



**COLORADO**  
**Office of Children,  
Youth & Families**  
Division of Child Welfare

Date: December 27, 2017

To: All County Human/Social Services Directors, Administrators, Supervisors, Caseworkers, Child Placement Agency Executive Directors and staff

From: Ann Rosales, MSW, Director - Division of Child Welfare

Title: Summary of Foster Parent Feedback from Town Hall Meetings and Teleconference

Regarding: Experiences of foster parents while providing care to children/youth, helpful practices, and suggestions for improvements

Key Words: Experiences, Professional, Replicate, Strengths, Suggestions

Number: IM-CW-2017-0065

Information Memorandum

The purpose of this memorandum from the Division of Child Welfare is to provide county departments of human/social services directors, child welfare directors, administrators, supervisors, caseworkers, child placement agency executive directors, and child placement agency staff with a summary of feedback provided by foster parents about their experiences providing foster care within the context of working with child welfare agencies and community partners.

The Colorado Department of Human Services conducted six (6) onsite foster parent town halls from October 2 - November 1, 2017. Locations included Colorado Springs, Denver, Ft. Collins, Grand Junction, Greeley, and Longmont. A facilitated statewide teleconference occurred on November 29.

This information memorandum is divided into two parts, to include strengths and helpful practices that were identified and the common themes/concerns that were conveyed during the town halls and teleconference.

A. Identified Strengths and Helpful Practices:

- o Responsiveness by the agency, "If there are issues they are on it and want to help";
- o 'Quick' (timely) communication from the agency by telephone or email helps the foster parent feel valued and appreciated;
- o Getting encouragement from the treatment team to, "Keep doing what you are doing";
- o Giving foster parents access to clinical support;
- o Having in-home support in the foster home;
- o An agency provides mentor families to support foster families;
- o An agency hired in-home respite and the provider travels to the foster home;
- o Appreciation is shown for each person in the foster family;
- o Caseworkers help share the transportation with the foster parent;
- o Having staff meetings at the foster home with the children/youth in care involved;
- o Caseworkers who are supportive to foster parents;
- o A great foster care resource caseworker;
- o Having the caseworker visit in the foster home with both the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) and other staff at the same time helps the foster parent get more information;
- o A county department has a resiliency curriculum for caseworkers;

- o Courts that invite foster parents to speak;
- o Foster parents that feel supported by GALs and get their opinions heard;
- o Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) helps the foster parent with transportation;
- o CASA offers short term respite to the foster parent; and,
- o The Colorado Foster Parent Association has 'Parents with Altitude', a closed and monitored Facebook group for foster parents. Foster parents can share tips and strategies to support others. The names of participants in the group are confidential. Information is shared about training and new rules, etc.

Suggestions to Improve Support to Foster Parents:

- o A speakers' bureau of foster parents to provide workshops to caseworkers about fostering (funding support needed);
- o A general hotline to support foster parents so they can call and get objective information that is not agency related;
- o In one community, CASAs had designated parking and a room to relax before court. That would be helpful for foster parents who attend court;
- o Invest more funding to support existing foster parents rather than focusing spending on recruitment of new foster parents;
- o Have more realistic foster care ads. "The ad made foster care look simple. It is easy on the outside but not on the inside";
- o Streamline the certification process to three to four (3-4) months. Applicants get discouraged when it takes six (6) or more months; and,
- o Resources like the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) should follow the child.

The strengths and helpful practices identified above are indicators that the needs of foster parents are considered. Foster parents spoke about their positive experiences:

- o "When you work with people who believe in you and you know it, it makes a difference. Just the appreciation from caseworkers keeps you motivated."
- o "If I have questions I ask and get the answers and have had tremendous support. The caseworker is amazing! I get information and ask caseworkers for advice (in meetings, by email, and for books to read). The kids had therapists, buddies, and big brothers in place."
- o "When it goes well, the caseworker listens to the foster parent, the team is working well with the GALs and the CASA, and there is help with transportation."

B. Common Themes/Concerns Conveyed by Foster Parents:

Foster parents' opinions have been collected through a variety of surveys since 2008. The current concerns foster parents communicated are consistent with previous surveys. The most prevalent concern for foster parents is a sense of not being valued or treated as professionals. Six (6) common themes/concerns from the foster parent town halls were:

1. Being respected and treated as professionals;
2. Access to respite and other needed supports;
3. Information sharing;
4. Transportation;
5. Inconsistent practice and decision-making; and,
6. Foster parents and courts.

The roots of the reported concerns may be embedded in organizational and institutional culture, resource access and development, and/or financial resources.

1. Respect and Being Treated as Professionals:

"Am I part of the team or not?" Foster parents said they want to be part of a collaborative team and want to be considered professionals as part of the treatment team. This includes involvement in decision-making related to children/youth in their care. Many said their opinions about the best interest and well-being of the children/youth in their care frequently are not solicited or when asked, their feedback has little or no significant impact on the decisions that are made. Invitations to participate in treatment team meetings and family engagement meetings are inconsistent and vary by county department of human/social services and caseworker. Foster parents reported that they are sometimes discouraged from attending Administrative Reviews and court hearings or the significance of their participation is not valued.

Foster parents reported that sometimes Guardians ad Litem (GALs) are not respectful. The frequency and length of time of visits between the children/youth and GALs varies, which can impact their understanding about the needs of the children/youth. GALs sometimes make decisions unilaterally

without consideration of the foster parents' knowledge and opinions about the children/youth in their care.

Foster parents reported hearing messages conveying: "Disempowerment, babysitters, temporary workers, and disposable." They are concerned about advocating or pushing issues too far, fearing the children/youth will be removed. "Fostering is really hard. We invest 100% of ourselves, we are put in a position to care for a child, to bond and attach, but when you do, you and the child are put in a vulnerable position and you have no say about the child you are supposed to be protecting."

Foster parents said that like all families, they need to have normal routines such as mealtimes, study time, family time, and time to relax, etc. They reported a lack of recognition of this need. It is frequently an expectation that foster parents provide transportation to visitation for the children/youth in their care during times that interfere with the daily routine such as during dinner hours and on weekends. This impacts full-family participation in routines or weekend activities. This may require foster families with two (2) parents to split activities and commitments, leaving children/youth missing both parents' participation and the foster parents missing the activities. Foster parents also reported that sometimes evening visitation conflicts with special school events or activities and children/youth are often disappointed, angry, and/or act out when they cannot participate in the event.

There were concerns that professionals visiting the children/youth in foster care often do not acknowledge the other children living in the home, their birthdays, special events, holidays, and instead focus solely on those in foster care.

Feedback: Foster parents suggested that support of a more respectful practice could include agencies examining strategies to encourage more inclusion of foster parents in decision-making through participation in treatment team and family engagement meetings. Recognize the importance of family routines to promote stability for the entire family. Schedule visitation at times respectful of the child/youth, the family, and foster family, and allows for flexibility for special events and activities of children/youth when it conflicts with visitation. Take time to talk to the other children/youth in the home. Bring a small gift and include them in lunch sometimes.

2. Access to Respite and Other Supports:

Certifying county departments of human/social services and child placement agencies (CPAs) sometimes deny an application for foster care for families interested in providing respite only. Foster parents report that it is difficult to locate respite, especially for older children/youth and at times there is a lengthy search for providers. Frequently foster families rely on families they know. A foster parent said that it is a good service to provide for others and yet it adds strain on the family providing respite to extra children/youth and there are no incentives for foster parents to provide respite.

Foster parents reported that it is difficult to understand who can watch the children/youth in their care, who can transport, who needs to be cleared, and who does not. Based on the feedback, it appears that certifying agencies make agency-specific and sometimes caseworker or staff-specific decisions about who can provide a break for foster parents.

Feedback: Certify respite-only foster homes. Find a way to incentivize county departments of human/social services and CPAs to provide respite. Develop a "child care.com" so foster parents know who is qualified to provide respite. Certifying agencies could make a collective respite list and open it to all foster families. Recruit respite providers for older children/youth.

Other Identified Supports:

**Mentoring:** It is helpful for first-time foster parents to meet other foster families and it could contribute to retention of foster parents. Pairing less experienced and experienced foster families makes a difference because of common experiences and in building relationships.

**Transition planning:** Transition planning for the children/youth being reunified is often inadequate and sometimes non-existent. For example immediate reunification of a child/youth may be ordered by the court. The child/youth is excited to reunify, but does not get an opportunity to process the move home or to say goodbye to the foster family. Lack of transition is confusing and difficult for the entire foster family. "When a child leaves with short or no notice the foster parents feel like they did something wrong." Foster parents must deal with the situation in spite of their own grief and loss and also attend to the grief and loss for the other children/youth in the home. Foster parents said that sometimes professionals and the courts forget or do not acknowledge that the children/youth in the family formed

strong relationships and friendships. Those remaining in the home have to deal with the likelihood of never again being able to see the children/youth that left.

**Foster parent preparation:** Foster parents' experiences in preparation for fostering varied. Twenty-seven hours of preservice training is acquired differently depending on the practice of the certifying agency. For example some agencies send their foster care applicants to the state foster parent core training which is approximately 12 hours and then the applicants either seek an additional 15 hours on their own or get training required by their certifying agency. Other agencies provide the entire 27 hour preservice training. The pre-service curricula vary by agency.

Foster parents reported a steep learning curve in the first year and once they acquired some experience they were better prepared.

Feedback: Foster parents always need support to be successful in meeting the needs of the children/youth in their care, regardless of their experience.

**Child care:** Foster parents reported that the cost of child care sometimes threatens their ability to continue fostering. Foster parents working outside the home often do not receive assistance for the child care costs. This is especially a financial challenge for single working foster parents. Foster parents reported child care issues when schools have four (4) day weeks and during school breaks.

Feedback: Increase the reimbursement for foster care maintenance so that one foster parent can stay at home. Provide the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) for all foster parents that need it. Provide funding or a grant program for children in foster care to go to specific child care centers. Require all child care facilities to reserve slots for children in foster care.

**Access to therapy:** Foster parents said they experience secondary trauma as a result of their work. The stress of fostering impacts their marriages and relationships. They experience grief and loss after children/youth leave their care and said that no one processes their feelings with them or checks in to see how they are doing.

Feedback: Make therapy available to foster parents to process secondary trauma and grief and loss.

**Support when there are allegations of abuse/neglect:** Foster parents said they need support when allegations of abuse/neglect are made because it is a stressful and sometimes frightening experience for the entire family. Foster parents are scrutinized and investigated. A founded disposition can jeopardize their outside jobs. Interviews with children/youth living in the foster home can be confusing and scary.

Feedback: Make the process less adversarial and isolating.

### 3. Information Sharing:

Foster parents said receiving as much information as possible helps them to understand the needs of the children/youth in their care, especially when transitioning into the foster home. Some experienced foster parents reported that they learned to ask for specific information before accepting a placement such as expectations about visitation and specific issues because it makes the transition smoother.

The extent of information provided initially and ongoing varies by county department of human/social services, caseworker, and sometimes the CPA. It can also vary by caseworker/staff from the same agency. Foster parents said sometimes information that cannot or is not provided by the caseworker is heard in court. The hearings are generally public proceedings. Some foster parents reported that more information is revealed once the relationship with the caseworker is established. Sometimes it is information that would have been helpful early in the placement. Foster parents said lack of information was isolating because they do not know what is happening or the progress in the case.

Rules require information sharing however foster parents report a lack of consistency in what is provided. A foster parent who serves older children/youth who are more difficult to place and who have 'tough' behaviors needing more support said these behaviors are sometimes 'downplayed'. The foster parent said, "There is a thin line between downplaying and being upfront and honest about struggles." Another foster parent reported that first child placed in the foster home was suicidal, the foster parent was unprepared for the experience, and did not know who to call.

Feedback: Foster parents suggested making requirements for information that should be expected in the first 24 hours and 48 hours, etc., and thereafter as it is acquired. Foster parents said they should have a right to a telephone number that works 24 hours a day when there is a crisis. Emailing updates (foster parents and caseworkers) would be helpful. A foster parent discussed daily journaling provided to the caseworker as an update about what is happening for the children/youth. Have a complaint process for foster parents to know the chain of command if there is concern about child safety and others in the case are not responsive to the concerns. Establish secure system for communication (data system) so that those involved in the case are expected to use it for conveying and reviewing information.

4. Transportation:

Transportation is a significant issue. Working foster parents said that sometimes their jobs are put in jeopardy due to the time intensive needs of the children/youth in their care. Foster parents reported having multiple weekly appointments including medical, dental, speech/language, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and mental/behavioral health therapy appointments for the children/youth in their care. Some also transport the children/youth to and from school. This is generally done with little or no support. A foster parent said, "I had seven (7) appointments a week including some in the home. That's a lot for one kiddo. You couldn't leave the house. I am committed and couldn't do anything for anyone else. Sometimes I think it gets glossed over."

Foster parents reported that sometimes they consider accepting the placement of a child/youth based on the location of the school. It is difficult to transport when children/youth are enrolled in different schools and they need to be at school and picked up at the same time.

Visitation times vary and can be less than an hour, eight (8) hours, and held once or multiple times weekly. Foster parents reported "useless down time" when there are short visitations or if there is a significant distance between the foster home and the visitation location and they are unable to make use of the time. When this is done for multiple children/youth in care weekly, it is overwhelming. As the case moves towards closure, the frequency and length of visitation often increases. Foster parents reported that when they ask for help or push back about the expectations they are told, "This is your job."

Feedback: Foster parents said if the agency, caseworkers, child placement agency staff, or CASAs transported one way, it would provide relief.

5. Inconsistent Practice and Decision-Making:

Foster parents reported inconsistent expectations and policies from county department of human/social services and caseworkers regarding foster parents' involvement in family engagement meetings, information sharing, access to resources, and providing guidance and support. They said information about special respondent and intervenor status is not consistently provided. Some foster parents said they are discouraged from intervening. Foster parents said the skill level and training of family engagement meeting facilitators varies, impacting their effectiveness.

Foster parents reported mixed experiences with county departments of human/social services and said their relationships even within the same county can be very different, depending on the caseworker, expectations, and level of trust. Foster parents acknowledged that caseworkers have significant responsibilities and were concerned about turnover. "Caseworkers are in the middle and under fire from the start and in trouble with everybody."

Foster parents said that there should be more intensive family search and engagement efforts at the beginning of the case. Some reported they located family members on social media and sometimes sooner than the caseworkers. Foster parents said that at times there was a lack of follow-up when the information was provided to the caseworker.

Foster parents reported varying expectations in their handling of technology used by children/youth in their care such as cellular telephones and social media. There were concerns about their ability to monitor who the children/youth were communicating with and when. Foster parents reported unsafe situations for the child/youth in their care regarding their use of technology. Some foster parents were allowed to manage access to the technologies and others were told they could not take a cellular telephone away.

There were mixed experiences regarding the reasonable and prudent parent standard. Some foster parents said they didn't know policy for the county department(s) of human/social services with legal custody of the children/youth in their care. Other foster parents from CPAs said they knew the county

departments' policies but if they conflicted with the CPA's policy, they were required by their certifying agency to follow the latter.

Feedback: Family engagement meeting facilitators should have a consistent facilitator training. Increased family search and engagement efforts should occur sooner in the case so that children/youth have shorter placements in foster care. Share reasonable and prudent parent standard policies. Reduce caseworkers' caseloads.

6. Foster Parents and Courts

In order to be eligible to receive a Court Improvement Program grant, Section 438 [42 U.S.C. 638] (b)(1) requires: "A highest State court shall have in effect a rule requiring State courts to ensure that foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers of a child in foster care under the responsibility of the State are notified of any proceeding to be held with respect to the child."

Section 475 [42 U.S.C. 675] (5)(G) requires: "The foster parents (if any) of a child and any pre-adoptive parent or relative providing care for the child are provided with notice of, and a right to be heard in, any proceeding to be held with respect to the child, except that this subparagraph shall not be construed to require that any foster parent, preadoptive parent, or relative providing care for the child be made a party to such a proceeding solely on the basis of such notice and right to be heard."

Section 19-3-502 (6), C.R.S. requires: "A person may be named as a special respondent on the grounds that he resides with, has assumed a parent role toward, has participated in whole or in part in the neglect or abuse of, or maintains a significant relations with the child."

Section 19-3-507 (5)(a), C.R.S. requires: "Parents, grandparents, relatives, or foster parents who have the child in their care for more than three months who have information or knowledge concerning the care and protection of the child may intervene as a matter of right following adjudication with or without counsel."

Many foster parents did not know they had rights in the court process regarding the children/youth in their care. They didn't have an understanding of intervenor or special respondent appointment. Foster parents reported both inconsistent and timely notice of court dates. Some received written notices consistently, some received notices depending on the court, sometimes notice was provided verbally by the caseworker (notices are usually generated by the county department of human/social services).

Foster parents also reported that court officers did not consistently invite them to be heard in court. The differences in practice happened among judicial districts, as well as within judicial districts. In some instances, the GAL was instrumental in asking the court to invite the foster parent to be heard.

Significant information was collected in the foster parent town halls and teleconference regarding concerns from foster parents and also recognition of some of the helpful practices that support foster parents and that are appreciated.

For questions about this Information Memorandum, please contact:

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Thank you for your continued efforts to improve the foster care experience for foster parents and the children/youth in their care.

Memo Website: <https://sites.google.com/a/state.co.us/cdhs-memo-series/home>