Foster Parent & Relative Caregiver Focus Groups
Published December 2017
Summary of Findings

BACKGROUND

In 2016 Governor Brown and DHS requested an independent review of foster care to determine what improvements were needed to ensure child and youth safety. Out of this review, the state identified 10 key projects to work on as part of the Unified Child and Youth Safety Implementation Plan. Many of the projects within the plan directly impact caregivers. For this reason, caregivers in central and eastern Oregon were asked to give feedback on areas slated for improvement so that DHS could ensure that changes would be meaningful and address the unique needs of rural foster families.

FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED
October 16 – Ontario
October 17 – Burns & John Day (Skype)
October 18 – La Grande & Hood River (Skype) & The Dalles (Skype)
October 19 – Bend

Total Participants: 33
*Important Note: Three foster parents responded by Email to the focus group questions and their input was incorporated into the final summary.

Length of service: <1 to 30 years

This Summary of Findings provides an overview of the most frequent focus group themes, highlights specific concerns within each larger theme, and in some areas includes recommendations for improvement directly from caregivers. This summary concludes with information regarding current efforts underway at DHS to improve the experience of being a certified foster parent/relative caregiver in Oregon. For the remainder of the document, the term “foster parent” will be used to describe caregivers who are a general applicant foster parent or a relative caregiver.

THEMES

Focus groups occurred with providers who held a General Applicant Certificate of Approval and a Child-Specific Certificate of Approval. Across all provider types and locations, several overall themes emerged that offer insight into the current support and training needs of foster parents.

A. Lack of basic knowledge needed to feel competent and capable as foster parents
B. Difficulty in accessing Orientation, Initial and Ongoing Training
C. Poor communication between foster parents and DHS
D. Lack of support after becoming a foster parent
A. Lack of Basic Knowledge

Foster parents expressed general confusion about their roles and responsibilities as caregivers. They cited mixed messages depending on who they spoke to involved in each case. One day they might be told to take a child to a doctor’s appointment but when they show up, be told they should not be there. In general, foster parents did not know what the actual DHS policies were regarding their roles. In two cases, foster parents who went through the expedited Temporary Certificate process did not even know they would be receiving financial reimbursement for caring for the children or that the children would have medical coverage.

Other notable statements regarding basic knowledge included:

- Not understanding required appointments and the timing of these appointments (IE: well child check within 30 days, mental health evaluation within 60 days, CANS screening, etc.) – Foster parents requested that they be provided with a check list to better understand required appointments
- Foster parents are given the Foster Home Certification Standards (on paper) but no one goes over the Standards with them – then it is assumed the foster parent knows what is expected of them
- One district provides a binder of information (including other handouts and resources) that foster parents felt was overwhelming
- Not understanding the roles of caseworkers in the branch- confusion around CPS vs. Permanency worker, “emergency” certifier vs. ongoing certifier; process of case transfer and who the foster parent should contact or be expecting contact from
- Process to issue a Temporary Certificate was very confusing, too many people involved and the process happened so quickly
- Not understanding who has responsibility for certain tasks- transportation to and from visitation, doctor appointments, CANS and Mental Health evaluations, etc.
- Not knowing about 24/7 access to a foster parent hotline, 211

B. Difficulty in accessing orientation, initial Foundations training, and ongoing training

These focus groups included parents who had not yet completed the required Foundations training as well as those who had completed required initial foster parent training as long ago as 30 years. This made a discussion about initial training difficult to assess and compare. All providers agreed, however, that the frequency and timing of initial and ongoing training were a concern and created barriers to accessibility. Many of the providers were working full time and needed greater flexibility and options. While DHS policy requires that foster parents complete Foundations training within 12 months of issuance of a Certificate, accessibility issues meant some foster parents were over a year in and still had not completed the training. Those who had completed training expressed that while some aspects were helpful, it did not prepare them for the children that were placed in their homes, and
frequently was “too nice” about the realities of being a foster parent. While there was unanimous praise for certification staff across all participants, they felt that additional follow up by certifiers after initial and ongoing training to discuss next steps would be meaningful. All foster parents agreed that the post impactful aspects of their training experiences were meeting and speaking with seasoned foster parents, current or former foster youth, and biological parents.

Other notable statements about training included:

Orientation -
- Few foster parents felt they were provided an individualized orientation. Rule indicates for a Temporary child specific certification, Orientation must be provided within 30 days of placement; several providers who were issued a Temporary Certificate voiced that they were not provided that level of information in a timely manner

Initial Training (Foundations) -
- Foundations does not provide information on working within the system or understanding it, such as why Child Welfare must take certain actions or meet certain timelines
- Rights as foster parents are not explained, and foster parents do not believe they have any way to address issues when rights are violated
- Foundations does not tell foster parents how to protect themselves – especially in the context of a certified family experiencing an Out of Home Care Assessment, including any forms and procedures that the CPS worker and certifier might use during an assessment
- Foster parents do not receive clear answers from the trainers in some cases– foster parents would like answers to be black and white and based in policy
- The Foundations curriculum is outdated; there are other online means that could be used as part of training.

Ongoing Training -
- There are limited options to address the variety of children foster parents may have in their homes
- Very few in-person trainings come to their area
- Child care is a major barrier for in-person trainings
- Online training like Net links should not always be offered during work hours – many foster parents work and are not able to participate during that time

Suggestions to Improve training
- Experienced foster parents should attend training with new foster parents – information changes and it gives access of experienced foster parents to new foster parents.
• Training needs to be “real” so that new foster parents know what they are getting into and hear it from experienced foster parents.
• Training needs to address the assumption by some new foster parents that “I know how to deal with kids” if they previously parented.
• Training should be offered over a period of time – suggestion to offer a basic training initially, and then a follow up training offered 3-6 months post placement.
• The trainings that are squeezed into a few days are “like a firehose” and make it difficult to retain information.
• As part of ongoing training requirements, foster parents should be paid to teach a class to other caregivers, or be a facilitator and receive training credit.
• Foster parents should be invited to participate on foster parent panels and have more time with new foster parents in training.
• Training should remind and allow participants to feel that it is okay and appropriate to reach out for help, especially when a foster parent is new.
• DHS should utilize more online resources like blogs, video chat, and online training.
  o There could be an interactive online training at night after children go to bed, where all parents are on live with a facilitator.
• There should be 101 and 201 versions of trainings to assist in understanding what they need to know over time.
• Curriculum should include topics such as:
  o How to check for and treat lice
  o Examples of the home situations children were in prior to care so foster parents better understand connection to behaviors they see in the home
  o Lessons Learned – bringing together new and seasoned foster parents to share and ask questions
• Foster parents should be required to come back to Foundations for a refresher every few years.

*Important Note*
The Caregiver Training Redesign group (11/2015-11/2016) provided several recommendations that align with caregivers understanding of orientation, and what to expect as a caregiver in the first 30, 60, 90 days of placement. The group also proposed ongoing training options that would allow for a 201 version for caregivers.

C. Poor communication between foster parents and DHS

Communication was a high level theme among each of the focus groups. Although these focus groups were focused on training and support, it became clear that regular and consistent communication across DHS and foster parents was not occurring. Caregivers cited lack of respectful communication as a driver for certified foster families leaving the system. Certification staff was the exception, frequently highlighted for their positive communications with foster parents. In general, foster parents expressed not feeling like a valued team member.
Foster parents felt there was little to no consideration for foster parents schedule or input around visitation, appointments, or transitions.

Other notable statements regarding communication included:

- Communication with caseworkers and their supervisors is difficult
- Lack of timely responses by caseworkers. Sometimes taking a week or more to receive a call back or return email
- Caseworkers not showing up to scheduled home visits, doctor appointments, etc. with no notice to the foster parent
- Caseworkers coming to foster homes to move children with no notice
- Caseworkers providing a schedule to the foster parent or telling the foster parent they needed to be somewhere or bring the child, without consultation regarding their work/personal schedules
- No communication to foster parents about legislative changes that impact them—especially SB 243, which changes the definition of abuse to children in care

D. Lack of support after becoming a foster parent

Outside of communication challenges, ongoing support was an area of great concern to foster parents. They identified a number of concrete ways DHS could better support foster parents—such as increasing reimbursement rates, providing respite care, and covering child care for working foster parents. They also identified more intangible supports that would improve their experience, for example: access to peer mentors, support groups, and other opportunities to feel less isolated. They noted that increased communication and responsiveness would help them feel supported as well.

Other notable statements regarding support included:

- Lack of Interactions with seasoned caregivers
- Finding and securing respite is difficult or impossible for higher needs children
- Help when behaviors are too difficult and who to turn to if professionals are not able to assist in behaviors. In rural areas, there are not many professionals available
- Foster children are often in the office everyday because either a) the foster parent cannot afford child care or b) there is a lag time between child care enrollment and availability
- There are not enough coordinated supports for foster parents around family counseling and family bonding
- No after hours crisis line in some communities
- Few opportunities organized to meet other foster parents and network, especially in smaller communities and during non working hours

Suggestions to Improve Support:

- Connect prospective foster parents with experienced foster parent for first 6 months to help them through challenges
• Host more events to fit in variety of schedules and interests.
• Each branch should have a clothing or resource closet to access clothing and other tangible needs (furniture, car seats, pack-n-plays).
• A Facebook page could manage tangible needs that foster parents could answer and lend to each other
• The Department should facilitate finding approved respite providers, including providing a list of approved respite providers
• The Department should be responsible for reimbursing respite providers
• Start a babysitting program with incentives for young people to understand children in foster care and provide occasional childcare.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

While these focus groups were concentrated on training and support, other ideas or concerns were brought up frequently that should be included in future discussions about the experience of foster parents in Oregon.

Placement Matching
Foster parents agreed that there are not enough high level homes available to parent the children currently entering care with high needs. They felt that this forced many of them to take children beyond their skill levels.

Variation in DHS Practice Between Districts, Counties, Branches
Two foster parents were initially certified in different parts of Oregon prior to their current certification location. Both expressed a completely different experience upon moving that was less than positive. Also, experiences with courtesy workers made foster parents feel that each county has their own “rules” and interpretations around policy and it is not consistent.

Foster Home Transitions
Several foster parents expressed concerns about foster children arriving from other foster homes with no belongings despite having been in care for some time. All agreed that children should not be coming to placements with their belongings in trash bags.

Rights of Children vs. Rights of Parents
Foster parents voiced concerns about the number of “chances” birth parents receive to improve and wondered where the balance should be between a parents rights and a child’s rights. They felt strongly that the children’s voices needed to be heard more in case planning, and time languishing in care should be limited.

Out of Home Care Assessments
Out of Home Care Assessments were consistent concerns among all focus groups. Foster parents felt in general that the state “doesn’t have their back” and as foster parents,
they are very vulnerable during the assessment process. Several parents felt DHS was
defensive and jumped to conclusions without listening to them. Some believed that
process was too long, stressful, and did not feel appropriate when a foster parent had a
long, positive history with the agency.

*Important Note*

Out of Home Care Assessments currently use the Oregon Safety Model, which is
the same model Child Welfare uses in assessing child abuse in Oregon. Ideas have
been discussed to develop a different model specific for foster families— to help
with the process and retention.

Interstate Travel for Border Communities

Foster families who live along the borders of Oregon were very frustrated with
interstate travel rules and inconsistency across branches. They received different
answer depending on who they spoke to. In some cases they could obtain an annual
pass for places they frequently travelled to across state lines. In other cases they were
told they needed a pass each time, no matter what. Participants who live on the
border of Oregon, Idaho, and Washington often have family and friends in those states,
so frequent interstate travel is part of daily life.

Moteling of Children /Foster Care Crisis

Some foster parents do not see the “moteling” crisis they are hearing about in the news.
The perception is that “moteling” is happening mostly in Portland. Several foster
parents posed the question about utilizing placements in Eastern Oregon instead of
moteling children. In this same vein, it was expressed that persons living outside of rural
counties may perceive these foster parents to be “rednecks”.

Adoption Support

A number of participants were concerned that caseworkers from outside of rural
Oregon do not want to have adoption placements in rural parts of the state because of a
perception that there are fewer resources. Part of this concern stemmed from
statements made by staff but as well from issues with notifications in the Oregon
Adoption Resource Exchange (OARE) website. The website does not notify potential
adoptive parents of their status after they make in inquiry about a specific child or
sibling group. Current foster parents feel they are waiting and never hear back.

Current and Future Efforts by the Department to Improve the Experience of
Foster Parents in Oregon

While some of the issues and concerns raised by these focus groups were unique, many
issues are ones that the Department has been aware of for some time and efforts have been
made to address, or plans are being made to address them in the future. Listed below are
current or future efforts that aim to impact the training and support needs of foster parents in our state.

I. Foster Care Reimbursement Rates Changes. The Legislature increased funding for DHS reimbursement for Foster Parents and Relative Caregivers.

Starting January 1, 2018 the new rates will be in effect and caregivers should anticipate seeing this change on their February check. See the chart below for changes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foster Care Reimbursement Rates – Effective 1/1/2018</th>
<th>Current 1/1/2012</th>
<th>New 1/1/2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care 0-5 years old</td>
<td>$ 575</td>
<td>$ 693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care 6-12 years old</td>
<td>$ 655</td>
<td>$ 733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care 13-20 years old</td>
<td>$ 741</td>
<td>$ 795</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Foster Care Shelter 0-5 years old                  | $ 24.60         | $ 30.66      |
| Foster Care Shelter 6-12 years old                 | $ 28.00         | $ 31.97      |
| Foster Care Shelter 13-20 years old                | $ 31.60         | $ 34.03      |

| Enhanced Foster Care Shelter 0-5 years old         | $ 29.40         | $ 54.33      |
| Enhanced Foster Care Shelter 6-12 years old        | $ 33.50         | $ 55.64      |
| Enhanced Foster Care Shelter 13-20 years old       | $ 37.90         | $ 57.70      |

| Personal Care Level 1                              | $ 207           | $ 231        |
| Personal Care Level 2                              | $ 413           | $ 461        |
| Personal Care Level 3                              | $ 620           | $ 692        |
| Personal Care Level 4                              | $ 620 +         | $ 692 +      |

| Enhanced Supervisor Level 1                        | $ 212           | $ 240        |
| Enhanced Supervisor Level 2                        | $ 414           | $ 468        |
| Enhanced Supervisor Level 3                        | $ 850           | $ 960        |

Base Rates are based on the USDA Cost of Raising a Child. 1/1/18 is equal to 56.6% of USDA rate. [https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2017/01/13/cost-raising-child](https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2017/01/13/cost-raising-child)


Enhanced Supervision rates based on Oregon’s Rate Redesign model from 2009; $6.00 per hour x L1 40 hrs, L2 65 hrs, L3 100 hrs.
II. Training Regarding New Statute (SB 243) - Report of suspected child abuse of a child in foster/relative care. New legislation passed this year which impacts a few different administrative rules and has some critical areas foster parents need to be aware of; these rules expand the definition of “Child Abuse” to include Financial exploitation of a child, Involuntary seclusion or confinement of a child, and also adds new requirements of the foster parent or relative caregiver when they have caregiving employees in their home requiring development of procedures in the home on Child Abuse reporting for those individuals.

The department is developing a computer-based training and materials intended to help foster parents better understand these new changes as well as provide training resources for caregiving employees. In late December caregivers can find these training resources at; http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/FOSTERPARENT/Pages/Training.aspx

III. Support & Community Resources. The Department is expanding the Foster Parent Resources webpage and over the next several months we anticipate many more resources being available. http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/FOSTERPARENT/Pages/resources.aspx

IV. Foster Parent Training Inventory. The Department has consolidated and updated the training page of the foster parent. The new format and information should allow caregivers to quickly see what their training requirements are, and how they can find and register for approved in-person or online trainings. http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/FOSTERPARENT/Pages/Training.aspx

V. Caregiver Training Redesign Workgroup. A workgroup comprised of over 30 staff and community partners began convening in July of 2017. They are developing Core Competencies for foster parents and will be redesigning Foundations and ongoing training to achieve those competencies, as well as addressing delivery and accessibility issues highlighted by caregivers and staff alike. By 2019, a new training model will be ready for delivery across the state.

VI. Foster Parent Support Legislative Investment. The 2017 Legislature set aside an additional $750,000 for the Department specifically for foster parent support, and asked that we return in January 2018 to outline how we would use the funds. These focus groups and a Caregiver Support & Development workgroup provided input into the outline and the Legislative will make a decision by February 2018 regarding the funds being used for increased respite care, foster parent mentoring, and flexible fund to help caregivers with urgent needs.

VII. Caregiver Support & Development Workgroup. The Department has convened a workgroup of staff and stakeholders to provide input into the request for additional funds for the legislature, and then look more broadly at support across the state. The workgroup will review successes from several pilot projects underway and determine next steps to ensure that those supports for caregivers can be scaled statewide and sustained beyond limited pilots.