



JURISDICTIONAL SCAN

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How have some child protection agencies **successfully recruited and retained resource families?**

The recruitment and retention of resource families is a critical and ongoing function for any child protection agency. There are a variety of strategies available to assist jurisdictions in the development of a comprehensive and integrated plan for recruiting and retaining resource families. For details about these strategies, please see: [What are some strategies for finding and keeping traditional and therapeutic resource families?](#)

While some states outsource the recruitment and retention of resource families, others have a hybrid approach. This brief highlights this range, and profiles the work in three jurisdictions that maintain a high rate of children placed in family-based settings and a low rate of children placed in congregate care settings:

- New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF)
- Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF)



New Jersey¹

In New Jersey, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) includes [Child Protection and Permanency](#), which is the department's child welfare agency, and the [Children's System of Care](#), which serves children with emotional and behavioral challenges, intellectual disabilities, and substance abuse challenges. Prior to its settlement agreement, New Jersey had contracts with private providers for the recruitment and retention of resource parents. DCF found, however, that providers didn't have a sense of urgency regarding permanency planning. In addition, New Jersey wanted the private providers to increase their recruiting efforts and to recruit in new ways, but that was not happening. As a result, DCF ended almost all the contracts the agency had with private providers to create a better structure. The recruitment and retention of resource parents is now done almost entirely in house, and at the local office level, although the agency does have a contract with [umbrella](#), a nonprofit, to host special events and offer advocacy and other support for foster, adoptive, and kinship families, along with a foster scholarship program.

In each local area office, DCF has instituted a Resource Family Support Unit focused on recruiting, training, and supporting resource families in neighborhoods from which children enter care, and to ensure prompt placement in homes that meet the needs of each child. These units include at least three support workers, a trainer, placement facilitator, recruiter, and supervisor. This structure allows for all recruitment, training, and ongoing support to be delivered at the local level. DCF has instituted a number of policies and practices to support this [Resource Family Model](#) structure and ensure the effective recruitment and retention of resource homes.

Recruiting Families

New Jersey DCF has been working to improve its array of resource families for many years. The agency has fundamentally changed the way it works with resource parents, approaching them not as beds or placements, but as valued and integral partners in the process. The state also invested considerable time and attention on [targeting its recruitment efforts](#) using strategies

such as market segmentation, which involves looking at the broad population of potential resource families and dividing them into subsets with common needs, interests, or characteristics, and then designing and implementing strategies to target them. New Jersey has been so successful in its recruitment efforts that the current [number of licensed foster homes](#) is more than double the number of children requiring placement in out-of-home care (approximately 14,000 beds are available in licensed foster homes versus 6,600 children in care).

Recently, New Jersey has lost about 400 staff positions across the agency and recruitment has become more centralized than it once was. Since localized efforts tend to bring about better recruitment efforts, the agency's recruitment numbers have dropped off. New Jersey is trying to get those positions back and return to the de-centralized, local office model that had worked well.¹

Retaining Families

In addition to having a sufficient number of resource families available, DCF has emphasized that building ongoing, meaningful relationships with resource parents is vital to the success of placing children in those homes. Having dedicated resource family staff that are familiar with the strengths, skills, and preferences in the agency's network of families, the agency can more quickly match children with appropriate homes that meet their needs, and support those placements over time. Resource parents also are more likely to accept placement of children if they know that staff have engaged in this kind of matching up front and the parents will be well-supported in caring for the child following placement. In New Jersey, a [caseworker follows up with the child and the foster parent](#) the day after placement to troubleshoot any issues, even on weekends or after hours.

To ensure the ongoing support of existing resource parents, New Jersey developed the [Resource Family Retention Plan](#), which outlines recommendations and action steps identified by the Resource Family Retention Task Force, including: 1) reinforcing the importance of resource families throughout the agency; 2) ensuring staff at all levels receive proper

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training to effectively engage with resource families; 3) guaranteeing all resource families receive necessary services, supports, and tools; and 4) developing policies and standards of practice that reinforce the value of resource families. This plan highlights the need for an assigned resource worker and child health unit nurse to help support each caregiver and provide services to the child in the resource home. This paradigm of resource home support is very intensive, with multiple staff working to secure as many community resources as possible to help keep children in these family-based settings, using the Resource Family Support Model.

All resource families are provided with Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) and other pre-service trainings, a comprehensive handbook, and other resources. The agency funds a range of support services, multiple appreciation events, and ongoing training opportunities for foster, adoptive, and kinship families contracted out to [embrella](#). DCF also provides peer supports to resource parents through an active mentoring program and a peer support helpline staffed by veteran resource families and run by Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care Call Center. Additionally, the agency implements an annual resource family survey to capture feedback from families regarding their experiences and needs to inform the agency's retention planning and activities for the coming year.

Another resource available to New Jersey's resource families is the [Mobile Response and Stabilization Services \(MRSS\)](#) team. MRSS offers immediate crisis intervention available statewide 24 hours a day, seven days a week to respond within one hour of a request for assistance or support. Based on the success of MRSS, a departmental policy was created that supported expanded access to serve all children entering out-of-home placement for the first time, or subsequent placement disruptions, with the goal of supporting the transition and preventing a crisis that might cause the placement disruption. This new approach was initiated in a single county (Mercer) in August 2015, implemented statewide in April 2017, and has resulted in very high levels of placement stability.

Now, when a child is removed from his or her home, an MRSS worker is automatically assigned and dispatched to meet with the child at the relative or foster placement within the first 72 hours. During this initial meeting, the MRSS worker meets individually with the child to acknowledge the trauma he or she is experiencing and discuss how they can work together to address any worries or challenges that may arise with sleeping, eating, schoolwork, or other functions as a result of this trauma. The MRSS worker also meets with the caregiver and discusses similar issues and strategies so caregivers feel more equipped to respond to potentially challenging behaviors at the outset. This initial visit also establishes a relationship between the caregiver and MRSS so that the caregiver is more likely to ask for help before there is a crisis.

Oklahoma²

In July 2012, [Oklahoma's Department of Human Services](#) began implementation of the [Pinnacle Plan](#), six months after reaching a settlement agreement. The Pinnacle Plan was an ambitious five-year plan that included reducing the number of placements, recruiting more foster families, lowering caseloads, eliminating shelter use, and raising worker salaries. To address the lack of resource family homes, Oklahoma made the decision to contract out the recruitment and support of foster parents to four private agencies across the state to provide as much coverage as possible for the recruitment, development, and support of foster families.

DHS quickly and almost exclusively turned all functions associated with the recruitment and retention of resource families over to the private agencies, with the exception of kinship care. Three of the four contracted agencies were from out of state and it took a long time for them to establish their programs. At the same time, DHS also was working to close two large shelters and reduce the number of children in youth shelters. The result was a placement crisis.

Since then, DHS moved past this placement crisis and has made significant changes to its recruitment

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and retention efforts. Upon receiving feedback from some subcontractors that they wanted to expand their operations, the department extended contracts to additional agencies. At one point, DHS had 18 agencies with contracts, although it is now down to 13.

Simultaneously, and as a direct result of the issues experienced with trying to outsource everything without having the resources to sustain the work during the transition, DHS realized it also needed some capacity in-house to recruit and retain resource families. The department cleaned up the assessment process and hired and trained staff to recruit and provide ongoing support to resource families. Currently, private providers serve about 1,000 resource families, and DHS directly serves another 1,000. Additionally, DHS has about 2,000 kinship homes, all served by the agency. A team at the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) has guided DHS throughout this entire transition.

Recruiting Families

Given the large number of churches in Oklahoma, the faith community leads many efforts to recruit foster parents. For example, DHS began a partnership with [111Project](#), a faith-based program to mobilize churches to help recruit and support foster and adoptive families so that no child is without a family. DHS also formed a partnership with [CarePortal](#), an online platform that connects caseworkers with local churches to meet the needs of families. [America's Kids Belong](#), a grassroots movement focused on the recruitment and retention of resource parents, also approached DHS. America's Kids Belong helped DHS form a partnership with the governor's office, the faith-based community, agency and tribal partners, and other community partners to launch a public outreach campaign — [Oklahoma Fosters](#) — to engage communities across the state to meet the need for an increased number of resource parents.

Additionally, DHS worked to streamline the resource parent approval process. The current approval process takes about 60 days if the family is willing and motivated. This 60-day time period encompasses everything a resource parent would need to do to

become approved, including 27 hours of training and a home study. All kinship families undergo the same process as resource families, although children may be placed with relatives as soon as the background check, house assessment, and references clear, which is usually within a day.

The Oklahoma Fosters campaign helped DHS and the private contracting agencies increase awareness of the need for foster and adoptive families through the use of multiple media outlets, development of recruitment materials, and development of additional community partnerships to support foster and adoptive families. In 2014, the agency brought on five recruiters and quickly increased that number to about 50 recruiters and 10 supervisors statewide. These recruiters are responsible for recruiting families and the onboarding process, which includes completing paperwork, contacting references, and finalizing the background check. All home studies are contracted out. Upon completion of the approval process, families are transferred from a recruiter to ongoing services. Agencies are responsible for the entire approval process; they do their own home study and upon completion, families stay with the agency. The only exception is training. DHS is responsible for all resource family training, which is run through a contract with the University of Oklahoma.

Retaining Families

DHS has increased its focus on retention activities to keep resource families engaged and involved. The department has a network of organizations around the state that are available to help both foster and kinship parents with concrete supports, such as car seats and toys. The department acknowledges the huge commitment resource families make, and recognizes staff members who go above and beyond in their efforts to support resource families. Through a partnership with the University of Oklahoma National Resource Center, DHS has developed foster and adoptive family support networks across the state, led by resource parents, to provide training and support. In addition, DHS uses data to inform and guide retention activities to maintain a high utilization rate and few vacant homes.

Washington³

In July 2018, Washington consolidated several child-serving agencies into the [Department of Children, Youth & Families](#), and in doing so, restructured the way the state serves children, youth, and families across communities. Within the child welfare system, multiple divisions work to serve parents, children, and caregivers experiencing foster care: the Licensing Division, and Child Welfare Field Operations and Programs. Historically, Child Welfare Programs managed recruitment and retention of foster parents, but shortly after the formation of the new agency, the state determined that the Licensing Division was better situated to conduct those activities.

During the recruitment phase, potential resource parents have more contact with Licensing, but once a family is licensed and a child is placed in the home, the family interacts with both Licensing and Child Welfare. For these reasons, the Licensing Division maintains responsibility for managing recruitment and contracted retention supports, while Child Welfare manages policies and programs that impact caregiver retention and supports for kinship families. The divisions work well together and collaborate to ensure there is a network of supports to serve all caregiving families.

Recruiting Families

Over the years, Washington has approached the recruitment of resource families in many ways, including maintaining all core functions within the agency, using a statewide contract with a private agency, and using regional contracts.

DCYF recently engaged in an exploratory process to determine whether to bring services in-house, continue to contract services out, or have a hybrid of the two. At the conclusion of an extensive assessment process, DCYF determined that the new approach to caregiver recruitment and retention would include a multi-pronged approach with the following internal and external elements:

- **Community-Focused Targeted Recruitment** (DCYF direct services): This approach provides lead recruitment efforts unique to each community, implements recruitment strategies, and develops community partnerships. A Targeted Recruitment Specialist (TRS) is designated in each of DCYF's six regions to oversee, facilitate, and coordinate recruitment efforts.
- **Caregiver Retention and Support** (contracts with community partners): This approach provides caregiver support functions, including support groups, one-on-one assistance through the licensing process, caregiver peer mentoring, community-based resource development and sharing, and the Foster Intervention and Retention Support Team.

Ultimately, the focus of the state's Caregiver Recruitment and Retention Program is to:

- Increase recruitment of diverse, quality caregivers that can meet the needs of children and youth placed in out-of-home care.



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- Improve retention rates of caregivers by ensuring they receive timely support, access to resources, and mentoring.
- Keep children and youth within their community when placed in out-of-home care.
- Improve permanency and placement stability by maintaining community-based, peer support to caregivers for guidance and support, as well as intervention for caregivers to improve satisfaction and retention.
- Engage in data-driven targeted recruitment to increase diversity among caregivers, as well as caregivers who can accommodate sibling groups, children and youth who are medically fragile, and children and youth with extensive emotional, behavioral, and physical needs.

DCYF currently contracts for services with the Statewide Foster Care Resource Information Center (SRIC), provided by Northwest Resource Associates. The SRIC maintains a database for tracking calls, questionnaires, and inquiries; provides the case management system to support contracted providers; and operates a statewide recruitment hotline for foster parents. DCYF recently received funding to support

an online provider portal, which will allow prospective caregivers and partners to submit, track, and complete the licensing process electronically. DCYF anticipates the new portal will launch in Fall 2021, replacing the services SRIC currently provides.

Retaining Families

Resource parents can be licensed directly by DCYF's Licensing Division or through a private child placing agency (CPA). A CPA is licensed by DCYF to recruit, certify, and manage its own resource parents.

To support licensed and kinship caregivers, DCYF provides a number of retention services directly and through contracts with providers. DCYF contracts with the state's Department of Social and Health Services' Division of Research and Data Analysis to conduct an [annual survey of foster parents](#) in Washington. In Fall 2019, DCYF conducted caregiver focus groups in each region, which helped to shape the structure of recruitment and retention moving forward. DCYF will continue to contract out support with an expectation in the contract that caregivers are hired on in mentor positions, and focus groups will continue as vital components to engaging caregivers.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Interviews with Elizabeth Manley, Children's Systems of Care Assistant Commission, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, November 14, 2017, and Lisa von Pier, Division of Child Protection and Permanency (CPP) Assistant Commissioner, Betsy Sunder, CPP Deputy Director, and Michelle Adams, CPP Deputy Director, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, December 15, 2017. Personal communication, Katherine Stoehr, Deputy Commissioner for Operations, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, May 3, 2018. Personal communication with Christine Norbut Beyer, Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, June 12, 2019.
- 2 Interview with Tricia Howell, Assistant Director of Operations, Child Welfare Services, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, on July 8, 2019.
- 3 Interview with Codie Veitenheimer, Caregiver Recruitment & Retention Program Manager, Licensing Division, Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families and Holly Luna, Kinship and Caregiver Retention and Support Program manager, Division of Child Welfare Programs, Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families, on June 17, 2019.

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