



Strengthening Families & Communities

TEAM APPROACH TO RECRUITMENT/RETENTION WORKING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

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Team Approach To Recruitment/Retention Working In New Hampshire

Recruiting and retaining foster parents is one of the biggest challenges in the child welfare arena. To meet this challenge head on, Casey Family Services has helped the State of New Hampshire devise a team approach that is generating positive results in most of the state's 12 district offices.

"Where there is an effective, cohesive team, there is increased recruitment and retention of foster homes," says Gail DeGoosh, foster care specialist in the New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth & Families (DCYF). "Teams with clearly defined roles and tasks, with a real meaning for the team members, have more visible results," she explains. "There is a direct correlation between teaming and outcome."

The team approach evolved from a state mandate to improve recruitment and retention efforts with the help of outside resources. Casey Family Services was selected to help conceive and carry out the mandate, and will continue its involvement at least through 2003.

Teams, led by a resource coordinator and a foster care worker, generally include the foster care worker, a supervisor, a family service worker, an assessment worker, at least two foster parents in the district and a representative from the local foster parent association, if available. These teams develop, write and carry out annual recruitment and retention plans, with Casey providing technical assistance and consulting on team building, agenda setting, plan development and evaluation. The College for Lifelong Learning (CLL), which has a state contract for training foster parents, also conducts workshops as needed.

Clearly Articulated, Measurable Plans

The goal is to produce plans that clearly articulate the needs, goals and activities for the year, including related budgets. "A key element of the process is to help teams write plans with measurable objectives that are linked to the best available recruitment and retention practices," says Bernadette Pelczar, a Casey Family Services social worker who has been a liaison with the state since the assignment began. "By taking time to measure progress, each team can assess results, stay focused and build on accomplishments," she adds.

Recruitment activities developed by the teams range from posting displays in banks, submitting notices for church bulletins, and providing bookmarks and flyers in local libraries, to speaking at community events, sponsoring advertising campaigns and conducting information sessions. One office came up with the simple but effective idea of asking each new foster parent to distribute one recruitment poster following a six-week training program.

Retention activities include coffee chats, potluck dinners with activities or speakers, mentor and support initiatives, local and statewide newsletters, online networking, family fun days, disruption conferences, and foster parent and staff satisfaction surveys. Teams have also planned family movie nights, appreciation events, teen summits and seasonal family events, and foster parents are asked to participate in information meetings and pre-service training.

“The recruitment and retention plans help me organize thoughts, set goals and see more clearly how to move towards them,” says Jan Feuer, foster care worker in the Keene District Office. “Having a group to support the plans is an extra bonus,” she adds. “I can see if I am trying to accomplish too much. Through the evaluation process I can also see what works and what doesn’t. The plans also allow others to see what we are doing and to ‘professionalize’ our jobs.”

The Benefits of Collaboration and Teaming

As initial plans were revised and fine-tuned, a stronger, more trusting working relationship has evolved, not only between the New Hampshire DCYF and Casey, but also between staff and team members in the district offices. Many teams have been expanded to include representatives from social service, child placement and mental health agencies, as well as teen independent living workers, attorneys, school principals, police and medical professionals, and former foster children. Through this partnership and the collective planning process, the foster care worker’s recruitment role has, in some cases, been redefined. Now team members – notably those foster parents who’ve become an integral part of developing and implementing plans – have been more active in identifying and retaining foster parents, says Pelczar.

Anne Gillen, a dedicated foster parent for 31 years, is a perfect example. As an original member of the Portsmouth District Office Recruitment and Retention Team, she has helped at booths and attended teen summits, among other activities. She also enjoys attending the final night of foster parent training, to share her experience with newcomers.

“I like seeing new things happen,” Gillen explains. “We’re trying to start a local foster parent support group in the community where I live. This is really necessary. When you’re having a bad day with a foster child you don’t call a relative, you call another foster parent, because they know what you’re going through and won’t advise you to quit.”

The Portsmouth office, in fact, has been particularly successful using the team approach, having doubled the number of recruits from the year before. Spearheaded by foster care worker Ann Abram, the team has done every-thing from initiating a “Welcome Wagon” for first-time foster parents (which provides such things as donated diapers and backpacks, as well as a warm smile), to organizing pancake breakfasts and workshops. The team even produced a brochure with the help of DCYF, Casey, Easter Seals and Lutheran Family Services. Because

of this success, Abram is serving as a kind of trouble-shooter and idea generator for all 12 districts.

“What’s clear from this process is that one person can’t do everything that’s required for effective recruitment and retention,” notes Pelczar. “You need a team, with the support of staff, administration and community. There’s no magic formula, but responsibilities must be shared so the effort can be sustained.”