

Growing dissatisfaction among the public with the conditions of these almshouses led many states in the late 19th century to prohibit children from living there. As a result, the
number of children's orphanages grew rapidly—from 200 in 1790 to 123,000 in 1910 (Foster Facts/Fax 1995). Orphanages served as both shelter and training school for children. Great emphasis was placed on morality, obedience, and character development, creating what some described as a military-like atmosphere. Because both education and caregiving were provided under one roof, the children often lived in isolation from the rest of the community (Foster Facts/Fax 1995). Staff were given low pay, creating low morale and high turnover rates, so the children had little opportunity for developing long-term, close relationships with adults (Foster Facts/Fax 1995). Still, orphanages generally were considered a vast improvement over almshouses for taking care of children.

The Child-Saving Movement

Although indenturing and orphanages offered some protection for children during this most precarious period of our history, both systems focused primarily on what the children had to offer to the newly developing country in terms of their labor and skills. Childhood during colonial times was brief for everyone, in large part because communities needed every able body for work, so little interest was shown in the needs of the developing child (Kadushin & Martin 1988b).

By the mid-1800s, this emphasis on economics began to shift. In 1853, Charles Loring Brace became secretary of New York’s Children’s Aid Society. Through his training as a minister, Brace came to view Christian charity as a way of encouraging people to provide homes for abandoned or orphaned children. Brace was particularly interested in recruiting families who lived in small towns and on farms, believing those places to be ideally suited to raising children. As head of the Children’s Aid Society, he arranged for "orphan trains" to transfer thousands of poor children from New York City to rural areas of the United States (Pasztor & Wynne 1995). This new system of "rescuing" children from "unsavory environments" reflected an increasing emphasis during that period on the importance of environment over heredity in shaping a child’s character. Once separated from their destitute parents, children were expected to quickly forget their birth parents as well as any bad habits or traits that led to their poverty (Wiltse 1985).

In recruiting families, Brace appealed to their belief in Christian charity as well as their self-interest. Children would still be expected to work in their new homes, thus preserving the tradition of indenturing, but presumably they would be better cared for than their predecessors. It is important to realize, however, that this "child saving" movement, as it came to be known, focused exclusively on children living in destitution. It did not yet concern itself with what we now call "parenting issues." During the first 100 years of our history, the United States viewed child-rearing and discipline methods to
be almost exclusively up to the parents; and not even frequent, severe beatings were considered just cause for removing a child from his home.

Brace's efforts were quite controversial. Although many children were placed in good homes and the program kept children out of almshouses, some critics argued that it was based on prejudice against immigrants and that many children were being separated from their families unnecessarily. The Catholic Church also complained that many Catholic children were being placed with Protestant families (Kadushin & Martin 1988b).

The Modern Foster Care Era

After the Industrial Revolution, child labor became less important to the country, and by 1875 all forms of indenturing had virtually disappeared. But Brace's program had ignited a heated debate between the advocates of orphanages and those who favored foster care. That debate would rage on for another century.

At about the same time that indenturing disappeared, a well-publicized account of child abuse prompted creation of the country's first organization to protect children from abuse and neglect. According to historians, a young girl named Mary Ellen Wilson was brutally beaten by her caregiver, chained to her bed, and left without adequate food and clothing. At that time, the community had no official place to turn with such information because no organizations or laws had been established to protect children from intentional harm. Concerned citizens therefore sought the help of Henry Bergh, founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. By arguing that Mary Ellen was an animal and was entitled to the same humane treatment as any other animal, Bergh was able to protect her from further abuse. Subsequently, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was established as a sister organization. This represented the first major effort to define some basic rights for children and protect them from a variety of harms (CWLA 1989).

It was also during this period that Charles Birtwell became director of the Boston Children's Aid Society. Accelerating an increasing emphasis on the rights of the child, Birtwell reframed the question from "Where shall we place the child?" to "What does the child need?" He also set the stage for viewing foster care as a temporary and treatment-oriented service. His approach required not only that each child be viewed as a unique person with unique needs, but also that each available option for the child be carefully considered. Birtwell raised awareness about the essential role of birth parents in children's lives, thus shifting some of the emphasis back to the importance of heredity (Wiltse 1985).

In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt summoned the first White House Conference on Children to consider the plight of children in the United States. Out of this conference
came two important declarations: That every child was entitled to a secure and loving home, and that children should remain with their birth parents if possible (Pecora et al. 1992). Roosevelt strongly supported a national system of aid to mothers who were widowed or otherwise without financial support in order to avoid the need for foster care based on financial reasons alone. Participants at this conference also expressed a clear preference for foster care over institutionalized care for children who had no serious emotional, behavioral, or health problems (Wiltse 1985).

Although support was mounting for the rights and needs of children, one obstacle for child advocates was a lack of reliable data to describe the conditions and circumstances under which children in the United States were living. Thus, in 1912, the U.S. Children's Bureau was created, to "investigate and report on all matters relating to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people" (CWLA 1989). Shortly thereafter CWLA was established, and with it came the first national policies and standards for services to children in out-of-home care (Barbell 1996).

Although professionals in child welfare were clearly making important strides, the problem of poverty continued to plague efforts to keep families together. The situation was greatly exacerbated during the Great Depression. In response to this problem, legislators included several important provisions for homeless, dependent, and neglected children in the Social Security Act of 1935. These provisions brought significant gains for certain classes of children, but limitations of the legislation and other changes in the condition of national life continued to create new problems (Costin 1985).

Impermanence and Drift

By the middle of the 20th century, mounting criticism of institutional care, along with a growing recognition of the importance of family in child development, had resulted in a growing preference for foster care over orphanages. This preference was strongly reinforced in a United Nations report by John Bowlby. Published in 1951 and titled *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, the report documented the many harmful effects of institutional care on children (Kadushin & Martin 1988b).

Within the field of child welfare, foster care had come to be viewed as the appropriate resource for children with less imposing needs, while group care settings were seen as the appropriate place for troubled or seriously disturbed children. All foster care was henceforth considered "treatment," intended as a temporary substitute while parents remedied whatever problems they were experiencing.

Although the concepts of "treatment" and "temporary" were accepted on a philosophical level, they generally did not translate into practice. Once children were placed in care, child welfare professionals often considered them better off than they had been with their
birth parents, even though foster care was never intended as a permanent solution for the
children.

The publication of a major study by Henry Maas and Richard Engler in 1959 created
considerable alarm among child advocates. The study revealed that more than half of all
children in foster care were likely to remain there until their maturity. Only a few would
be adopted or reunited with their birth families (Wiltse 1985). Historians point out that
the study had excluded children in care for less than three months; thus, the appearance of
the foster care system as a "holding tank" may have been somewhat exaggerated. Several
other studies, however, also created alarm. It appeared that children were not only
remaining in care for years on end, but also drifting from one home to another. One study
found that, on average, a 13-year-old child in foster care had lived in four or five different
homes (Pecora et al. 1992). Studies also found that no effort was being made to help
parents keep their children or reunite them once separated. Children in care were
suffering from developmental delays, feelings of inadequacy, fear of attachment and,
ultimately, severe problems adjusting to adult life-all as a result of the instability they had
experienced in foster care (Pecora et al. 1992).

These studies created a strong impression that something was clearly amiss with the
foster care system; and by the 1970s, pressure to reform the system was mounting
(Pecora et al. 1992).

Toward "Permanency Planning"

In 1973, a demonstration project was established in Oregon to try to find a solution to the
problems of impermanence and drift. The project, called "Freeing Children for Permanent
Placement," initially intended to show that older children who had lived in foster care for
several years could be adopted; but the project's leaders also found that children
frequently could be reunited with their birth parents.

The success of this project promoted "permanency planning" as a national movement.
This movement culminated in passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare
Act, which was signed by President Jimmy Carter in June 1980. The act aimed to redirect
the nation's efforts toward strengthening families to avoid child placement, reunifying
children with their birth parents as quickly as possible or, if necessary, placing them in
loving, adoptive homes (Barbell 1996).

Even as the movement was gaining momentum, however, the effects of child abuse and
neglect were just beginning to be fully realized. In 1974, the Child Abuse Prevention and
Treatment Act was passed, providing funding for programs to prevent and treat the
problem of child abuse and establishing the National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect.
Greater recognition of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect – along with clearer definitions – eventually would result in many more parents being reported to child welfare agencies, thus further taxing their limited resources and increasing the demand for foster care. The permanency planning movement made dramatic strides in the early 1980s.

By 1984, the federal law was showing some success in reducing the number of children in care and the length of time spent in care. From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, however, a dramatic 90% increase in the number of children in out-of-home care occurred (Petit & Curtis 1997); the length of time children remained in care and their rate of reentry into care also rose. Concurrently, the out-of-home care system found itself facing new challenges: the overrepresentation of children of color; an influx of infants and preschoolers; children with increasingly severe emotional and behavioral problems; the pervasiveness of substance abuse and its effect on families, the growing number of children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS; and the discharge of many youths from care who lacked jobs, homes, and connections to a family.¹

Once again, the out-of-home care system found itself straining to deal with the sheer number of children in the system and with the complex issues that had brought them there. Concern grew that many children were coming into care needlessly and that many more could go home or achieve permanency with another family if more family-centered, intensive services were available. Congress again took action, creating the Family Preservation and Family Support program as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993. This program reiterated the principles of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act but added funding for a variety of services, including intensive family preservation services (intended to keep families together) and services to reunify families with children in care.

Despite the mandates and funding of the Family Preservation and Family Support program, the child welfare system continued to struggle to provide the level of services needed for children to achieve timely permanence, the number of children in out-of-home

¹ In 1986, Congress amended the federal foster care program to create the Independent Living Services program, a relatively small program designed to provide services and supports to enhance independent living skills of youths who had not been reunified or adopted and who would remain in care until they "aged out." In December 1999, Congress passed and the President signed the Foster Care Independence Act into law, and it replaced the federal independent living program established in 1986. The new law created the Chafee Independence Program to improve outcomes for youth after they leave foster care. The program provides increased funding for independent living activities and assistance, including room and board, for young people ages 18 to 21 who are leaving foster care. In addition, the act emphasizes the importance of securing permanent families for young people in care, expands opportunities for states to offer Medicaid to transitioning youth, and increases state accountability for transition outcomes.
care continued to increase in most states, and a significant percentage of children experienced increased stays in care. Large caseloads, inexperienced and untrained staff, and high turnover rates of workers and foster parents made it difficult for children and families to obtain the help they needed. In response, in late 1997, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act; President Clinton signed it into law on November 17, 1997. The new legislation reauthorized the Family Preservation and Family Support program, renamed it the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program, and modified and clarified a wide range of policies established under the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 including:

- Modifying the reasonable efforts states must make to preserve or reunite families by promoting examples of circumstances in which states are not required to make efforts to keep children with their parents for safety reasons.

- Establishing (for the first time in federal law) timelines and conditions for filing termination of parental rights petitions. States must file on behalf of any child, regardless of age, who has been in care for 15 of the most recent 22 months.

- Setting new timeframes for permanency hearings at 12 months rather than 18 months. At a permanency hearing, there must be a determination of whether and when a child will be returned home, placed for adoption, or referred for legal guardianship or another planned permanent living arrangement.

- Encouraging adoptions by requiring states to make reasonable efforts and to document child-specific efforts to place a child for adoption, and by providing incentives for the adoption of children with special needs previously in care.

- Continuing and expanding the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program to include funding for time-limited reunification and adoption promotion and support services.

To comply with the law, public and private agencies must initiate significant program and practice changes in the coming years.
References


Foster Care Facts on File

- In 1995, 3.1 million children were reported as abused and neglected—an increase of more than 50% since 1985 and more than 300% since 1976 (National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse 1996).

- Of the children for whom reports were substantiated, 55% were neglected, 26% were physically abused, 10% were sexually abused, 3% were emotionally abused, and 7% were classified as suffering from some other form of abuse (National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse 1996).

- Nationwide, over 540,000 children currently reside in some form of foster care. The number has increased 90% in the past 10 years (Petit et al. 1999).

- In a recent survey of 100 children living in nonrelative foster care, 92% said they felt safe all of the time and 82% said they felt loved all of the time (Wilson 1995).

- 27% of all children who enter foster care are reunited with their birth parents within 6 months (Tatara 1993).

- 66% of children who enter foster care are reunited with their birth parents within two years (Tatara 1993). Approximately one-quarter of children currently in care have no plans for being either adopted or reunited with their birth parents.

- Nationwide, infants and young children under 4 years old comprise the fastest-growing population in need of foster care. Infants also remain in care longer than other children (U.S. House of Representatives 1989).

- Youths between the ages of 13 and 18 comprise roughly one-third of the foster care population (Merkel-Holguin 1993). Each year, 25,000 youths in care reach the age at which they are forced to live on their own because they no longer qualify for foster care.

- Adolescent girls in foster care are twice as likely as other adolescent girls to become pregnant (Barbell 1996).
Between 1984 and 1990, the number of children and youths entering foster care after committing a crime increased by 52% (Barbell 1995).

While all children who enter foster care have special needs, as many as 70% do not have severe emotional, behavioral, or developmental problems (Barbell 1996).

The U.S. General Accounting Office estimates that parental abuse of alcohol and drugs is a factor in the placement of more than 75% of all children in care (U.S. General Accounting Office 1994).

In 1985, 147,000 nonrelative foster care homes were available for 276,000 children in need of care. In 1995, 142,000 nonrelative foster care homes were available for 486,000 children in need of care (Pent & Curtis 1997).

While the number of nonrelative foster parents available to care for children has decreased, the number of relative caregivers has increased. During recent years, foster care agencies have successfully recruited 125,000 relatives to provide homes for children in need of foster care. This form of foster care is called kinship care (CWLA 1994).

More than 85% of children in care have siblings in care, but only 25% are placed together (Barbell 1996).

Children of color are overrepresented in the foster care system by a margin of two to one. Currently, children of color comprise 64% of the foster care population and remain in care longer than any other group (Barbell 1996).

Most foster parents are in the low-to-middle income bracket. Studies show that only 7.2% of foster parents choose to foster as a way to increase their income (James Bell Associates 1993).

On average, foster parents were given $356 per month in 1996 to pay for the expenses of a 2-year-old child. Reimbursement rates ranged from a high of $588 per month in Alaska to $205 per month in Alabama (American Public Welfare Association 1996). In 1996, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated the annual cost of caring for a child in a middle-income, two-parent household to be $655 per month (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1996). In most states, the reimbursement rates for foster parents are lower than the true cost of providing routine care for a child, so foster parents often make up the difference.
As many as 40% of foster parents stop fostering within their first year. In a national study, 64% of foster parents who left the system cited agency-related problems as the primary reason (e.g., poor communication with the foster care worker, insensitivity to the needs of foster parents, and lack of essential supports like respite care, day care, and training). Approximately 22% of foster parents who stop fostering do so for financial reasons (James Bell Associates 1993).

References


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