

# ***Targeted Recruitment:*** **The Most Effective Strategy Towards** **Increasing County Resource Parent Licensures**

FAITH M. BATTLES

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The social issue of child abuse and neglect is one that must be addressed by public child welfare agencies with humanity, forward thinking, and bravery to act as if it is impossible to fail. To act as if it is impossible to fail to help families become empowered to protect and care for their young when resources are scarce; to reunify children and youth with families when at some point they neglected to protect them from child abuse and neglect, and to find people within our communities to welcome into their lives someone else's child who needs safety, permanence, and well-being in order for those children to grow into healthy, well adjusted adults. One of the most challenging tasks in the face of dwindling resources in public child welfare agencies across the nation is recruiting and retaining community partners to become county licensed resource parents (also known as foster parents). The question is always, "How do we engage the community to want to partner with the public child welfare agency to become county licensed resource parents?" The response to this question most often comes in the form of counties employing traditional recruitment efforts that are expensive, lack focus, and involve minimal community engagement. These efforts fail to address the individual needs of the county, attract community partners that are not willing to foster the more challenging children in need of out-of-home placement, and result in foster children and youth having to be placed in more restrictive and less favorable settings.

Common pitfalls for counties in their recruitment of resource families (also known as foster families) typically fall within three areas:

Counties often rely on conventional methods of recruiting, such as billboards within communities, glossy brochures, heart-wrenching television spots, and community tablings which are not sufficient to bolster the rolls of county resource parents willing to take hard-to-place children into their homes.

Counties generally neglect to creatively and consistently utilize their most valuable recruitment tool—their current county licensed resource parents.

Counties do not embrace the necessity and value of being able to measure the success of their recruitment efforts with clear performance indicators based on identified recruitment goals and objectives and information about recruitment expenditures.

A targeted recruited effort that is 1) focused on those persons in the community that are most likely to foster an identified demographic of children and youth (i.e., the most difficult to place population), 2) is data driven, 3) utilizes county licensed resource parents in the forefront of the recruitment effort, and 4) is forward thinking is the most effective strategy towards increasing county resource parent licensures.

---

**Faith M. Battles, MSW** is a Child Welfare Supervisor with Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA), Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Placement Services Division.

## Findings

Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services Department (EHS), Children & Family Services (CFS) has a well-organized practice for recruiting and licensing county resource parents that appear to rely heavily on billboard usage, brochure distribution, and other typical recruitment efforts. Their use of county licensed resource parents in the recruitment and training of county licensed resource parents and creative utilization of CFS staff in the licensure and home-study process offers necessary support to their county licensed resource parents. Furthermore, Contra Costa County has embraced the reality that resource parents need an ally within the public child welfare organization that serves as a bridge between the resource parents and CFS, as well as being the voice of the resource parents in the form of Foster Parent Liaisons. Contra Costa's impressive success in retaining their county licensed resource parents is positively impacted by their use of the Foster Parent Liaison.

## Recommendations

Recommendations for Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA), Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) include:

- completing thorough needs assessment of Alameda County licensed foster homes and of the children and youth in out-of-home placement in Alameda County to determine current unmet placement needs and predict future placement needs,
- establishing recruitment goals and objectives and placement priorities for DCFS,
- identifying communities to target based on demographic and census information that reveal areas that have been unintentionally overlooked in recruitment and engage identified communities in targeted recruitment efforts of those families most likely to foster the most difficult to place population,
- developing a comprehensive recruitment plan that utilizes general, child specific and targeted recruitment efforts with targeted recruitment comprising 60% of all recruitment efforts,
- committing to maintain Foster Parent Liaison position(s) through current funded child welfare position(s),
- establishing specific, measurable, attainable, and time-oriented performance indicators to statistically track licensure of county foster homes resulting from targeted recruitment efforts and annually review data to assess success of recruitment plans and expenditures, and
- developing practice of administering "exit interviews" for all county licensed resource parents and use information gained to better improve recruitment, training and support practices.

# ***Targeted Recruitment:*** **The Most Effective Strategy Towards** **Increasing County Resource Parent Licensures**

**FAITH M. BATTLES**

## **Introduction**

Each year thousands of children and youth throughout the United States are victims of child abuse and neglect. Within the United States there are approximately 517,325 children and youth in the foster care system with approximately 48% participating in family reunification services. The numbers for California indicate approximately 92,344 children and youth are involved with the state's foster care system, 51% are awaiting reunification with their birth families, while 46% of these children and youth will experience multiple placements while in out-of-home care (AFCARS, 2004, ASPE Claims Reports, 2005, and ACF Budget Reports, 2005). In Alameda County, there are 2,296 children and youth in out-of-home care. A significant number of these children and youth are able to remain with their parents or relatives provided supportive services are put in place and the family willingly takes advantage of the resources. Close to 35% of dependent children and youth in Alameda County are placed with relatives or fictive kin; approximately 27% are placed in certified foster homes through foster family agencies; 13% are placed in congregate care settings; and close to 5% are placed in county licensed foster homes. Data indicate that children between 11–18 years of age are typically not placed in county licensed resource homes but in foster family agency homes and congregate care (Mary Volz, Alameda County Social Services Agency, Department of Children & Family Services, *Quality Assurance*, 2007). Such placements result in a significant cost for Alameda County as

they are considered higher levels of care originally intended for children and youth with behavioral and emotional challenges. On the other hand, for those children and youth who are not able to remain safely in the home, out-of-home placement is their only option. Placement with a relative, extended family member or fictive kin is the first priority in this instance but when this is not possible, placement in a foster home is the next best option.

In an attempt to attract community members to consider foster parenting, most public child welfare agencies rely heavily upon general recruitment methods (i.e., billboards, television, radio, booths and fairs), which can oftentimes be the least engaging to the community and the most time-consuming, and expensive for the public child welfare agency. This traditional method of recruitment generally does not attract significant numbers of resource parents according to national research findings. While casting such a wide net may result in some licensures, many of the families recruited through this method are typically unwilling to care for school-aged children, as well as older youth and children with special needs due to behavioral, developmental, or medical issues. In reality, these children typically constitute the most significant number of children in foster care, thereby generating an urgent need to recruit and license resource families willing to provide for their care. Targeted recruitment, that is recruitment that matches child demographics and needs to appropriate community outlets, has proven to be most effective. Counties that boast promising

practices in areas of recruitment embrace the practice of targeted recruitment, integrate it into their daily business as their primary recruitment effort and continually assess their labors by analyzing data for effectiveness.

### **Background of Interest in Targeted Recruitment**

My current job responsibility includes direct involvement in DCFS resource parent recruitment efforts. To remain responsive to the community's needs, DCFS is constantly seeking new and innovative ways to attract community partners to the important task of providing safe and stable homes for abused children and youth. Although Alameda County has made remarkable strides in the last 2 years in the recruitment of resource parents by engaging with faith-based organizations around recruitment, the county recognizes that I has more to do to develop a comprehensive, thoughtful and data-driven recruitment effort necessary to meet the ultimate goal of recruiting and licensing 400 new county-licensed resource parents within the coming years.

### **Key Elements of Resource Parent Recruitment**

The successful public child welfare agency understands recruitment requires full time commitment that must be innovative, consistent, thoughtful, data-driven, and pro-active. To be most effective, recruitment must be a three-pronged approach, including activities that can be categorized as general, child-specific, and targeted. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family public child welfare reform strategy, targeted recruitment is the most effective strategy in recruiting foster families and placing children and youth. An explanation of each recruitment method is warranted to detail what efforts comprise a balanced and flourishing recruitment strategy.

General recruitment, the most commonly used recruitment method involves reaching large audiences through outreach programs utilizing public events, public services announcements through television and radio, billboards, foster care and adoption community tablings, and other community events.

This method is not very focused and typically approaches community partners through a tag line such as, "All children deserve a family." The audience that is attracted by this method typically is not suitable for fostering or adopting the types of children that present unique challenges in terms of placement and do not follow through once approached by the agency. However, the benefit to generalized recruitment is dispensing valuable information to the public regarding what is needed in the community and bolstering public child welfare's image in the community. It has been recommended that only 15% of the agency's recruitment budget be allocated to general recruitment effort (Goodman, 1999).

Child-specific recruitment involves creating a unique and individual recruitment plan for a specific child based on that child's needs. This may include researching the child's past, especially those adults (i.e., relatives, teachers or close friends) who had an integral role in their lives, and approaching them with the idea of fostering that particular child. Agencies often use this method to recruit families for children with special needs, including disabilities, behavioral issues, and medical frailties. Goodman (1999) suggests recruitment budgets allocate 25% of monies to this function, which can be costly and time extensive but worth the effort.

Targeted recruitment identifies specific children and youth in the community in need of temporary or permanent homes as well as taking inventory of available families. This type of recruitment requires the agency to know the age, gender, race, sibling status, and ethnic background of the children and youth who need out-of-home placement. Next, they must consider what these children and youth have in common i.e., social, emotional, physical and developmental needs. Priorities are established taking into account if the common factors will change over time, what skills the resource parents will need to successfully parent these children and youth, and what need is the most urgent. Targeted recruitment merits approximately 60% of the agency's recruitment budget and should be the most extensively used strategy (Goodman, 1999).

## Program Overview

Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services Department (EHS), Children & Family Services (CFS) faces the same challenge of bolstering its role of county licensed resource parents and credits their use of targeted recruitment with addressing this ongoing issue. Although the concept of targeted recruitment is welcomed within CFS, the actual implementation as recommended by industry experts remains in question. Interviews with CFS staff and review of CFS written materials on recruitment and data made available to complete this BASSC assignment reveal that Contra Costa County is somewhat involved in a research-oriented, data-driven, targeted recruitment strategy, which could be enhanced and used in their targeted recruitment effort. The county has also implemented promising recruitment and retention strategies that are sustaining its recruitment and retention efforts of county licensed resource parents.

## Resource Parent Recruitment in Contra Costa County

Doubts about the feasibility of engaging in targeted recruitment in Contra Costa County appears to be impacting any true targeted recruitment efforts. Of concern is the availability of resources within CFS and the actual number of “active” resource parents to support any targeted recruitment efforts. Not unlike many counties, without an annual recruitment plan Contra Costa County’s recruitment efforts can best be described as general with the recruiter attending tablings in the community for the purpose of dispensing information to generate interest and “plant seeds.” The development of relationships within the community and a continual presence therein underlies Contra Costa’s approach in terms of recruitment efforts. The county holds the belief that the more information the community receives about the needs of the local public child welfare system over time is what generates county licensed resource parents.

*“You need to have a critical mass of homes . . . before you do targeted recruitment. Contra Costa does*

*not have a critical mass.” (Mary Jensen, CFS Social Worker Supervisor). “We try to be the information people, so people are attracted rather than pushed into it. We don’t do anything hard sell, we try to be informative . . . informative.” (Lisa Simmons, CFS Recruiter)*

Research supports Contra Costa County’s position that recruitment is a lengthy process and that information needs to germinate with each person before an actual decision to foster is made. For example, it takes approximately one year after someone has been informed about the need for resource parents within their community before they even make a phone call to request further information. Once the phone call is made an interested person often takes even more time to consider the information provided before they move to the next step and attend an informational meeting. This manifested itself in Contra Costa County when the county was challenged a few years back to place 7–8 babies in county licensed resource homes within a one week time frame. The local media learned of the shortage of county licensed resource homes to accommodate the babies and alerted the community to the county’s needs in print, radio, and television. The county seized the opportunity and hosted a one-time only recruitment effort to address this need by hosting an orientation in a county building that attracted 80 interested persons. Of those 80 interested persons, the recruitment effort generated only three families that were actually licensed.

*“People had a spontaneous interest and thought about it and said, ‘I don’t do this.’ (Simmons). “It overwhelmed the current system we had . . . not enough people to process the applications in a timely manner.” (Jensen)*

## Program Evaluation: Successes and Challenges

With any recruitment effort, it is best to begin with the end in mind—retaining resource parents for the duration. Research indicates that newly licensed resource parents often surrender their license within the first year citing lack of support as the principle motivator, which ultimately diminishes any agency’s recruitment efforts when they are unable to stop re-

source families from leaving while adding resource families to its roster. Contra Costa County has managed to avoid this snare by not experiencing significant annual surrenders of licenses due to dissatisfaction with CFS. Those resource parents who have left the county's foster care program have usually adopted the foster child in their care, retired from fostering, or relocated outside of the county. Contra Costa County's success in this area can likely be attributed to its implementation and effective utilization of a Foster Parent Liaison.

The Foster Parent Liaison is a county licensed resource parent who is a registered nurse and adoptive mother of four previous Contra Costa County dependent children. This position came as a result of a recommendation five years ago following an investigation into Contra Costa County's support of its resource parents. The position is paid and has been contracted through a non-profit agency for the past five years. The Foster Parent Liaison's role is to communicate the needs of CFS to the resource parents while providing resource parents with overall support needed to navigate the "system." With the responsibility of being on call 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, the Foster Parent Liaison offers a supportive shoulder and an open ear, assists resource parents with payment concerns and refers resource parents for respite services and any other identified supportive means. The Foster Parent Liaison also hosts monthly coffee meetings at various locations throughout the county as support groups for resource parents, adoptive parents, relatives, and non-related extended family members alike. The Foster Parent Liaison also initiates contact with each newly county licensed resource parent at the time of their first placement and interviews resource parents who decide to surrender their county foster care license. Contra Costa County uses this information to improve recruitment, development, and support practices.

### **Lessons Learned**

While Alameda County is certainly making unprecedented strides through the Faith Based Initiative, Bay Area Heart Gallery and the Interagency Recruit-

ment Effort to engage the community toward reaching its goal of 400 newly licensed resource parents in the coming years, it must supplement its efforts with additional strategies that attend to the identified specific placement needs in the county. While our messaging remains clear in terms of the department's commitment to concurrent planning and the changing and more demanding population of children in out-of-home placements, community partners are struggling to accept this reality and commit to this endeavor. Well-intended efforts are in vain if community partners licensed who are not willing to foster drug/alcohol exposed babies, school aged children and older youth and children who are challenged medically, behaviorally, or developmentally. Those resource families will inevitably experience great frustration with not having received a placement due to the fact that they are unwilling to foster Alameda County's child population, which ultimately leads to an underutilization of available foster care placements and possible voluntary relinquishment of licenses. The public shouldn't be given the misperception that there is a sufficient number of resource families to care for the children coming into care, when the reality is, there are simply not enough county licensed foster homes willing to take the types of children in need of care that are the hardest to place.

What is called for is a well-rounded, year around three-pronged recruitment effort that establishes data-driven priorities, goals and objectives, is fiscally supported in accordance to effectiveness and performance indicators, and included benchmarks supported by data. Utilization of resource parents in all recruitment efforts and consistent messaging that values concurrent planning should further strengthen what must be an aggressive and continual community effort.

### **Implications for Alameda County**

Implementation of a well-rounded recruitment plan with targeted recruitment comprising the majority of DCFS recruitment efforts can be fiscally supported with monies from the Title IV-E Waiver. Opting to be able to spend its foster care monies more flexibly,

Alameda County is one of two counties (the other being Los Angeles County) that requested and was approved to participate in the Title IV-E Waiver project over the next five years to administer the county's child welfare services. Alameda County's allocation for funding under the Title IV-E Waiver was based on the budget for fiscal year '05-'06, which included AB2129 monies for resource parent recruitment and Options for Recovery (known as Community Action to Reach Out to Infants, CARI in Alameda County) that support for recruitment and support of resource parents specifically trained to care for drug and/or alcohol exposed children aged 0–5 years old. Any implementation of suggested recommendations would fall within the budget already allocated for recruitment, development, and support of county licensed resource parents.

### Recommendations for Alameda County

The current recruitment efforts in Alameda County can be further improved by utilizing the Recruiter and Resource Parent Liaison positions to fully implement a well rounded recruitment strategy, with emphasis on targeted recruitment by July 2009. The strategy should aim to:

- Implement "Recruitment Is Everybody's Business Finder's Fee Referral Program" that offers a monetary stipend to resource parents and departmental staff for every resource family they refer that becomes licensed and placement ready;
- Develop practice of administering "exit interviews" for all county-licensed resource parents;
- Complete thorough needs assessment of Alameda County licensed resource homes, including license status, location, capacity and placement preference and/or specialty;
- Complete thorough needs assessment of the children and youth in out-of-home placement in Alameda County that helps predict future placement needs (including review of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs) and acknowledges commonalities for use in targeted recruitment efforts;
- Establish recruitment and placement priorities for DCFS based on information gained from research (i.e., teenagers, infants, neighborhood location, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender queer and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth, concurrent planning families, adoptive families, etc.);
- Identify communities to target and engage based on demographic examination to reveal family-oriented neighborhoods and census information that reveal areas unintentionally overlooked in recruitment;
- Host annual Resource Parent Recruitment Retreat with stakeholders and community partners in attendance (i.e., birth parents, foster youth, department staff, including management from all divisions, and resource parents);
- Develop a comprehensive recruitment plan that prioritizes targeted, child-specific, and generalized recruitment, in that order, with targeted recruitment encompassing 60% of all recruitment activities;
- Establish specific, measurable, attainable and time-oriented performance indicators to statistically track licensure of county resource homes resulting from targeted recruitment efforts and annually review data to assess success of recruitment plan and expenditures;
- Strive to sustain recruitment campaign activities throughout the year with one clearly identified effort implemented each month; and
- Establish an assessment process for prospective Resource Parents & Adoptive Parents that results in a written document that introduces the family to the department, identifies strengths and areas of growth, and offers most optimum placement suggestions.

### Conclusion

Before a public child welfare agency can attend to its need to recruit community partners to become county-licensed resource parents willing to care for its most challenging to place children, it is best to begin with the end in mind-retaining resource parents for the duration. Implementing strategies that provide nec-

essary support for resource parents should be the number one priority if the county is to avoid voluntary relinquishment of licenses, multiple placements for foster children and youth, and damaged reputations within the community. Secondly, a targeted recruited effort that is data-driven, focused on those persons in the community that are most likely to foster the most challenging to place children and youth, utilizes county-licensed resource parents in the forefront of the recruitment effort, and is forward thinking is the most effective strategy towards increasing county resource parent licensures. Lastly, a well-rounded, year around three-pronged recruitment effort that establishes priorities, goals and objectives and is fiscally supported by data must be reviewed constantly and modified at least annually to address the public child welfare agency's changing needs.

### Acknowledgements

Throughout my career I have been blessed with opportunities to work within agencies that value my experience, enthusiasm and abilities and have afforded me challenging yet rewarding opportunities to create change for vulnerable populations. Alameda County has welcomed me as my authentic self, dared . . . no, required me to stretch beyond my current abilities and encouraged me to envision myself in positions of leadership beyond any self-imposed limitations. My most heartfelt thanks to:

- Chet Hewitt, former Agency Director for Alameda County SSA for exemplifying bold, innovative and passionate leadership that is live and in color;
- Carol Collins, Assistant Agency Director for Alameda County DCFS for her gentle yet stern reminders to me of what is expected of a manager and exemplifying how to move through good times and difficult times with grace;
- Lori Jones, Placement Services Division Director for DCFS for tolerating my vulnerability through my professional growth while expecting me to think more broadly; and
- Sally Lee, Intake Services Program Manager for DCFS and my "targeted recruited" mom, for

unselfishly and unashamedly giving me what everyone wants more than anything—an unconditional family!

*Thank you very much to Lois Rutten, Mary Jensen, Lisa Simmons, and Patrick Harrington, PhD, all from Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services, Children & Family Services. This team eagerly assisted me with this project and spent a considerable amount of time processing my requests, detailing their work and offering constructive feedback.*

### References

- Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Budget Reports (2005).
- Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) (2004).
- Alameda County Self Assessment Plan (January 2007).
- ASPE Claims Reports (2005).
- Child Specific Recruitment Ohio's Promising Practices (March 2006) Adopt Ohio Kids.
- Collins, Carol & Hewitt, Chet (2005). A Search for Family: Faith Institutions' Role in the Reform of Child Welfare. Alameda County's Foster Family Campaign.
- Goodman, Denise, Ph.D. (Spring 1999). Targeted Recruitment: The Most Effective Strategy.
- Department of Health and Human Services, Inspector General Office (May 2002). Recruiting Foster Parents. OEI-07-00-00600. <http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/>
- Needell, B., Webster, D., Armijo, M., Lee, S., Dawson, W., Magruder, J., Exel, M., Zimmerman, K., Simon, V., Putnam-Hornstein, E., Frerer, K., Ataie, Y., Atkinson, L., Blumberg, R., Henry, C., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (2008). *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research website. URL: [http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb\\_childwelfare](http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare)