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breakthrough series
collaborative

Recruitment and Retention of Resource Families

Promising Practices and Lessons Learned

casey family programs

About Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs' mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately to prevent the need for—foster care.

Established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, the Seattle-based national operating foundation has served children, youth, and families in the child welfare system since 1966.

The foundation operates in two ways. It provides direct services, and it promotes advances in child welfare practice and policy.

Casey collaborates with foster, kinship, and adoptive parents to provide safe, loving homes for youth in its direct care. The foundation also collaborates with counties, states, and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to improve services and outcomes for the more than 500,000 young people in out-of-home care across the United States.

Drawing on four decades of front-line work with families and alumni of foster care, Casey Family Programs develops tools, practices, and policies to nurture all youth in care and to help parents strengthen families at risk of needing foster care.

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I: Summary of the Recruitment and Retention Breakthrough Series Collaborative

In September 2002, 26 public child welfare agencies from across the country, representing over 94,000 children in out-of-home placement, were selected to participate in an innovative project focused on recruiting and retaining resource families.[1]

This project employed a method for achieving system change that was new to the field of child welfare: a method called the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC). In a BSC, small-scale changes are rapidly tested to achieve dramatic system-wide improvements in a short period of time. These small-scale tests of change often go through multiple cycles of modification and, when deemed successful, are spread quickly throughout the jurisdiction. If the tests are determined to be unsuccessful, they are stopped—thus ensuring that only the best ideas for change are implemented system-wide. This approach eliminates the time-intensive, belabored planning efforts that often hinder successful, rapid change in public systems.

Tests of change are shared with other teams through conference calls, an Internet site, and in-person meetings—allowing teams to "steal shamelessly" from one another. Over the course of fourteen months of the

[1] Although 26 teams were initially selected to participate in this BSC, four teams withdrew following the first learning session due to internal changes in leadership and ensuing shifts of organizational priorities. The complete list of participating teams can be found in Appendix A.

Recruitment and Retention BSC, participating agencies tested over 400 small changes in their pilot sites, shared learnings with the other participating teams, and rapidly spread successes throughout their entire jurisdictions. In addition to attaining measurable improvements in outcomes for children and families in their pilot sites, these public child welfare agencies made some remarkable organizational culture changes in a little more than a year.

Key Practice Themes Emerging from This Collaborative Include:

- ➥ Engaging in culturally sensitive recruitment
- ➥ Creating partnerships with the faith community in recruitment
- ➥ Learning about, educating, and engaging targeted communities in recruitment efforts
- ➥ Recruiting new families willing to care for adolescents and sibling groups
- ➥ Being responsive and attentive to the needs, questions, and concerns of resource families
- ➥ Creating opportunities for resource families and birth families to talk to each other about the children in care
- ➥ Ensuring strong partnerships with the agency and clear roles for resource families
- ➥ Creating opportunities to listen to the voice of children and youth in care
- ➥ Making certain that the perspectives of the resource family are heard in numerous ways
- ➥ Finding unique ways to hear the perspectives of birth families and honoring their involvement in the lives of their children

II: Background and Overview of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative Methodology

The BSC methodology was developed in 1995 by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and Associates in Process Improvement (API). This quality improvement method has been used extensively in the field of health care for more than eight years.

The IHI has led BSCs in over 25 different topic areas, including reducing delays and waiting times in emergency rooms; reducing Caesarean section rates; improving end of life care; and improving critical care.

In December 2000, Casey Family Programs (Casey), a national operating foundation based in Seattle, Washington, joined with the IHI to learn the BSC methodology so that it could be transferred to the child welfare field. A joint BSC, sponsored by Casey, focused on "Improving Health Care for Children in Foster Care." Eight public child welfare agencies were selected to participate in this project through a competitive application process, and, together with their partners from other agencies, they tested and implemented changes in nine key domains.

Based on the success of the Health Care BSC and the nationally identified need to improve the recruitment and retention of caregivers within the foster care system, in March of 2002 Casey launched a BSC with additional funding from the Packard Foundation. This BSC focused on recruiting and retaining resource families. Following a competitive application process, 25 public child welfare agencies and one American Indian tribe were selected from over 50 applications to participate. Each

agency assembled a team comprised of child welfare staff, resource families, community members, and youth in care. Teams worked together to make changes and implement new strategies for the recruitment and retention of resource families. The teams (from across the country) were guided and mentored by a nine-member faculty chosen for their experience in and commitment to the recruitment and retention of resource families. The teams came together for three gatherings (learning sessions) where they shared their small tests of change, collaborated with one another, and encouraged one another in their system change process.

While teams in the BSC use a pilot site to test their changes, the Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology is not a standard pilot project. It is a specific quality improvement method that is designed to enable participating teams to make dramatic improvements in a focused topic of practice over a short period of time; in this case, the way public child welfare agencies recruit and retain resource families.

A BSC is not intended to create an entirely new body of knowledge. Instead, it is intended to fill the gap between what is known as "best practice" and what is actually practiced in the field. Oftentimes, particularly in public agencies, policies already reflect these best practices. But for many reasons these practices are not being implemented in the field. The key to a BSC is using a variety of techniques to bridge this gap between what is known and what is done. Several critical characteristics of the BSC methodology help agencies quickly test and then fully implement these best practices in ways that are tailored to the individual agency and therefore sustainable over time.

1. Rapid Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles are used

PDSA cycles are one of the keys to the rapid changes that are witnessed in a BSC. Instead of spending weeks, months, or years planning for massive changes, teams are encouraged to test an idea as soon as it occurs. As an example, one of the youth members of a team suggested providing information about a prospective resource family to a youth prior to placement. Rather than creating a workgroup to develop a form, determine who would administer the form, figure out how the information would be collected and shared, and so on, the youth simply put together a form with the basic information she thought other youth would like to know and tried it out with one resource family. This quick test was completed within a few days and the learnings were then applied immediately to a subsequent test, which included several resource families. Teams are encouraged never to plan

more than they can actually do—and if they can't complete their test rapidly, they need to make their test even smaller. In the BSC, the spirit of conducting rapid small-scale changes is captured in the phrase "What can you do by next Tuesday?"

2. Anyone can have and test ideas

Ideas for practice and system improvement do not come only from management. Placement workers, licensing workers, resource families, youth in placement, community members, birth families, people from diverse ethnic communities, and everyone involved in the system have a great deal of experience and knowledge to draw from, and thus all have their share of good ideas. Another key to the BSC is that all of these people have a sanction to test their ideas and share their learnings with others within the context of a standard framework (see point 5 below). This allows all participants to draw upon their own expertise to help improve the system. With checks and balances built in through supervisory consultation and team meetings, this approach encourages the innovative social worker, resource family, licensing worker, youth in care, and others to try out ideas that they believe will improve outcomes for children and families.

3. Consensus is not needed

Instead of spending time trying to convince one another of a "better way" of practice, the BSC encourages participants to test their ideas in the field rather than simply talking about their ideas in a meeting room. Participants do not need to agree with one another for an idea to be tested; the convincing comes naturally once people start to see the results of the tests. The ensuing conversations are about real results and feedback rather than assumptions or hypothetical situations.

4. Changes happen at all levels (not just at the top)

All people have some level of influence, whether they are the senior leader of the project at a Commissioner/Director/Administrator level, or a youth in care. It is important that every person involved is willing to test and make changes at his or her own level. This helps everyone break free of the "if only they [usually management] would do *x*, everything would be better" mentality. In this particular BSC, when a youth in care realized that children entering placement receive very little information about what to expect, she did not recommend that management fill this gap. Instead, she took it upon herself to develop a handbook for children entering placement.

5. All BSC work is grounded in a standard comprehensive framework

Each BSC is based upon a nationally developed comprehensive framework that guides the work of the teams. The framework for the Recruitment and Retention BSC was developed over the course of six months and included input from experts from all areas of child welfare, including resource families, youth and young adults currently and formerly in care, birth families, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. This framework identifies eight key components of an ideal system for recruiting and retaining resource families, ranging from messaging to developing relationships with resource families to agency staffing. Rather than selecting one of these components to focus on, each team must commit to work simultaneously in all component areas to ensure complete system-wide impact. It is the synergy that occurs when working on these components simultaneously that creates maximum system improvement.

6. Ideas are "stolen shamelessly"

This methodology is entitled the Breakthrough Series Collaborative for a distinct reason. Each participating team in the BSC can benefit greatly from the successes and learnings of all the others. In-person meetings, a project extranet site, and monthly conference calls all present opportunities for teams to capitalize on the successes of others as well as to learn from their mistakes. When one team designs a profile form to collect information about a resource family that can be shared with youth entering placement, there is no reason for the other participating teams to create their own form. Instead, they can simply customize the profile form and begin testing it in their own site the next day.

7. Successes are spread quickly

Many pilot projects begin and then remain in a pilot site indefinitely, or, in other instances, once a "project" is completed, the pilot disappears. The learnings from the pilot may not be effectively communicated to the rest of the system, the learnings may not seem applicable to other sites, or resources may not be committed to spreading the new practice model—and opportunity for system improvement is lost. The BSC method prevents this from happening. Once a change has been tested successfully in the pilot site, the team is responsible for spreading that specific small change immediately throughout the entire jurisdiction. Lessons learned are shared between and across the state, county, or tribe, and each site has the opportunity

to modify the test in order to ensure the practice change works for that specific geographic, cultural, or ethic area. Each change is tested and rolled out quickly so that others across the county or state can reap the benefits without having to wait for a "final report" on the success of the pilot. As successful changes continue to be spread in real time through natural peer-to-peer relationships, the culture of "stealing ideas shamelessly" also spreads throughout the jurisdiction, creating "a microculture of innovation," to quote a participant in the Health Care BSC.

8. Measurement is for improvement, not for research

Measurement is a critical aspect of the BSC methodology, as the BSC strives to gauge improvements over time. In the Recruitment and Retention BSC, each participating team was required to track and report on seven specific measures on a monthly basis, including:

- Availability of appropriate resource families for children needing placement
- Partnership between resource families, birth families, and the agency
- Placement stability
- Kinship placement
- Placement with siblings
- Retention of resource families
- Satisfaction of birth families and/or youth

By looking at progress in these measures each month, even when the numbers are small or not scientifically tracked, teams can tell if they are making an impact on children and families. (See Section III, Development and Use of a National Framework and Measures, for more details.) Anyone can make changes for the sake of change; in the BSC, we make changes for the sake of improvement.

III: Development and Use of a National Framework and Measures

Each BSC is based on a comprehensive framework and set of measures that guide all work done by the teams. The framework and set of measures were developed by a national group of experts including families, youth and young adults currently or formerly in foster care, workers, managers, policy-makers, advocates, and researchers.

In the Recruitment and Retention BSC, the framework identified eight "doable" practice components of an ideal system for recruiting and retaining resource families, ranging from messaging to developing relationships with resource families to agency staffing. As a companion to this framework, each team was required to track seven measures on a monthly basis in their pilot sites.

Each team committed to working simultaneously in all eight component areas to ensure system-wide impact. To ensure that changes were not just made for the sake of change, teams reviewed their progress on the measures monthly to identify trends and evaluate improvements.

The components of a strong recruitment and retention system for resource families include:

Framework Components[2]

1. **Messaging**
   Public awareness must be raised about the needs of children in the public child welfare system, both in general and in specific ways.

2. **Engaging Resource Families During the Recruitment Process**
   The likelihood must be increased that families who express interest in becoming resource families will follow through with the process.

3. **Supporting Families and Children Through the Process and Preparing Them for Placement**

4. **Licensing**
   Qualified resource families must be licensed in a timely and supportive way.

5. **Providing Services and Supports for Resource Families**
   Resource families must have the services and supports they need to provide appropriate care for children and their families.

6. **Developing Relationships and Supporting Involvement with the Agency**
   Resource families, youth, and birth families must be true partners with the agency.

7. **Involving the Community**
   The community must be an active partner in recruiting and supporting resource families, youth in care, and their families.

8. **Staffing**
   Appropriate and well-trained staff throughout the agency who can recruit, support, and engage resource families, children in care, and the children's families must be recruited and retained.

[2] The complete Framework for Change can be found in Appendix B.

The areas in which teams measured their progress monthly were a mixture of process and outcomes. These areas included:

Collaborative Measures[3]

- Appropriate resource families for children needing placement
- Partnership between resource families, birth families, and the agency
- Placement stability
- Kinship placement
- Placement with siblings
- Retention
- Satisfaction of birth families and/or youth

A careful reading of the practice framework may actually result in readers generating ideas for small tests of change to improve the practice of recruiting and retaining resource families—just thinking this way about system change can be quite exciting. The teams certainly came up with ideas—hundreds over the course of the project. Over 400 PDSAs were tested over the 14 months of the BSC. Many of the practices that teams tested were already in place in various jurisdictions across the country or were already being practiced by one or two workers within a system, and the remainder were new practice ideas. The BSC provided an opportunity for teams to customize and adapt the existing practices for their own jurisdictions as well as to test practice ideas new to the field of child welfare. As each team tested ideas for system improvement in the component areas and shared its learning with the other teams, best practice themes began to emerge.

[3] The complete list of detailed measures can be found in Appendix C.

IV: Themes, Strategies, and Lessons Learned

The Organic Nature of the BSC

At the conclusion of the BSC, all 400+ of the PDSAs self-reported by participating teams were catalogued and categorized into a searchable database.

Through a comprehensive review of these PDSAs, reflection on the learning sessions, conference calls with teams and faculties over the course of the 14 months, and individual conversations with faculty members and BSC participants, ten key practice themes, along with accompanying "lessons learned," were identified as the true linchpins to improvements in recruiting and retaining resource families.

Because the framework provides great latitude to test diverse practice changes—especially as this BSC moved in unanticipated directions—several unexpected practice themes emerged. These emerging themes resulted in an organic and dynamic process in the BSC itself. For example, when teams sought to involve resource families to a greater degree in assessment and case planning activities (one of the framework components), biases of social workers were uncovered and needed to be addressed in order to improve retention. When teams sought to enhance the relationships between resource families and birth families to improve retention (another framework component), resource families' negative or fearful attitudes toward birth families were uncovered. These attitudes needed to be faced head on before systemic change could occur. When resource families stated explicitly that a specific practice or practice area directly affected recruitment and retention of families (not receiving enough information about children coming into their homes, for example) teams knew that they could go no further until they tested change in that

practice area. When youth on the teams shared something about their foster care experience (such as the pain it caused them to be placed in a home they knew nothing about), the teams knew it was necessary to honor their voices and create tests of change to improve experiences for children entering care.

It would have been challenging to predict these themes prior to the BSC. As a result of these unanticipated directions and resultant new learning, the conversations between and within the teams deepened. Over the course of the BSC, faculty and individual teams began to recognize that the organizational cultures of child welfare agencies needed to change in order to ultimately improve the recruitment and retention of resource families. Agency values and practices are a reflection of its culture. If child welfare systems are to more fully engage resource families in the process of serving children and their families, if we are to fully listen to the voice of the constituents (resource families, youth, and birth families), and if we are to improve the systems that we have in place to respond to the needs of resource families, it will require an examination of and evolution in our collective values, biases, systems, and beliefs.

Faculty and many teams have come to believe that the significance of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology transcended improvements in the way resource families were recruited and retained. While many practices, as detailed in this report, specifically address the issue of recruitment and retention, and the outcome measures certainly indicate measurable improvements in this area, the long-term impacts of this BSC may be even more significant as deep-rooted changes take root in the underlying organizational culture of public child welfare agencies.

Themes and Strategies

While these themes and the strategies that were used to test and implement them are listed as discrete and separate in this paper, there is actually a great deal of overlap between the themes and the strategies. We have tried to categorize these themes and strategies to reflect the intentions of the work done by the participating teams; but we acknowledge that, because the system is complex and intentionally interrelated, the themes and strategies are not always easy to assign to a single category.

The ten themes or lessons learned from the teams can be broken down into three primary areas: (a) recruitment, (b) retention, and (c) voices of constituents. Each theme is numbered from one to ten in the list below. Strategies for each theme are keyed to this list. For example, the three strategies for Theme 1, culturally sensitive recruitment, are numbered 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 where they occur on page 20 and elsewhere in this publication.

Key Themes

A: Recruitment

1. Culturally sensitive recruitment
2. Partnerships with faith-based organizations
3. Educating and engaging the community
4. Recruitment of homes for youth and siblings

B: Retention

5. Support and responsiveness of child welfare agency
6. Role clarity for and inclusion of resource families
7. Resource family–birth family relationships

C: Voices of Constituents

8. The voice of children and youth
9. The voice of resource families
10. The voice of birth families

Definition of Success

It is important for the sake of clarity that we define the term success as used in this paper. We call the team examples "mini-cases of success" and we also note measurable improvements throughout. The term success does not reflect a scientifically proven cause-effect relationship. Instead, it reflects changes in practice that indicate substantial improvements. These improvements may be evident through increased satisfaction on the part of a young person, birth family, resource family, or staff member, or they may be reflected in improvements in some pre-determined outcome. A determination of success is more likely to be based on a qualitative determination about what is best for children and families than on a comprehensive evaluation that correlates a specific test of change to a specific quantitative outcome.

Similarly, the measurable improvements described in later sections do not suggest a direct correlation between a measurable outcome and a specific

test of changes or strategy. Because, within the BSC methodology, multiple changes are being tested simultaneously, this type of causal relationship is not in fact demonstrable. Instead, because teams are tracking specific measures on a monthly basis over the life of the BSC, data used in this report indicates the overall improvements that have resulted from the complete body of practice changes. While many people are seeking a "magic bullet"—a single strategy that would result in a dramatic improvement—the work in a BSC is based on the idea that no single strategy is sufficient to improve an entire system. It is only through a combination of strategies and changes that overall system improvement, as reflected in the measures, will be achieved. While we have attempted to tie the measurable improvements listed throughout this paper to the themes that they are most closely tied, it must be understood that there is a synergy that works between the tests of change and practice shifts across the framework components. There is simply no A+B=C formula for the improved recruitment and retention of resource families.

In this paper we have described what 22 public child welfare agencies discovered were the key themes and critical strategies to improving their systems of recruiting and retaining resource families. These themes and strategies reflect the continuous learning process that all participants and faculty experienced as successful recruitment and retention came to mean so much more than finding the right message to post on a billboard. They demonstrate the need for agencies, and the staff within them, to examine the very foundation upon which child welfare practice is based and to ensure that the organizational culture of each agency supports practices that value relationships with children, youth, and families, and places them in the center of all work as true and meaningful partners.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to a discussion of the small tests of change, how they clustered into key strategies, and how these key strategies led to the emergence of several overall promising practice themes. Specific mini-case studies are presented that further demonstrate the work of the participating teams as the teams tested and ultimately implemented these best practices.

A: Recruitment

Prior to the launch of this BSC, child welfare agencies across the country had identified a lack of available and appropriate resource families as one of the primary challenges they were facing. The majority of these agencies were searching for more successful ways to recruit new families.

They were investing in mass media campaigns, employing marketing professionals to help develop messages, and changing the ways they staffed the recruitment side of the agency. But even as agencies poured time and resources into these broad-based campaigns, they still did not see significant increases in their pool of resource families.

As this BSC unfolded, teams quickly moved away from these resource-intensive recruitment practices and found several aspects of recruitment that truly seemed to make a difference. These differences evolved as a result of their interactions with existing and prospective resource families, conversations with youth who had grown up in the foster care system, discussions with community partners, and ultimately in the measures they were tracking related to available resource families. The aspects of recruitment that teams identified as critical to successful recruitment include:

Culturally Sensitive Recruitment

➥ While child welfare agencies recognized the importance of placing children with families of like cultures and races, they often were not able to make such placements due to a lack of available resource families of color. One of the primary reasons for this is the historically negative interactions between these communities and child welfare agencies.

- As child welfare agencies began to review the materials they used to recruit resource families, they discovered that very little of the material was culturally or linguistically specific; thus, it was no wonder that families of various culture backgrounds were not responding to the messages. Similarly, when prospective families contacted the agency to express interest, their interest was often stymied by an inability to communicate with a staff person who understood their language or culture.

Partnerships with Faith-Based Organizations

- Most child welfare agencies were familiar with the success achieved by the One Church One Child project in Chicago, yet few had tried replicating it. Agencies discovered that the faith communities were incredible potential resources, especially for recruiting families of color.

Educating and Engaging the Community

- Instead of relying on broad-based sweeping marketing campaigns, working with community partners was a theme repeated over and over again by teams. Every team seemed to have some small story of success, yet few had put together a comprehensive campaign based on this idea. Once they began to explore community partners more completely, they found a new source of success.
- Because community agencies are presented with numerous opportunities for partnership, child welfare agencies had to be thoughtful and strategic in both educating and engaging them. They needed to carefully target potential partners, help them understand both the need and the significance of the work, and support them in getting something out of the partnership.

Recruitment of Homes for Youth and Siblings

- The themes identified above could be used to recruit homes for various populations, but the question of recruiting homes specifically for adolescents, teens, and sibling groups was continuously raised by teams and thus merits its own thematic area. Youth and sibling groups needing placement differ from younger children in their strengths and needs, and the resource families that provide care for them must possess a different set of skills.

- Young people often have very strong and clear voices—once they are asked to express them. Instead of searching for possible resource homes for youth while they sit in the office lobby, it often behooves the agency to simply ask the young person who they would like to stay with.
- A common message given by young people in placement to agency staff is, "Let us stay connected to those people who matter to us." While this may appear to be about more than just placement and resource families, helping young people keep their connections supports their placement and provides more stability. These connections are often extremely helpful to resource families as well.

THEME 1:

Culturally Sensitive Recruitment

Because a significant number of children in care are children of color,[4] it is critical to have a pool of resource families who reflect the children's race, ethnicity, and culture. From the onset of this project, there was a high degree of interest across all of the teams in increasing the number of resource families of color. As the various small tests of change occurred, certain activities resulted in a strong positive response within the communities of color. The most important lesson teams experienced was that, in order to recruit families of color, jurisdictions needed to partner with families of color and speak to families in their primary language.

Lack of trust between government systems and people of color exists in both urban and rural settings. A belief that governmental systems have lacked fairness and equity in the treatment of families of color is pervasive. In order to engage families of color, this perception must be overcome.

One of the most effective means of overcoming this perception is by having families of color serve as the voice for the system. Systems need to find explicit ways to mitigate language and cultural barriers that keep families of color from becoming involved in the child welfare system. The overarching strategies that were found to be most successful in recruiting resource families in culturally sensitive ways are listed in the box below.

[4] 63% (338,778 out of 542,000) of children in care are children of color. AFCARS 2001.

Strategies for Culturally Sensitive Recruitment

1.1 Partnering with existing resource families of color to improve engagement of families of color

1.2 Developing and using culturally sensitive recruitment materials

1.3 Responding to inquiries in culturally sensitive ways

1.1 Partnering with Existing Resource Families of Color to Improve Engagement of Families of Color

It is fairly common knowledge in child welfare circles that the best recruiters of resource families are existing resource families. This is particularly true in communities of color, where there is often a great deal of mistrust between the community and the agency. When existing resource families share their positive stories of fostering with their neighbors, fellow church members, other parents at a local park, or in other venues, the impact is much greater than a brochure or public awareness campaign.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Certify resource families of color as co-leaders of foster parent training.
- Conduct joint recruitment by American Indian families and child protection staff (through joint participation in fairs and other events, for example).
- Conduct joint responses to inquiries. If a family of color calls with an interest in becoming a resource family, have a social worker and a family of color jointly respond and meet the prospective family.
- Have existing resource families of color contact prospective families who are going through the process but whose momentum is slowing. Help and encourage them to complete the process.

A Mini-Case of Success
New Mexico and Navajo Nation Partnership

The Navajo Nation Indian Child Welfare workers invited the agency to join them in a recruitment booth at the Window Rock Fair. A short time later the agency attended the Shiprock Fair (the 80th Annual Northern Navajo Nation celebration) and participated in their recruitment booth. Both of these efforts helped demonstrate to the community that the agency truly cared about them—and it ultimately resulted in an increase in resource families.

1.2 Developing and Using Culturally Sensitive Recruitment Materials

Cultural competence is a key aspect of developing trust in a community. Yet when many teams looked at their recruitment materials, they realized their materials had been developed in a one-size-fits-all format. Nearly always in English and often showing young white children, it was no wonder that these recruitment materials often did not have much success in communities of color. This became an area that saw rapid changes followed by positive results in recruitment.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Translate recruitment brochures to Spanish and other appropriate languages.
- Translate resource family application to Spanish and other appropriate languages.
- Translate MAPP (foster parent training curriculum) for families based on language—in this BSC, one team conducted MAPP trainings in Cambodian.
- Distribute fliers to schools that are written in multiple languages (English and Spanish, for example).
- Create a video for specific groups of color: American Indian families, for example.
- Ask resource families to review the home study through a cultural lens; then modify it with their feedback in mind.

1.3 Responding to Inquiries in Culturally Sensitive Ways

Similar to the development of recruitment materials, when inquiries were answered in languages that were not consistent with the language of the inquirer, the prospective resource family was immediately lost. Although many agencies knew this to be the case, they had not yet done anything about it prior to this project.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Conduct informational meetings where primary speakers speak the appropriate language (Spanish, for example). Follow up with communications in the same language.
- Staff resource family inquiry line with culturally sensitive staff who are bi- or multilingual and sensitive to cultural issues.
- Implement a dedicated line for resource family inquiries where the recording is in multiple languages, e.g., Spanish, Khmer, Russian, and Laotian.

Participating teams experienced the following improvements over the course of the BSC. These improvements resulted from various combinations of the strategies and tests of change described above.

Measurable Improvements

- Massachusetts experienced a 60% increase in Cambodian resource families and a 45% increase in Latino resource families.
- New Mexico experienced a 57% increase in American Indian resource families.
- Erie County, New York experienced a 33% increase in Hispanic resource families.
- Oklahoma experienced a 66.7% increase in American Indian resource families.

THEME 2:

Partnerships with Faith-Based Organizations

During this Breakthrough Series Collaborative, there was significant interest in building alliances with faith-based organizations to improve the recruitment of resource families. One of the reasons for this interest is the work done by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) showing that those whose primary motive is altruism possess the characteristics that allow them to be successful resource families: the ability to partner with the birth family and the commitment to ensure that children maintain their connections following placement.[5] Further, a national initiative is underway to engage the faith community in many aspects of child welfare services. Teams were very interested in identifying the most effective means of engaging the faith community in the identification and recruitment of resource families.

The overarching strategies that were found to be most successful in partnering with faith-based organizations are listed in the box below.

Recruiting Strategies for Faith-Based Organizations

- **2.1** Building relationships with faith community leaders
- **2.2** Learning about the specific faith community ahead of time
- **2.3** Communicating with the faith community using multiple methods
- **2.4** Focusing recruitment efforts in the faith community on specific children

2.1 Building Relationships with Faith Community Leaders

Many teams knew that the way to engage communities was through the leadership. But this was often more challenging to act upon than it was to identify as a strategy. Not only did the most influential leadership first need to be identified, these leaders then needed to be educated and engaged in meaningful ways. Not surprisingly, these strategies were most effective when someone in the agency or existing resource families already had a relationship with a faith community leader. Starting from scratch extended the process, as

[5] Ford, M. (2001). *A Guidebook for Training Concurrent Permanency Planning Resource Families in Minnesota.* St. Paul, MN: North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC).

trust had to be built. Teams found that existing resource families often served as a great inroad to the church leaders and engaging them in this process made it both richer and more fruitful.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Conduct meetings face-to-face between leaders and staff in the agency they already know. If no one in the agency has existing relationships, have face-to-face meetings between the leaders and existing resource families.
- Use language that describes the vulnerable children in the community. Explain how these children often have to leave the community because of the lack of homes. Remind the leaders that church-going families often make some of the best and most dedicated resource families.
- Leverage relationships that are already established, including those within the faith community. (See the Shasta County mini-case below).

Shasta County, California achieved some very positive results by leveraging relationships among pastors. This helped them expand their efforts quite dramatically in a short period of time.

A Mini-Case of Success
Shasta County, California and Leveraging Multiple Relationships

The team from Shasta County, California tested the idea of leveraging the relationship among pastors by meeting with pastors of eight churches during their monthly prayer breakfast. This strategy proved very effective as these pastors took it on as a community service that they could accomplish together. A mild form of competition even evolved among the churches regarding how many families could be recruited. This strategy eventually proved successful for numerous teams within the BSC. The pastors were able to give voice to the idea that children going into care were the community's children, and, as such, the community had the responsibility to meet their needs.

2.2 Learning About the Specific Faith Community Ahead of Time

All faith communities are not alike. Each community has its own set of priorities and its own level of understanding about what the faith community—and the agency—are doing. Oftentimes, trust is the first thing that needs to be built before any "real" work can happen. The common goals are usually quite simple, but must be articulated through conversation and partnership. Understanding what the faith community believes is important is the best way to develop common ground quickly.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Complete research prior to meeting with faith community leaders and members to understand existing community efforts of the faith community.
- Develop marketing tools that reflect the messages that faith communities find compelling.

2.3 Communicating with the Faith Community Using Multiple Methods

While face-to-face contact is the most important way to develop initial relationships, it must be supported through multiple communication methods. As in a traditional public relations campaign, there are many ways to reach different members of the faith communities, and all should be employed to make the outreach as wide and deep as possible.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Use the existing church/temple bulletin.
- Hold informational meetings at the church/temple.
- Develop specific messages that can be delivered directly from the pulpit, preferably by the pastor or another member of the faith community.

2.4 Focusing Recruitment Efforts in the Faith Community on Specific Children

Nearly every team that tested faith-based partnerships emphasized that child-specific recruitment is more effective in churches than general recruitment. Church members are more effectively recruited to fostering when the recruiter puts a face, age, gender, and personality to the child needing care.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Have the pastor highlight the needs of one child from the community.
- Train church members to be mentors to youth in temporary placement to give them an opportunity to know them firsthand.
- Use church bulletins to profile specific children from the community who need homes.

A Mini-Case of Success Carver County, Minnesota and Child-Specific Recruitment in Church

The Carver County, Minnesota team was seeking a steady home for a child who had been bouncing between short-term caregivers for some time. Team members partnered with a local church and described this child in the bulletin and from the pulpit. As they told the story of this individual child, they provided information about the child's needs, they created a picture of the child in the hearts and minds of the church members—and in doing so, they found a family for the child.

THEME 3

Educating and Engaging the Community

One of the collaborative's requirements was that each site have a community team or an "extended team" responsible for helping spread successful small tests of change throughout the state, county, or tribal organization. These extended teams were made up of a diverse array of representatives including birth parents, young people, community

providers, representatives from the judiciary, attorneys, guardians ad litem, resource families, law enforcement, schools personnel, and local businesses. Teams quickly learned that effective recruitment cannot occur without the broad support of the community, particularly those members who care about children. In order for the community to respond, however, its members must understand the need for resource families; their role must be made explicitly clear. Each team that met with success in engaging the community employed some variation of five particular strategies in this area.

Strategies for Engaging the Community

- **3.1** Targeting recruitment efforts to a local community or neighborhood using data as the foundation for decision-making
- **3.2** Learning about targeted communities' needs and beliefs
- **3.3** Customizing information for targeted communities
- **3.4** Engaging the business community and other community partners
- **3.5** Combining strategies in conducting a campaign in the targeted community

3.1 Targeting Recruitment Efforts Using Data

Many teams found data to be a critical piece of engaging communities in recruitment efforts. Although the use of data is often thought of simply as education for community members, it is often useful as an engagement tool as well. While statewide or countywide data are often most available to agencies, it is the neighborhood or community-based data that are most compelling to resource families in the locale. Several teams focused recruitment efforts on specific zip codes—and made it clear within their recruitment materials that the data were zip code-specific. Once community members realize how many children from their own community need placement, they are much more likely to step up and make a decision to support those children and their families.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Use data to determine where children in out-of-home care are from by zip code or neighborhood.
- Use data to determine where resource families live.
- Use data to determine specific characteristics of the children in out-of-home care.

3.2 Learning about Targeted Communities' Needs and Beliefs

Over the course of the BSC, teams learned that the general public holds many myths about foster care and foster parenting. Myths that agencies need to correct include the beliefs that foster parents must: have a large home; make a certain amount of money; have children of their own; and own their own home. Community members often have no idea about the kinds of children needing care. In order to develop effective education and awareness campaigns, the agency must first understand what the community members believe.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Ask community members about perceptions of what it takes to become a resource parent.
- Ask community members about perceptions of foster children.
- Ask community members about what they think the children and families in their community need.

3.3 Customizing Information for Targeted Communities

By identifying the myths held in the community, teams were then able to conduct community presentations, modify recruitment Web sites, and refine their recruitment materials to better educate the community. Some teams developed databases and multiple fact sheets for targeted communities based on what they learned through data analysis and surveys of the community.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Develop a database using the data and information collected.
- Develop fact sheets about the targeted community using data and information. These fact sheets can describe the children in the community who need foster care and what their needs are.
- Develop fact sheets that dispel myths and misperceptions around foster children and resource parenting. Based on what you learn by asking community members what they believe, you can tailor these fact sheets to respond directly to their misperceptions. You can also tailor them by language and culture.

A Mini-Case of Success
Denver County, Colorado and Community-Specific Fact Sheets

The team from Denver County, Colorado developed a fact sheet on a targeted community. The team provided facts on children going into care within that community. This fact sheet included a section called "why should we care?" This sheet was distributed throughout the community to highlight the profiled needs and how the community could help.

3.4 Engaging the Business Community and Other Community Partners

As community awareness and engagement improved, successful teams not only partnered with the faith community and other more traditional community partners, but also engaged members of the business community. Numerous teams shared ideas about effective engagement of the business community.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Place “Heart Galleries” that tell the story of specific children and youth in the lobbies of local businesses.
- Insert recruitment materials or messages in paychecks of local businesses.

- Initiate a grocery store recruitment effort. Teams learned that many grocery stores are willing to have a recruitment table located at the front of the store.
- Create foster care business cards to distribute at community business breakfasts.
- Engage Mad Dads—a faith-based urban ministry of men committed to keeping youth off the street—as new partners in neighborhood-based education and recruitment.
- Meet with the editorial board of the local newspaper. Gain the board's support for running a series of stories about children in foster care.

A Mini-Case of Success

Cuyahoga County, Ohio and Engaging the Business Community

The team from Cuyahoga County, Ohio approached the water department and asked if recruitment materials could be placed in the mailings of water bills to Cuyahoga residents for three months. The water department agreed, and recruitment and information materials were distributed to over 359,000 families with great results. Due to the success of these mailings, the team contacted other community entities to request similar mailings. The city of Cleveland agreed to include foster care information in their employee payroll envelopes.

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

The team from Illinois approached a local business asking them to sponsor a foster parent/youth pizza party at a popular local family site in a neighborhood that was targeted for recruitment. The business became much more engaged than just donating money and is now a strong partner and voice in finding neighborhood families to provide care for neighborhood children and youth.

3.5 Conducting a Campaign in Targeted Communities/Neighborhoods

The ideas listed above all describe ways of educating and engaging non-traditional partners in the recruitment effort. The actual campaign builds on all of these foundational efforts and includes involvement of the churches, schools, local businesses, local newspapers, hospitals, and community centers in a focused, time-limited effort that directly targets the misinformation of the community and seeks to improve the community's impression of foster care. Successful teams used the ongoing reminder to the community that "Recruitment Is Everyone's Business!"

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday

- Invite businesses, local community groups, and existing resource families to an informational meeting. The resource families can dispel myths by giving firsthand accounts of their experience.
- Tell the story of foster care and the needs of children and youth in the community. Share the data about the needs of children and families in the neighborhood/community.
- Hold an open house in the home of an existing resource family—so they can tell their story to their neighbors.
- Run multiple stories in the local newspaper of children in foster care who were successfully reunited with siblings or family members or who found a permanent family due to the support of the resource families.

Measurable Improvements

- Santa Cruz County, California had a 72% increase in resource families in the 95060 to 95065 zip codes.
- Catawba County, North Carolina had a 71% increase in resource families in their targeted pilot site.
- Vermont targeted partnerships with school districts and had the following results:
  - 200% increase in the Winfield School District
  - 66% increase in the Cabot School Districts
  - 54% in the Harwood School District
  - 39% in the Northfield School District
  - 30% in the Randolph School District

THEME 4

Recruitment of Homes for Youth and Siblings

According to every team in the BSC, the number of older children lingering in foster care in their state, tribe, or county without an adult who is committed to them was significant. As such, many teams focused on finding placements and long-term, permanent connections for youth. Further, part of ensuring that youth in care have connections to people who care about them means that sibling groups must remain together. This theme is closely connected to, although still separate from, Theme 8, "The Voice of Children and Youth." While ensuring that the youth's voice is heard is one of the essential strategies in recruiting resource families for young people and sibling groups, the youth voice is much more than simply a recruitment strategy.

Strategies for Recruiting Homes for Youth and Siblings

4.1 Engaging youth in identifying possible caregivers

4.2 Drawing upon the pool of existing resource families

4.3 Helping youth build connections with caring adults

4.1 Engaging Youth in Identifying Possible Caregivers

The first lesson learned was that youth are the best source of options for identification of caregivers. By successfully engaging youth in a discussion about people who matter to them, teams were able to find caregivers for older children and for sibling groups. Teams successfully used ecomaps and genograms to identify existing connections of older youth. Teams indicated that, all too often, social workers wait too long to initiate the search for kin (broadly defined to include neighbors, friends, teachers, employers, and extended family) and risk losing critical connections of the child. Teams found that by asking youth early in the process to identify those they feel close to, they reduced the number of youth who had no identified resource families and sibling groups that had to be split apart. Several teams effectively engaged residential care facilities in the recruitment process—paying attention to who visited the youth, who the youth contacted, or who the youth appeared to care about.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Ask youth who it is that matters most to them in their lives, including family members, godparents, neighbors, friends, teachers, employers, and others. Ask these questions early and ask them often.
- Use ecomaps and genograms to identify connections for youth and ways to maintain sibling groups.
- Engage residential facilities in the identification process by asking the facilities to keep track of who is visiting the youth, who the youth is contacting, and who the youth is talking about.

A Mini-Case of Success
Oklahoma and the Use of Genograms

The Oklahoma team implemented the practice of using genograms. The team previously had one worker utilize genograms to engage with families, and especially to solicit, in a non-threatening way, information that could result in leads for placements with relatives. After the team's success with this first worker, it identified a second worker in a different unit to be trained to use genograms. Now all workers are using this tool and finding success at identifying kin.

4.2 Drawing Upon the Pool of Resource Families

Existing resource families who have previously indicated that they are only willing to care for younger children are often an untapped pool of caregiving options for older youth. These existing resource families may be waiting for children that "fit" their desired child profile. Several teams successfully tested a variety of strategies involving asking the existing pool of resource families to care for older youth and sibling groups. Teams held "while you are waiting parties" and found families willing to care for teens. The teams contacted adoption agencies and asked that the prospective families learn more about the older children needing homes.

Often the reason that families are not willing to care for older youth is because they are afraid of them or do not understand them. Teams found that within nearly every pool of resource families are those that are especially successful in caring for youth and for sibling groups. These families seem to understand the way that youth view the world and communicate in a language youth understand. The bottom line is that they like teenagers. The families who care for sibling groups understand how children in care need one another.

Teams were quick to identify families that fit this description: they wished they "could clone them." While cloning may not be an option, teams tried the next best thing. They sought to infuse the enthusiasm of resource families who liked to care for teens and sibling groups into the rest of the pool of families. They paired new resource families with existing families who loved teens and who cared for sibling groups. They asked existing resource families who loved teens to speak at training events and to serve as part of the resource family orientation. These efforts were very successful. As one team told us, "The energy of the resource families who love this work is contagious!"

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Ask resource families who care for younger children if they are interested in caring for older youth and sibling groups. Let them meet older youth in various situations before they commit to fostering them.
- Hold "while you are waiting parties" that include older youth, siblings, and other resource families. Also invite resource families who foster older youth.
- Invite resource families that care for older youth to mentor new families that are caring for older youth. These buddy systems and mentor programs often result in the type of support that resource families need. They also help form connections among older youth placed in different homes.
- Ensure that the resource families who participate in training and orientation events enjoy the company of teenagers and have cared for sibling groups.

4.3 Helping Youth Build Connections with Caring Adults

Another key lesson learned was the importance of helping youth build connections that might evolve into long-term relationships. Several teams focused on creating mentorship, Big Brother/Big Sister, or adult companion programs for youth in care. A creative variation on this approach was tested by the Illinois team. They contacted older, long-term resource families who were no longer providing care to serve as mentors to youth in care. These one-time caregivers may still have a great deal of love to give, but regulations may prevent them from providing care due to their "aging out" of fostering. (Many states have age restrictions for resource families.)

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Create mentorship programs between young people in care.
- Utilize Big Brother/Big Sister or adult companion programs for youth and siblings in care.
- Engage former resource families that have previously cared for older youth and sibling groups. Invite them to become mentors to young people currently in care.

A Mini-Case of Success

Cuyahoga County, Ohio and Youth Mentors

The team from Cuyahoga County, Ohio partnered with a local church that successfully recruited ten youth mentors. These mentors were assigned to children awaiting permanency. In time, these mentors often came to serve as a primary contact for the youth. Some of them became so engaged in a youth's life that they attended case planning meetings and, in some cases, either cared for the youth or adopted the youth.

Measurable Improvements

- Wyoming had a 71% increase in the number of resource families who indicated they felt competent and willing to care for teens.
- New Mexico had a 158% improvement in the number of families who indicated they felt competent and willing to care for teens.
- Catawba County, North Carolina had a 96% improvement in the number of resource families who indicated they felt competent and willing to care for teens.
- Vermont had a 38% increase in the number of resource families who indicated they felt competent and willing to care for teens.
- Catawba County, North Carolina had a 100% increase in the number of sibling groups placed together.
- Hamilton County, Ohio had a 80% increase in the number of sibling groups placed together.
- Erie County, New York had a 33% increase in the number of sibling groups placed together.
- Texas reduced the time that siblings were apart by 73%.

B: Retention

According to the resource families on the teams, retention is the heart of all recruitment. When resource families are strong partners with the child welfare system, when they have effective relationships with birth families, and when their role as an integral part of the professional team is undisputed, they are much more satisfied and more likely to continue to care for children and support birth families.

When asked during the first learning session what some of the barriers were to building these relationships, engaging in effective teamwork, and developing clarity in their roles, resource families described the following experiences.

Lack of Support and Responsiveness from the Child Welfare Agency

- In some cases, resource families are only given a portion of the available information at the time of placement and, without full disclosure, they are unable to meet the child's needs. Additionally, resource families often do not receive a copy of the case plan and thus do not know what the overall plan for the family is or how they can best support the child or family to achieve the plan.
- Calls from the resource family to the agency are not returned for days, and situations can turn into crises before a response comes.
- Some resource families report that children in their homes are not visited frequently by the worker. These families are left to handle very difficult children "on their own"; and they sometimes find themselves unable to meet the challenge.

Lack of Clarity Around Role and Inclusion of Resource Families

- In many cases, resource families are not included in the case planning process, so their roles and the roles and responsibilities of other team members are unclear.
- Resource families may fear that, if they really speak their minds, the children in their care will be removed from their homes, and they will not receive other placements. So they don't communicate their concerns, and consequently, the children's needs are not fully met.
- Resource families sometimes do not feel that they are treated or viewed as equal members of the professional team. As such, their perspectives and concerns are not acknowledged or honored.

Lack of Effective Partnerships Between Resource Families and Birth Families

- Without full disclosure, an opportunity to connect with the birth parents, and support in developing a relationship with the birth parents, resource families are unable to support the child and family toward reunification or another permanency goal.
- Some resource families are not given information about what progress is expected of the birth families, their own expected role in assisting the birth family to meet their goals within the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) time frames, or the success of the birth families in their efforts to reunite with their child.

THEME 5

Support and Responsiveness of Child Welfare Agency

As the resource families on each of the participating teams sat in a large circle in the midst of their teammates at the first learning session, they fielded many questions about their overall satisfaction in serving as resource families. The families said that, while they understood the multiple pressures on workers and the high caseloads the workers faced, they needed to be supported and have their concerns responded to in a timely manner as they cared for children. They wanted to feel assured that they would be given the information they needed, early in the process, to support the children who were being placed in their homes and that when an issue arose, they would receive a rapid callback. The entire room agreed that these were not unreasonable demands; they understood why resource families felt strongly about these issues. In testing key strategies, teams

often discovered that, while these strategies did not require a great deal of additional work on the part of the workers, they yielded great payoffs in increased resource family satisfaction.

Strategies for Improving Support and Responsiveness

5.1 Providing resource families with necessary information about the child and family

5.2 Ensuring that responses to resource family issues and concerns are timely and supportive

5.3 Ensuring regular and frequent visitation of children in placement by the workers

5.1 Providing Resource Families with Necessary Information

It became evident during the team discussions that many social workers were unclear what information they were permitted to share with resource families. The issue of confidentiality arose time and time again as a barrier to effective sharing and team building between resource families and the agency. Senior leaders from the teams made it clear that it was perfectly acceptable for social workers to share information about the child and the child's family with the resource families, but, for many on the teams, this was a new practice. Teams tested multiple ways to improve information sharing with resource families. Additionally, resource families indicated that they rarely received copies of the case plan and often were not invited, or not provided sufficient notice, to attend case planning and case review meetings where critical information about the child was shared. Teams tested ways to ensure that the resource families were part of critical conversations involving the child in their care.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Create a Child Information Sheet that workers complete prior to placement and give to resource parents at the time of placement.
- Develop a Resource Family Policy and Procedure Handbook.
- Invite the resource family to take part in the case planning process.
- Share the case plan with the resource family.

A Mini-Case of Success
Carver County, Minnesota and Child Information Forms

The team from Carver County, Minnesota developed a new form for workers to complete prior to placement. The form details information about the child's health issues, school history, emotional issues, likes and dislikes, and information about the child's family. As a result of the implementation of this new form, resource families express increased ability to effectively care for children coming into their homes. If a worker fails to provide this new data sheet, resource families insist on receiving it.

5.2 Ensuring Responsiveness to Inquiries and Concerns

Resource families shared with their fellow team members some of the frustrations they experienced when they first called the agency to inquire about becoming a resource family. Resource families shared experiences of being placed on hold for long periods of time, not receiving information in a timely manner, or having to wait months for the orientation session. The teams were excited to test small changes in the ways that the system responded to the initial inquiry of resource families. Resource families also expressed deep concerns about the fact that social workers often waited days to respond to their phone calls. Teams found multiple ways to support social workers in being more responsive to the calls, questions, and concerns of resource families.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Develop two-call policies that allow resource families to contact the supervisor if they do not hear back from their worker within 24 hours.
- Use e-mail, in addition to phone calls, to communicate with resource families.
- Respond to initial inquiries from prospective resource families within 24 hours.

- Staff all phones with live people, rather than relying on voice mail systems.
- Conduct orientation sessions on a regular and ongoing basis so that prospective resource families do not have to wait longer than one month for a new session to begin.

A Mini-Case of Success
Hamilton County, Ohio and the Use of E-mail

The team from Hamilton County, Ohio decided to test the use of e-mail as a vehicle for improved communication with resource families. Initially they thought that very few resource families had e-mail and were not sure if this approach would be successful. They found, to their delight, that a minimum of 68% of the resource families had e-mail and were interested in using it to communicate with their workers. Hamilton County now uses e-mail as a distribution vehicle for announcements and newsletters, and workers are beginning to use e-mail as a means to communicate about specific children in care. This has become a standard way to communicate with resource families—and it works.

5.3 Ensuring Regular and Frequent Visitation Between Workers, Resource Families, and Children

The federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) have shown a direct correlation between the frequency of child visitation with their families and children achieving their permanency goals ASFA time frames. This being the case, teams sought to increase the frequency of worker visitation with resource families and children in care. Additionally, resource families felt that it was important for the workers to have more regular contact with both the children and the resource families about their progress and needs.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Implement surveys to learn about the quality and frequency of visitation as perceived by the resource families.
- Implement a worker shadowing program.
- Conduct follow-up calls by supervisors.

A Mini-Case of Success

Hamilton County, Ohio and Worker Visits

The team from Hamilton County, Ohio developed a worker–resource family sign-off sheet that depicts any concerns, issues, and the nature of every visit. This practice has spread across the county and has improved the worker-resource family relationship and the quality of the visits among resource families, workers, and children in care. The visits are now more purposeful and more time is spent on matters of substance.

Massachusetts and Supervisor Follow-Up Calls

The Massachusetts team heard from a resource family that it would be nice to have someone from the agency call to check on each placement shortly after it begins. The team began testing this idea and found that having the supervisor call a resource family within three days of placement made an enormous difference in the satisfaction and support felt by the resource families. On these calls, the supervisor asked three simple questions: How are you doing? How is the placement going? Is there anything that would have made the placement easier? This also gives the resource family the sense that the entire agency cares about the success of the placement.

Measurable Improvements

- Denver County, Colorado had a 94% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.
- San Mateo County, California had a 47% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.
- Cuyahoga County, Ohio had a 33% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.
- New Mexico had a 33% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.

THEME 6

Role Clarity for and Inclusion of Resource Families

Resource families were not the only ones who voiced concerns about the process of creating birth family–resource family relationships. Numerous workers on the teams expressed their own fears about being responsible in a sense for creating relationships between birth families and resource families. They expressed a number of concerns:

- If workers were to include the resource family in case planning and ask resource families to serve as a role model/mentor to birth families, they (the workers) would need training in mediation.
- Workers would need more time, as it was hard enough to ensure that birth parents, much less resource families, attended meetings as frequently as desired.
- Workers would need a better understanding of what they were and were not allowed to share with resource families.

These fears translated into practice in ways that did not regularly include resource families in the case planning process, in ways that kept resource families out of the decision-making, in ways that sometimes isolated resource families from the agency, and in ways that even caused some resource families to fear retribution from the agency if they reported the true needs of the children in their care. As many resource families expressed throughout this project, they simply felt as if they were not a valued part of the team supporting children and families, even though they were responsible for providing the bulk of the care and nurturing. Once these issues were brought to the forefront, teams implemented a variety of strategies to address these concerns. The strategies listed in this section focus on changes made on the part of the agency and staff. Additional related strategies, including increased participation of resource families in meetings, can be found in Theme 9, "The Voice of Resource Families."

Strategies for Including Resource Families

6.1 Training staff on facilitation of difficult relationships

6.2 Raising awareness about the need for birth family–resource family connections

6.3 Increasing understanding of confidentiality issues

6.1 Training Staff on Facilitation of Difficult Relationships

Facilitation and mediation are important, yet rare, skills for most agency workers. Sometimes people even forget these are specific skills and simply assume that anyone can run a meeting. But when situations are challenging, emotions run high, and people are stressed, very specific skills and training are essential for success.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

Training Staff on Facilitation of Difficult Relationships

- Develop guides, checklists, and formats for facilitating post-placement meetings.
- Provide experiential training for staff at various levels.
- Train clerical staff on the administrative needs of these meetings so that facilitators can focus on the facilitation of the meeting.

A Mini-Case of Success

Ramsey County, Minnesota and Facilitator Guides

The team from Ramsey County, Minnesota developed a guide sheet to support the facilitators of these post-placement meetings. The team followed this up by providing training on conducting the meetings for all child protection supervisors and some licensing staff. The training allowed the facilitators to improve their skill level in working through conflict, predicting areas of tension, and bringing the conversation to consensus. All child protection and licensing staff attended meetings to help understand the purpose, necessity, and philosophy of the post-placement meetings. They also trained clerical staff in arranging the meetings to take some of the burden off of the social workers.

6.2 Raising Awareness About the Need for Birth Family–Resource Family Connections

Many workers expressed concerns about the workload implications of developing and supporting these connections. Coordinating and facilitating meetings between resource families and birth families can

be extraordinarily time-consuming and challenging. But once again, this became an issue of values and culture change. Oftentimes, workers simply needed a reminder that developing and nurturing family relationships was at the very core of their work, and that by creating these connections, resource families would become a strong ally and support in the reunification process. Workers came to understand that the creation of this relationship was not in addition to the work—it actually was the work. Workers who had tested holding a resource family–birth family meeting early in the placement process and then talked to their colleagues about their results expressed this learning most compellingly. Workers were so excited about how meetings between resource families and birth families, held shortly after a child was placed in care, made them feel so good about the work they were doing with children and families and made a significant difference in the ongoing case process. Teams used these learnings to talk to other units in the agency about how developing stronger relationships between resource families and birth families was changing the way they thought about placement and the role of resource families in the process of reunification.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Use staff meetings to talk about the foundation of this work and what it means to families. Have conversations about values and how both birth families and resource families must be valued.
- Engage workers who have facilitated or attended these meetings to talk with their peers.
- Invite workers to sit and observe the meetings first-hand to experience the power of the meetings and connections.
- Invite resource families and birth families who have attended these meetings to speak to the staff about how it affected them and their relationship.

6.3 Increasing Understanding of Confidentiality Issues

Last, many teams had to work through some of their misconceptions surrounding confidentiality. Workers on teams expressed a lack of clarity on what they were allowed to share with resource families. Resource families shared that they needed to have all of the

information available if they were to effectively work with children and their families. Birth families certainly need to know about the resource families who are caring for their children. In the end, teams concurred that they were legally able to share information about the birth families with the resource families—and vice versa—even though many in the agency started out being uncomfortable and mistrustful of what the resource families and birth families were going to do with the information. It was even discovered that in some agencies, confidentiality was used as a protective cloak to shield the agency from sharing necessary information with resource families.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Make a list with workers of what they "wish" they could share with resource families. Have them identify which of those things they think they are not allowed to share. Debunk misconceptions about facts that they actually are allowed to share.
- Make a list with resource families of what they "wish" could be shared with them. Have them identify which of those things they have been told cannot be shared. Compare this list to the list above.

Measurable Improvements

- Utah had a 66% increase in the number of resource families who were active participants in the case plan development and review.
- Oklahoma had a 50% increase in the number of resource families who were active participants in the case plan development and review.
- Vermont had a 45% increase in the number of resource families who were active participants in the case plan development and review.

THEME 7

Resource Family–Birth Family Relationships

Teams explored several strategies regarding resource family–birth family relationships during the BSC. Similar to the strategy focused on worker visitation (described in Theme 5, Support and Responsiveness of the Child Welfare Agency), all of these strategies required change to the mindset of many resource families, birth families, and agency staff. As a result, while many changes could be tested quickly on a small scale related to direct changes in practice, there were other changes that required longer-term, more fundamental changes in beliefs.

Strategies for Strengthening Relationships Between Resource Families and Birth Families

7.1 Connecting resource families and birth families shortly after placement

7.2 Supporting birth families in the relationship with resource families

7.1 Connecting Resource Families and Birth Families

As the conversations about resource family–birth family relationships evolved, several teams decided that an important strategy to explore included finding ways for resource families and birth families to meet shortly after placement—to talk about the child, to craft plans for visitation, to discuss shared parenting strategies, and to begin to minimize the predictable and natural tensions and fears that exist. Teams needed to talk through the fear that this interaction engendered in many resource families.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Hold a post placement meeting that includes both the resource family and the birth family shortly (within 72 hours) after placement. Also include the young person, whenever possible.
- Focus on the child in all discussions and meetings, rather than on the protective issues or deficits of the family.

- Provide space and training for resource families to communicate directly with birth families and to help support birth families in making progress toward reunification.
- Provide profiles of the resource family to birth families, so that parents know who is caring for their children.

A Mini-Case of Success Catawba County, North Carolina and 72-Hour Placement Meetings

Catawba County, North Carolina initiated the practice of holding meetings within 72 hours following a child's placement. The meeting focuses on the children and on creating relationships between resource families and birth families. It empowers children to ask lots of questions, empowers foster parents to identify information they want provided, and empowers birth families to be part of the decision-making. Birth parents also say that it gives them a sense that their children will be taken care of. The agency is now using these meetings in residential cottages as well to form relationships and engage birth families. Workers at all levels of the agency have embraced this practice and many call it "the best thing since Family Group Conferencing."

Through conference calls, discussions, and testing practice changes, teams that successfully connected resource families and birth families learned the following:

➥ Waiting a long time before bringing resource families and birth families to meet one another often escalates the tension and fear between resource families and birth families and it makes it very difficult for the children in care. The tremendous feelings of torn loyalties that children experience between birth parents and resource parents is mitigated by the system creating opportunities for relationships between these critical people in the life of a child. While it might seem that emotions are high immediately following placement, and as such a meeting might be difficult to facilitate, it is better to address the tension and the emotions early in the process as opposed to waiting until the tension has evolved to friction.

- There is a natural process of joining that occurs when birth parents and resource families meet one another. When the focus is taken off the formal child protection issues and is centered on the child's needs, the two sets of parents generally are able to talk to each other with greater ease.
- When resource families and birth families create a relationship while the child is in care, in many instances this relationship continues after the child returns home. The resource family becomes a source of support and sometimes respite care for the birth family. The children are able to maintain connections with the resource family, which minimizes their sense of loss when the placement ends.

7.2 Supporting Birth Families in the Relationship with Resource Families

While the importance of the connection between birth families and resource families may be self-evident, the implementation can be quite challenging. These connections are occurring under extremely tense and emotional times in people's lives and must be treated sensitively. This can be especially true for birth parents. Thus, in order for these connections and relationships to be meaningful and productive, the agency must find ways to actively support birth families in these relationships. They cannot sit passively by and expect that if meetings are held, the relationships will miraculously develop.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Support birth families in talking directly to resource families about the strengths, needs, preferences, and desires of the children in care.
- Focus on commonalities between the resource family and birth family, especially as they relate to meeting the needs of the children.
- Provide active and continuous reassurance to birth families that resource families are not trying to replace them as parents for their children.

The teams in the BSC that successfully connected resource families and birth families learned several principles about supporting birth families throughout the relationship:

- ➥ The birth family–resource family meetings present tremendous opportunities to encourage birth families to teach resource families about the needs, wishes, and preferences of the child in care. Teams indicated that they were building a new norm about the expectations of resource family roles with birth families.
- ➥ It has been surprising to attendees at post-placement meetings that birth families and resource families have many more commonalities than differences, and that it is the responsibility of the agency to explicitly bring these similarities to the forefront of birth family–resource family conversations.
- ➥ The fear that birth families present during these meetings is often a result of their lack of confidence. They worry that they are not "good enough" and that resource families will co-opt their role as parents. This fear can be addressed and tension mitigated through skillful facilitation of these meetings.

C: Voices of Constituents

At the start of this BSC, teams and faculty expected to focus their efforts entirely on two areas: recruitment and retention. And while the focus of the work was, in fact, on developing and improving recruitment and retention systems, one issue kept rising to the surface: listening to constituents. At the heart of this issue is the simple truth that, at the very least, everyone wants to have their say about their own lives and situations. And it is the responsibility of the child welfare agency to make sure these voices are invited and heard.

Although many of the strategies and ideas encompassed by the term "voices of constituents" could easily be subsumed into the previous two categories, after the second learning session, the faculty determined that this issue was about something much deeper. Engaging and listening to voices of constituents is at the heart of good child welfare practice, yet organizational cultures made it nearly impossible to do. Teams and faculty alike soon discovered that without changing the fundamental beliefs of the agencies themselves and how they engaged and treated their constituents, true systemic change would be impossible. Over the course of the BSC, three specific groups of constituents emerged as critical in this work. Some of the themes from these three constituent groups—birth families, youth, and resource families—may be similar, because the bottom line is that people want to be included and heard.

The Voice of Children and Youth

➥ Removing children from their home and placing them in foster care with strangers is one of the most difficult tasks for a social worker. But it is infinitely more difficult for the child being placed; agencies often

lose sight of this fact. Some of this difficulty can be alleviated by, prior to placement, giving the youth information about the family and by giving the family information about the youth, written by the youth.

- ➥ Young people have every right to be a part of decision-making that affects their lives. They would be included in the process if they lived in their family of origin, and that should not change simply because they are in out-of-home care.
- ➥ The common saying "wisdom from the mouths of babes" is worth remembering, as young people who experience the system have the deepest and most profound perspective of how it can be made better. If the goal of the system is to meet the needs of these constituents as best as it can, then no one is better positioned to inform the system about what it needs to do.

The Voice and Role of the Resource Family

- ➥ Treating prospective resource families as valued members of a team goes incredibly far in engaging them and supporting them through the recruiting, approval, and licensing process. Many agencies experienced extremely high drop-out rates after the initial phone calls because prospective families felt from the beginning that they weren't valued by the agency.
- ➥ Once resource families are approved, they must be treated as part of the team to support families and children. They are neither babysitters nor child care providers; they are perhaps the most critical part of supporting children and their families toward permanency.

The Voice of Birth Families

- ➥ Birth families are the core of child welfare work and must be included in all discussion and decisions about their lives. For purposes of child welfare practice, their "lives" equal their "cases."
- ➥ There are many avenues of support for birth families, including workers, resource families, their extended families, and their communities. It is the responsibility of the child welfare agency to ensure that they receive these supports and maintain these critical connections, especially in concert with efforts to reunite them with their children in out-of-home care.

THEME 8

The Voice of Children and Youth

While the notion of listening to the voice of youth to improve the recruitment and retention of resource families may seem obvious, the BSC came to realize the impact of the voice of youth somewhat by accident. The team from Carver County, Minnesota included as part of the core team a young woman who had lived in care for several years. As she expressed her perspectives over the course of team discussions, it became clear to the faculty that the Carver County team's conversations had deepened, and their tests became much more focused, than those of the other teams, none of which included youth members. Ultimately, the Carver County team was learning a great deal from her experience about how to recruit families for teens.

At one point during the initial in-person meeting of all teams, this young girl wondered out loud why more youth weren't active in the BSC. Not only did the faculty respond by creating a youth panel for the next gathering of the teams, but this proved to be a pivotal moment in the BSC. It was an easy matter to form the youth panel at the next in-person meeting, because, over the next four months, eight other teams in the BSC had invited youth to join their core teams.

Teams with youth members found their sharing to be rich with youth perspectives, and the PDSAs tested were clearly informed by the youths' experience. More and more teams began to see first-hand how the voice of youth can not only strongly influence the process but also is in fact integral to the process. By the time the BSC concluded, nearly every team had found ways of engaging youth in meaningful ways, and even more importantly, every team experienced a change in values regarding the need for incorporating the voice of youth.

The youth involved in this BSC influenced many of the most profound strategies tested. Their ideas were straightforward, clear, and specific as to how the experiences of youth in placement could be improved; how their resource families could be better supported; and how the recruitment of families who care about teenagers could be improved.

Strategies for Elevating the Voice of Children and Youth

8.1 Providing information for and about youth entering placement

8.2 Inviting youth to case planning and decision-making meetings

8.3 Including youth in agency planning and decision-making

8.1 Providing Information for and About Youth Entering Placement

At the first in-person meeting, the young woman also posed a challenging question to the group of 130 adults. She gently asked, "Why don't you tell us anything about the resource family before you place us there? Do you have any idea what it feels like to be picked up from everything you know and dropped off with a total stranger?" The proverbial pin could be heard dropping in the silence that met her question. Then a murmur ran through the room as people began to question their own practice. This question resulted in a flurry of small tests of practice changes that focused on providing youth with the desired information on the resource families, and likewise providing resource families with information about the youth. These were among the first PDSAs to be tested in this BSC.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

Providing Information for and About Youth Entering Placement

- Create resource family profile sheets so that youth know something about their foster parents. As the young woman said at the first in-person meeting, "Tell us what they eat, what kind of music they listen to, what their house looks like."
- Create youth profile sheets so that youth can tell their prospective families something about themselves in their own words. A young person in the BSC reminded everyone that all resource families typically knew about them was their thick case file, which often said nothing good. The young people in the BSC wanted an opportunity to tell families what they liked to eat, what they liked to watch on TV, what their hobbies were, and what their hopes and dreams were.

- Create an older youth–younger child mentor program so that younger children could also complete these profile forms. Older youth reminded participants that all children needed an opportunity to tell their resource families about themselves. And younger children simply needed some support in doing so.

8.2 Inviting Youth to Case Planning and Decision-Making Meetings

Youth team members in the BSC also talked about case planning and decision-making meetings that took place without their participation. Although they understood that the agency bore the ultimate responsibility for decision-making, they wanted an opportunity to have their voices heard. Most importantly, they wanted someone to ask them what they thought was best for them, as they were often the ones who knew the answer.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Invite youth to attend court hearings.
- Schedule placement meetings at times that are convenient for young people.
- Support youth to remain connected to their parents, including writing letters when visitation isn't possible.
- Support youth to maintain connections to their siblings, extended families, and others who are important to them.

8.3 Including Youth in Agency Planning and Decision-Making

The youth participants' concerns did not end with their own case plans. Systemic changes occurred as the teams began to change their organizational cultures to reflect the need to elicit and act on the youth voice. Agencies wanted to find ways to institutionalize the continuous engagement of this deep, powerful, and unique perspective.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Create a handbook for children and youth entering placement. Youth are the best authors of this handbook, as they know best what questions their peers might have.
- Implement youth-to-youth mentor and support programs. Who better to support other youth than those who have been through the same experience?
- Create opportunities for judges, school system representatives, and other partner agencies to meet with groups of young people to understand their experiences and perspectives. Use this as a time to stress the importance of asking the youth directly what they want.
- Include youth in resource family trainings to help them understand who the youth are who need placement and what their needs really are when in placement.
- Include youth in the training of agency staff, at all levels. Their presence is a basic reminder of the purpose of child welfare work.
- Form a youth advisory board to inform planning and decisions on new policies, programs, and procedures in the agency.

A Mini-Case of Success
Ramsey County, Minnesota and a Youth Panel

The team from Ramsey County, Minnesota convened a "youth issues" committee. Modeling their efforts after the youth panel held by the BSC, they created a video of interviews with the youth. This videotape is now used for training all prospective resource families and staff in the county. (The BSC distributed copies of this tape to all teams.)

Lessons about listening to the voices of youth came from interviews with youth in the videotape produced by the Ramsey County team, panel discussions by youth at learning sessions, specific breakout sessions that focused on involving youth, and the tests of change that involved youth input. The lessons learned include the following:

- ➥ Youth want connections to their families, and the more resource families can support these connections, the more stable the placements will be.
- ➥ Youth want their resource families to like them. They don't believe that the system always helps in this process. Sometimes the family is predisposed to dislike the youth by the way the workers or others talk about the youth.
- ➥ Youth want a voice in decisions made about their lives. The more their voice is heard, the more they will buy into the planning process.
- ➥ When resource families and workers really listen to youth in care, it often fundamentally changes the way they view their work, the way they practice social work, and the way they interact with youth and families.
- ➥ Youth in care find it difficult to talk to peers who are not in the foster care system about their life experiences as it makes them feel "different." They do want to talk to other youth who are in the system, however. The power of this sharing and the bond that can develop between children in care is often strongly underestimated.
- ➥ Youth see many things that contribute to problems within the foster care system that others don't see. They can also articulate these issues in ways that no one else can—and they are more than willing to talk about these issues when asked. They are also willing to work to improve the system when asked. In fact, most youth express a strong desire to roll up their sleeves and do whatever is necessary to make the system better for other young people.

Measurable Improvements

- Denver County, Colorado had a 29% increase in the satisfaction of youth in care with their involvement in the case planning process.
- Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation had a 27% increase in the number of youth in care participating in their own case planning.
- The state of Massachusetts had a 17% increase in the number of youth in care participating in their own case planning.

THEME 9

The Voice of the Resource Family

The Request for Proposals for the Recruitment and Retention BSC required that a resource family be a member of the core team for planning and implementing the small tests of practice and systemic change. During the initial hours of the first learning session, however, it became evident to faculty in their interactions with teams that quite a few teams were uncomfortable with or did not know how to involve the resource families in meaningful ways in the conversation.

Faculty noticed that teams sometimes used acronyms that resource families did not understand, carried on side conversations that did not involve the resource families, discussed agency internal affairs without explanation, and all too frequently left the resource families out of the conversation. While this was not anyone's intention, it appeared to faculty—and was reaffirmed later by the team members themselves—that teams did not understand the value of the voices of resource families in a way that made mutual conversation possible, nor did they know how to engage resource families or make good use of their input in this forum.

A Mini-Case of Success
The Faculty Bring Out the Resource Family Voice

On the first day of the first learning session, the faculty observed that, while every team had brought a resource family as part of its five-person core team, most resource families were sitting quietly at their tables, not participating in the team discussions. Following a three-hour debrief session that night, the faculty entirely re-crafted the second day of the learning session to address this issue head-on. The day began with a "fishbowl" session in which all 22 of the resource families sat in a circle in the middle of the room and answered questions about the challenges, frustrations, and successes they saw in the system. As other team members listened to this candid discussion and posed their own questions to the resource families, a new mutual respect for experience was gained, and the team meetings that afternoon already began to look and sound quite different. Not only had the resource families been given a voice, but teams had the opportunity to hear those voices in a non-threatening and constructive way.

There were several key areas in which resource families provided some valuable and early strategies for success.

Strategies for Elevating the Voice of Resource Families

9.1 Responding to initial inquiries in a timely and appropriate fashion

9.2 Treating resource families as true partners of the agency

9.1 Responding to Initial Inquiries in a Timely and Appropriate Fashion

One of the first issues resource families raised was how the agency responded to inquiries from prospective resource families. The resource families helped the teams understand what it feels like to contact the system to express interest in becoming a resource family, only to have to wait weeks to receive a call back; to talk to someone who does not really seem interested in you; to talk to someone who could not speak your language; or to receive materials that generate no interest or enthusiasm.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Respond to inquiries within 24 hours.
- Improve the quality of materials sent in initial packets, including materials in appropriate languages.
- Improve the clarity of message provided to prospective resource families during the first contact.
- Assign an experienced resource family to mentor a prospective resource family.
- Make an in-person visit to the prospective family within one week of their initial inquiry.
- Follow up with families who make initial inquiries but do not continue in the process.

A Mini-Case of Success
Denver County, Colorado and Single Point of Entry

Denver County, Colorado created a single point of entry for all resource family inquiry calls. The agency staffed the phone with a bilingual member of the resource family recruitment and licensing unit who was able to respond to questions rapidly.

Erie County, New York and Follow Up

The team from Erie County, New York devised a test aimed at engaging those families who called to inquire about becoming a resource family but who did not attend the informational meeting. Within three days after the meeting, they contacted families who did not attend and asked to schedule a "one-on-one information meeting." These meetings enabled the agency to recruit families who otherwise would have been lost as potential resource families.

9.2 Treating Resource Families as True Partners of the Agency

As the trust within the teams increased, resource families felt freer to express deeper frustrations with the system, particularly around their relationship with the children's caseworkers. Concerns they expressed included:

- Being provided with very little information about the child at time of placement
- Not being included in the assessment and case planning process and lacking clarity around their role
- Not being considered part of the professional team
- Phone calls not being returned for days

On the second day of that first learning session, the resource parents gave a poignant description of processes and practices that alienated them from the system. Teams were very responsive to these concerns, and small tests of change were initiated immediately around the country.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Invite resource families to case planning meetings, and hold these meetings at times and in places that are convenient for resource families.
- Provide child and youth profiles to resource families prior to placement.
- Provide information about the child's family of origin to the resource family.
- Include resource families in Family Group Conferencing meetings.
- Hold a facilitated dialogue between resource families and staff to discuss and understand the underlying values that people hold.

A Mini-Case of Success San Mateo County, California and Family Group Conferencing Meetings

San Mateo's resource parents were hesitant to participate in and skeptical of the outcomes of these Family Group Conferencing meetings. To educate and alleviate the fears of the resource parents, the licensing unit of the county sponsored a training and mock role play of a family group meeting. As a result, resource parents were able to see and understand the value of these meetings.

All teams that tested resource family involvement in Family Group Conferences indicated that, as a result of resource family involvement in these meetings, the role of the resource family is much clearer, the issues the family is facing are normalized, and the resource families feel more valued as part of the team.

A Mini-Case of Success

Cuyahoga County, Ohio and Values Discussions

The Cuyahoga County team engaged its supervisors in a values discussion. Supervisors were asked a series of open-ended questions that challenged them to explore their beliefs about families. After lengthy discussions within this group, supervisors in turn asked these same questions of their staff. These discussions went a long way towards clarifying the value resource families bring to their partnership with the agency.

Ramsey County, Minnesota and a Facilitated Dialogue

Ramsey County, Minnesota made an explicit decision to ensure that the voice of the resource family was heard by holding a facilitated dialogue between resource families and the agency staff. Over 200 people attended. The dialogue included a frank discussion of myths and traps that get in the way of effective teamwork, the roles and responsibilities of team members, values that may hinder relationship development, ways that visitation impedes or supports birth family–child intimacy, and agency policies that interfere with relationship building. During this discussion, Ramsey County worked to create a safe environment for participants so that personal values and core beliefs about this work came to the surface. Once they did so, leadership made certain that they were handled in a way that honored participants' courage in voicing their thoughts. After the two hour discussion, a panel of social workers, resource parents, birth parents, licensing workers, and supervisors were asked to come to the front of the room. A case example was shared and panel members were asked to respond to a series of questions. For example, resource families were asked to describe what they perceive the role of the worker to be in resolving the issues presented in the case example; agency workers were asked to describe critical communication by the resource family that must occur if the team in the case example is to be effective; and so on. Each panel member was asked to represent a role of a team member that they do not normally play. During this facilitated dialogue, both systemic and practice issues that impact the quality of resource family–agency relationships were clearly identified. As these issues were identified, organizational leaders made a commitment to find resolutions. According to Susan Ault, Director of Family and Children's Services for the Ramsey County

Human Services Department, "This open and frank discussion was a huge step for us in changing the culture and direction of the agency with regard to resource families."

Key learnings gained from listening to the voices of the resource parents included:

- First impressions matter immensely; paying more attention to the agency's response to the initial inquiry means a loss of fewer families between the inquiry call and orientation.
- The messages in the information packets need to be compelling; they need to tell a story and communicate clearly the expectations and benefits of being a resource family.
- If resource families are to reflect the composition of children in care, resource family recruitment must be done in a culturally responsive way.
- Becoming a resource family is a huge decision. Immediate support and mentoring by seasoned resource families increases the number of families who attend the orientation meeting, complete training, and become licensed.

As the role of the resource family was elevated, retention of resource families improved, and recruitment in turn increased as well. Joan Rock, District Manager from the state of Vermont, indicated that, since her agency became involved in the BSC, she always has homes for the children who need them, and, even better, she now has options for placement in many cases.

Measurable Improvements

- Denver County, Colorado had a 94% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.
- San Mateo County, California had a 47% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.
- Cuyahoga County, Ohio had a 33% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.
- New Mexico had a 33% increase in the satisfaction of resource families.

THEME 10

Voice of the Birth Family

When thinking about recruitment and retention of resource families, it is often all too easy, unfortunately, to forget about the birth family. In the theme of relationships between birth and resource families, one aspect of work with birth families was addressed by the teams early on. But the overall notion of engaging and listening to birth families in a strengths-based and supportive way took a bit longer.

Strategies for Elevating the Voice of Birth Families

10.1 Including birth families' voices in case planning and decision-making

10.2 Engaging birth families in meaningful ways

10.3 Maintaining family, cultural, and community connections

10.1 Including Birth Families' Voices in Case Planning and Decision-Making

The work of child welfare is about the lives of families: parents and their children. It is most important for the voices of these families to be heard in this work. They must be at the table, then, and their perspectives must always be in the forefront of everyone's minds.

Teams suggested that, historically, the safety assessment (investigative) phase was really devoted to determining if abuse or neglect had occurred. This fact-finding period was rarely focused on engaging the family and creating relationships. As a result, if the child was removed from the home, the birth family–agency relationship had already been damaged, and engaging the family in identification of kin, planning for services, and interacting with the resource family consequently became that much more difficult.

During ongoing work with the family, teams tested various ways to ensure that the family's perspectives continued to be a driving force for case planning and placement decisions.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Ask birth families how they feel about being included in meetings. Ask them often, in order to ensure that the meetings are comfortable for them and are meeting their needs.
- Ask the birth family what they think is best for the child, including placements.
- Schedule meetings at times and in locations that are convenient for the birth family.
- Conduct meetings in the native language of the birth family.
- Form a task force composed of families who have "successfully" gone through the system. Invite these families to mentor and/or support families who are currently involved with the system.
- Have values discussions with staff about birth families' voices and their beliefs about birth families.

A Mini-Case of Success

Hamilton County, Ohio and Family Conferences

The team from Hamilton County, Ohio was committed to ensuring that the birth families had a positive experience in the family conference. The team developed an evaluation tool that it used to assess how the birth families felt about the experience, and if it resulted in an increased willingness to remain engaged in the process. They found that the evaluation tool itself told birth families that what they felt mattered; it improved ongoing birth family attendance in case planning events.

Ramsey County, Minnesota and a Facilitated Dialogue

The Santa Cruz, California team, like many other teams, sought to better engage birth families in the case planning process. They initiated care meetings at the point of initial placement and change of placement. In these meetings, the birth family is asked to provide ideas on where the child might live if they cannot live at home. The team is scheduled around the birth family's ability to attend. By ensuring that all participants view the voice of the birth parent as central to these discussions, they have found additional placements for children that they would not have found previously.

A Mini-Case of Success
Shasta County, California and a Family Task Force

The Shasta County, California team sought to institutionalize incorporating the voice of the birth family as part the culture of the agency. The team formed a task force of families who have gone through the system successfully. These families meet with families who are newly entering the system to help minimize the stigma and the fear around the process. This step had improved the willingness of new families to engage in the safety assessment process, to disclose potential caregivers, and, most critically, to work with the county so that children can be returned home.

10.2 Engaging Birth Families in Meaningful Ways

One of the evolving themes of the BSC was the importance of listening to the birth family in order to identify kin and people who care about the child. The teams stated very clearly, however, that disenfranchised, angry families do not cooperate in identifying potential caregivers for the child. Thus, in order to better identify and engage kin in supporting family members caring for their children, birth families need to be engaged from the point of initial contact and throughout the process of placing children in care.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- To help engage the birth family, ask simple questions at initial intake about the child's strengths, needs, and desires.
- Early on, ask birth families about possible kin relationships and connections to help identify possible placements, should placement become necessary.
- Use genograms as tools during the safety assessment process to engage the family and identify potential supports for the family and child.

A Mini-Case of Success
Massachusetts and Engaging Families Early

The Massachusetts team tested expanding the engagement of birth families by asking three questions of birth parents when a child went into placement:

1. What are your child's favorite foods?

2. What does your child like to do before going to bed?

3. What makes your child feel better when he or she is sick?

Also, whenever possible, parents were asked to describe any health issues, worries, or concerns they had about their child. The Massachusetts team indicated that these questions not only improved birth family engagement—birth families clearly were appreciative of being asked—but it also proved very beneficial to foster parents who are taking a child into their care. This practice has resulted in improved relationships between birth families and resource families as it sets the stage for ongoing communication and interaction. It has also improved the retention of resource families who previously felt as if they were not receiving enough information about the children coming into their homes.

10.3 Maintaining Family, Cultural, and Community Connections

When children need to be removed from their homes, it is critical that the system does not inadvertently create more losses for the child. The child welfare system must ensure that children in care are able to maintain connections to their kin, culture, and community. Yet youth on the teams who spent months or years in foster care told stories of how they lost critical relationships with friends, teachers, neighbors, family members, and other significant figures in their lives after they were placed in foster care. Youth on teams shared that they did not always feel their social workers or resource families understood how painful it was to lose these relationships. Resource families, social workers, and birth families each play a crucial role in ensuring that children in care are able to maintain critical relationships.

What Can You Do By Next Tuesday?

- Engage the judicial community in learning about kinship options.
- Provide resource families with ecomaps that depict important relationships of the child coming into care.
- Support visitation and regular, consistent contact between birth families and children in placement, as well as with siblings, extended family, tribal members, and others who are important to the child and family.

A Mini-Case of Success

Washington and Judicial Questions

The team from Washington state sought to engage the judicial community to learn more about kinship caregiver options in birth families. Judges were asked by the team to require biological parents at the time of the shelter care hearing to provide the names of three possible kinship providers. This proved to be a very effective strategy. The judicial community decided to take a more active role in working with birth families to identify kinship options. Judges from each jurisdiction agreed to ask the question.

Vermont and Information about Child's Family

The Vermont team wanted to provide more information to resource families about the children being placed in their care, so they began to spend time at the initial placement meeting talking about the children's birth families and their important connections. Not only has this helped resource families become better informed and better able to support the children in their homes, it has also helped them have more empathy for the birth families. As part of the ongoing training process for this practice, Vermont had specific discussions about the importance of these connections with the supervisors in the agency.

V: Conclusion

There are over 500,000 children in the care of the child welfare system.[6] Many come into the system with greater needs than children in previous years. Some have multiple medical and behavioral health care needs. They include young children, sibling groups, and adolescents, and all need homes. Recruiting and retaining loving families willing to care for these children is one of the greatest challenges to face the child welfare system.

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative on the Recruitment and Retention of Resource Families was an effort undertaken by Casey Family Programs to test new and innovative strategies, as well as to adapt existing successful strategies, to improve the success of child welfare systems in recruiting families. The intent was to actively engage individuals in states, counties, and tribes across the country who are close to the day-to-day recruitment and retention efforts, in building a base of information about the activities that contribute directly to successful recruitment and retention. We believe that the intent of the Breakthrough Series was fulfilled as an abundance of new and effective ideas were tested and the resulting successful practices spread across agencies. Teams left the collaborative BSC with improved systems of recruitment and retention of resource families.

Moreover, and equally importantly, teams learned that if they were to have a long-term impact on the culture of the agency and its recruitment and retention of resource families, they would need to attend consistently, over time, to each of the key practice themes identified:

➥ Engaging in culturally sensitive recruitment

➥ Creating partnerships with the faith community in recruitment

[6] AFCARS 2002.

- Learning about, educating, and engaging targeted communities in recruitment efforts
- Partnering with existing resource families and youth in care while recruiting new families willing to care for young people, adolescents, and sibling groups
- Being responsive and attentive to the needs, questions, and concerns of resource families
- Explicitly creating opportunities for resource families and birth families to talk to each another about the children in care
- Ensuring strong partnerships with the agency and clear roles for resource families
- Creating many opportunities to listen to the voice of children and youth in care
- Making certain that the perspectives of the resource family are heard in numerous ways
- Finding unique ways to hear the perspectives of birth families and honoring their involvement in the lives of their children

Casey Family Programs is grateful to the teams and the faculty who contributed to this learning process. Their willingness to explore new ideas, sail into uncharted waters, and share and steal shamelessly from their colleagues was critical to the success of this Breakthrough Series Collaborative.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participating Teams

California, Monterey County Department of Social Services

California, San Mateo County Human Services Agency

California, Human Resources Agency of Santa Cruz County

California, Shasta County Department of Social Services

Colorado, Denver Department of Human Services

Illinois, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Massachusetts, Massachusetts Department of Social Services

Minnesota, Carver County Community Social Services

Minnesota, Ramsey County Human Services

New Mexico, New Mexico Children, Youth & Families Department

New York, Erie County Department of Social Services

North Carolina, Catawba County Social Services

Ohio, Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Families

Ohio, Hamilton County Job & Family Services

Ohio, Summit County Children's Services

Oklahoma, OK DHS

Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation

Texas, Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services

Utah, Utah Department of Human Services, Division of Child and Family Services

Vermont, Vermont Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, Division of Social Services

Washington, Washington Department of Health and Human Services

Wyoming, Wyoming Department of Family Services

Appendix B: Practice Framework

Key Components of Effective Recruitment, Retention, and Support Programs, Policies, and Practices

In the Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Recruiting and Retaining Resource Families, agencies will be expected to work on improving multiple components simultaneously. Dramatic improvements in the overall system of recruiting, supporting, and retaining resource families will only occur when improvements in all eight of these components are achieved.

Key Components

1. **Messaging**
   Public awareness must be raised about the needs of children in the public child welfare system, both in general and in specific ways.

2. **Engaging Resource Families During the Recruitment Process**
   The likelihood that families who express interest in becoming resource families will make a commitment to the process must be increased.

3. **Supporting Families and Children Through the Process and Preparing Them for Placement**

4. **Licensing**
   Qualified resource families must be licensed in a timely and supportive way.

5. **Providing Services and Supports for Resource Families**
   Resource families must have the services and supports they need to provide appropriate care for children and their families.

6. **Developing Relationships and Supporting Involvement with the Agency**
   Resource families, youth, and birth families must be true partners with the agency.

7. **Involving the Community**
   The community must be an active partner in recruiting and supporting resource families, youth in care, and their families.

8. **Staffing**
   Appropriate and well-trained staff throughout the agency who can recruit, support, and engage resource families, children in care, and the children's families must be recruited and retained.

Key Components of Effective Recruitment Programs, Policies, and Practices

I. Messaging

Public awareness must be raised about the needs of children in the public child welfare system, both in general and in specific ways.

A. General awareness of child welfare and foster care and adoption is raised and addresses public perceptions, myths, and misperceptions.

B. Recruitment is strategic and targeted based on the needs of the children in care, including racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious/spiritual diversity, and representing the communities from which children come.

C. Recruitment messages are targeted to multiple communities simultaneously and use the community's language and cultural beliefs as a way of engaging them.

II. Resource Families During the Recruitment Process

The likelihood that families who express interest in becoming resource families will make a commitment to the process must be increased.

A. Families who express an interest in becoming resource families receive immediate responses to their inquiries in ways that are culturally appropriate and in the language of their choice.

B. The needs of children requiring placement and their families are presented accurately.

C. The types and availability of services for children and resource families are presented accurately.

D. Decision-making about which families should be engaged and for which children they are appropriate is clear, timely, and includes participation from the resource families.

E. Responsibilities of, expectations for, and rights of resource families are clear.

F. Responsibilities of, expectations for, and rights of the agency are clear.

III. Supporting Resource Families and Children Through the Process and Preparing Them for Placement

Supporting and Preparing Resource Families:

A. Communication with resource families is cordial, respectful, and direct.

B. Resource families receive support to complete all activities that are required as part of the process.

C. Resource families are prepared to become resources to children and their families through various modalities and by various people.

D. Preparation varies by type of resource family, type of children, geography, and culture.

E. All relevant information (i.e., children's backgrounds, agency procedures, legal requirements) is shared openly with prospective resource families and on an ongoing basis.

F. Mutual assessments are conducted by resource families and the agencies throughout the preparation period.

Supporting and Preparing Children in Placement:

G. Communication with the children needing placement is open, honest, and includes their families.

Supporting and Preparing Resource Families AND Children in Placement:

H. Preparation for placement includes the child, his or her birth family, and the resource family.

I. Youth and resource families are appropriately and adequately prepared for all transitions they face, including initial placements, changing placements, reunification, adoption, and independence, and resource families understand their roles in these transitions.

IV. Licensing: Qualified Resource Families Must Be Licensed In a Timely and Supportive Way

A. Resource families are licensed in a timely way.

B. Assistance is provided for resource families during the background checks, fingerprinting, required inspections, and physical requirements.

C. Mandated background checks and other clearances for licensing are timely.

D. Decision-making about waivers is clear and consistent; resource families are part of the decision-making process; and waivers are granted when appropriate.

E. Home studies are conducted in a way that respects cultural beliefs and practices, includes the resource families as partners, and include a comprehensive assessment of the strengths and developmental issues of the family.

Key Components of Effective Retention/Support Programs, Policies, and Practices

V. Providing Services and Supports for Resource Families

Resource families must have the services and supports they need to provide appropriate care for children and their families.

A. Necessary and culturally appropriate services and supports are tailored to the specific needs of different resource families (i.e., foster care, kinship care, guardianship, adoption, respite), are accessible, and are promptly provided.

B. Information about these services and supports is communicated with resource families.

C. The types of services and supports needed for individual resource families, the children in their care, and the children's families are assessed regularly and are based on the principles of family preservation.

D. Decision-making about obtaining services and supports is clear and consistent and includes resource families, children in care, and the children's families (when appropriate).

E. A systematic and consistent approach is used for assessing allegations of maltreatment and supporting and advocating for resource families during the investigation process, and efforts are made to preserve the placement when it is in the child's best interest.

F. Information about the ongoing needs of resource families and their overall satisfaction level is collected and used to improve programs, policies, and practices.

G. Information about the ongoing needs of youth in care, their families, and their overall satisfaction level is collected and used to improve programs, policies, and practices.

VI. Developing Relationships and Supporting Involvement with the Agency

Resource families, youth, and birth families must be true partners with the agency.

A. The agency adequately funds the infrastructure to recruit, support, and retain resource families, including providing adequate financial support for resource families.

B. Mutual assessments between resource families and the agency are conducted regularly, and any needs identified for resource families or the agency are addressed in a timely fashion.

C. A variety of culturally appropriate and relevant in-service trainings are available, accessible, and known to resource families.

D. Resource families are part of the regular recertification (or licensure) process and are supported throughout the process.

E. The experiences of resource families are documented, maintained, and used to improve services and supports for families and are connected to the recertification process.

F. Appropriate resource families who can meet the safety, permanency, and well-being needs, and reflect the racial, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual diversity of the children needing placement are identified and selected.

G. Youth and their families are included in the selection process prior to placement.

H. Information is shared openly, whenever possible, between and among resource families, the children in their care, the children's families, and the agency.

I. Agencies expect and promote ongoing relationships between resource families and birth families.

J. Resource families' input is actively solicited and used in the child's case plan.

K. Resource families' input is actively solicited and used in the development of agency policy, programs, and practice.

L. Resource families are acknowledged and recognized for their service.

VII. Involving the Community

The interdependence between the agency and community organizations is recognized to be of paramount importance to supporting resource families.

A. Relationships with community organizations must be developed and nurtured.

B. The community, including community-based services and supports, is an active partner in supporting resource families, children in care, and the children's families.

C. An open forum for dialogue is established and supported between resource families, children in care, the children's families, the agency, schools, health care providers, and community support providers.

D. An open forum for dialogue is established and supported between the agency and the courts, in which issues around children in out-of-home care and resource families are addressed.

E. Resource families have timely access to necessary and appropriate services in the community for the children in their care.

F. Decision-making about service needs and access to services is clear and includes resource families, the children in care, and the children's families.

G. Agencies support building capacity among resource families for self-support and advocacy.

Key System-Wide Component for Effective Recruitment and Retention

VIII. Staffing

Appropriate and well-trained staff throughout the agency who can recruit, support, and engage resource families, children in care, and the children's families must be recruited and retained.

A. All agency staff, including management, licensing, training, resource family case management, intake, and case management staff, are committed to partnering with resource families.

B. Staff receive training and preparation for working with resource families, children in care, and the children's families based on this framework.

C. Staffing decisions take into account the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual backgrounds and needs of the population being served.

D. Staff receive appropriate and adequate support from the agency to partner with resource families, children in care, and the children's families.

E. Staff, especially agency leaders and managers, have strong relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with the community, including community-based services and supports.

F. Staff understand the importance of culturally appropriate services and supports for resource families, children in care, and the children's families.

Appendix C: Measures

Category 1: Selecting Appropriate Resource Families for Children

Teams must track and report monthly on a minimum of one measure from Section A and one measure from Section B.

Section A

Increase in the number (net gain) and percentage of resource families who reflect the racial, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious/spiritual diversity of the children needing placement and of families who live in the communities from which these children come.

1. By community, as defined in your area
2. Racial/ethnic/cultural group represented in your community (e.g., African American, Latino, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander)

Section B

Increase in the number and percentage of resource families with the necessary competencies and skills to ensure placements that meet children's unique needs.

1. Medically Fragile Children
2. Children with Developmental Disabilities
3. Adolescents/Teens
4. Sibling Groups
5. Other (determined by team)

Category 2: True Partnership between Resource Families, the Agency, and Birth Families

Teams must track and report monthly on a minimum of one measure below (either A or B).

Section A

Increase in the percentage of resource families who participate in the initial and ongoing development of a plan for the child(ren) in their care

Section B

Increase in the average number of times and the percentage of times that resource families, birth families, and the agency come together for coordinated case planning to plan for the well-being of the child

Category 3: Placement Stability

Teams must track and report monthly on the measure in Section A and on a minimum of one measure from Section B.

Section A

Decrease in the number of moves for children in placement

Section B

Decrease the number of moves for children in placement

1. Decrease in the number of moves for children in placement, age 0–5
2. Decrease in the number of moves for children in placement, age 6–11
3. Decrease in the number of moves for children in placement, age 12 or older

Category 4: Kinship Placement

Teams must track and report monthly on a minimum of one measure below (either A or B).

Section A

Increase in the percentage of children in out-of-home care placed with kin as a first placement

Section B

Decrease in the length of time it takes for children to be placed with kin

Category 5: Placement with Siblings

Teams must track and report monthly on a minimum of one measure below (A or B or C).

Section A

Increase in the percentage of children in out-of-home care placed with all their siblings who are also in care as a first placement

Section B

Increase in the percentage of sibling groups placed together for adoption

Section C

Decrease in the length of time that siblings spend in separate placements

Category 6: Retention

Teams must track and report monthly on a minimum of one measure below (either A or B).

Section A

Decrease in the number of resource families who leave

Section B

Increase in the overall level of satisfaction of resource families, as reflected by resource family satisfaction surveys

Category 7: Satisfaction of Birth Families and Youth with the Care of the Child

Teams must track and report monthly on a minimum of one measure below (A or B or C).

Section A

Increase in the percentage of youth in care who are involved in placement decisions and decisions about themselves while they are in placement

Section B

Increase in the overall level of satisfaction of youth in care, as reflected by youth in care satisfaction surveys

Section C

Increase in birth family satisfaction with the relationship between the birth family and the resource family around the care the child receives

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