Factors Influencing Foster Parents' Decisions to
Continue or Cease Foster Parenting

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FACTORS INFLUENCING FOSTER PARENTS' DECISIONS TO CONTINUE OR CEASE FOSTER PARENTING

Report Brief

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Concerns about the rising numbers of children who need foster home placements and the limited number of foster homes available for them in the county led to Alameda County's interest in investigating how foster parents decide to continue or cease to foster. While previous research indicates that the satisfaction of foster parents is highly dependent on the attention they receive from the foster agency, little is known about specific strategies for providing the kind of support foster parents desire. The purpose of this study was to identify strategies for recruiting and retaining foster homes. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate people to become foster parents?

2. What factors influence foster parents' likelihood to continue fostering over time?

3. What factors influence foster parents' decisions to stop providing care?

4. What strategies could improve the recruitment and retention of foster parents in Alameda County?

METHOD

Focus group interviews with 64 individuals were conducted across 7 focus groups between February 3, 2000 and April 4, 2000. Three types of foster parents participated in the study: a) those who completed training and never fostered children, b) those who provided foster care for a few years and then stopped, and c) current long-term foster care providers. The focus group questions addressed the experiences of foster parents and the factors that influenced their decisions to continue or cease fostering. Additionally, foster parents made suggestions for improving Alameda County's foster parent recruitment and retention methods.

RESULTS

A literature review on foster parent recruitment and retention revealed multiple factors that contribute to the difficulties associated with recruiting new foster parents. The literature revealed that foster care agencies could improve the retention of foster homes if they increased foster parent training and payment rates, improved quality and quantity of their interactions with foster parents, and included foster parents in case planning and decision-making activities.

Building upon the findings from the literature, the focus group interviews revealed several major findings. With regard to Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) training & social services events, foster parents appreciated and enjoyed any opportunity to interact with other foster parents and to network with county staff. It was found that individuals learned about the opportunity to foster via word-of-mouth, churches, or while employed in an agency serving children. The primary motivating factors for fostering were their own childhood experiences, their love of children, and awareness of the great need for foster parents. Foster parents reported that their attachment and commitment to foster children, the support they receive from friends and family, and their own financial and personal resources enable them to continue fostering over time.

Those who completed training but never fostered children reported that: a) the county had never placed any foster children in their homes or b) they had experienced unsuccessful adoptions or dissatisfaction with the agency's operations. Foster parents who discontinued fostering after a few years reported: a) positive memories of the children for whom they cared, b) negative memories of trying to communicate with social workers, c) lack of county support, d) poor timeliness of services, e) negative encounters with biological families, and f) not being treated as a team player by the agency. Suggestions for recruiting and retaining more foster homes include utilizing current foster parents in recruitment efforts, providing freer access to information and services, and treating foster parents with respect as team members.

RECOMMENDED TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

1. INCREASE THE ROLES OF FOSTER PARENTS IN DECISION-MAKING

- Involve foster parents in case planning activities. To increase the involvement of foster parents in decision-making, the agency could arrange for them to be included in regular case conferences. This change would give foster parents the opportunity to provide decision-makers with important information about children's needs and behaviors.

- Increase the frequency of foster parents' interactions with agency representatives. Examples include increased visitations, phone conversations, meetings with social workers.

- Increase the amount of information provided to foster parents. In addition to obtaining important information from foster parents, the agency should also identify pertinent information about children's case plans that could legally be shared and explained to foster parents.

- Explain the child welfare system during training. Since foster parents were very frustrated that they could not understand the child welfare and court processes, the county needs to provide explanations. The agency should examine its foster parent training curriculum to identify areas that could include enhanced explanations of the child welfare system's rules and procedures.

2. INCREASE SUPPORT FOR FOSTER PARENTS

- Identify and address obstacles to providing valuable support to foster parents. Foster parents suggested that simple words of encouragement and appreciation from social workers would increase the levels of support provided to foster parents. The agency should identify existing obstacles (e.g., caseload size, mandated activities, agency culture) that may prevent its social workers from providing this kind of support that foster parents desire.

- Consider sponsoring more frequent appreciation events. The agency could convey messages of appreciation by increasing agency-sponsored foster parent appreciation events. Participants noted that they valued these type of activities

- Increase opportunities for foster parents to support one another. The agency could consider organizing more activities to give foster parents the opportunity to share experiences and provide social support to one another. These activities could include increasing participation rates of foster parent support groups and structuring training activities designed to further encourage foster parents to utilize one another in the years following training.

- Increase foster parent payment rates. The agency should examine the possibility of increasing foster parent payment rates as another way to increase their support of foster parents.

- Increase foster parents' access to child care and respite care. The agency should examine ways that it could provide foster parents with more access to child care and respite support services.

3. DECREASE DELAYS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

- Place limits on the duration of time between licensing and placing children in new foster homes. Many trained foster parents discontinued their relationships with the agency because they never received contact from the agency about potential foster care placements. Foster parents were confused with the amount of time it took for children to be placed with them because they perceived that there were great numbers of children in need of out-of-home placements. To address discouraging placement delays, the agency should consider instituting a limit on the time between individuals obtaining foster care licenses and having children placed with them.

- Identify, and provide explanations for, delays in placing children. The agency should identify why they have many licensed foster parents who do not receive foster children. If the agency trains and licenses individuals who do not meet the agency's desired criteria (e.g., ethnic heritage not matching that of children in need of out-of-home placement, etc.), the agency should consider ways to communicate these criteria to individuals seeking to care for or adopt foster children. Additionally, the agency should consider ways to increase follow-up contacts with recently licensed foster homes to ensure that new foster parents feel supported and are given the opportunity to draw upon the agency's resources. Similarly, attention should be given to explain why trained foster parents are not receiving child placements.

- Deliver disbursements to foster parents in a timely manner. In combination with the low payment rates they receive, delays in financial disbursements create hardships for foster families. The agency should examine the extent to which their disbursements are delayed and identify ways to disburse payments to foster parents faster.

- Provide service referrals in a timely manner. While the needs of children are of primary concern, foster parents reported that the county often delivered or arranged for services with great delay. The agency should identify the obstacles to providing families with service referrals in a timely manner and implement methods to improve service referrals to foster parents.

- Improve the response time of social workers to the requests of foster parents for prompt communication. The agency should identify the obstacles that prevent social workers from returning the phone calls of foster parents regarding urgent requests for information. This effort could include

interviewing social workers to better understand the daily challenges which prevent the timely response to requests for information or services. Armed with this knowledge, administrators could modify workloads, work tasks, or agency culture to improve social workers' response time to foster parents

4. UTILIZE CURRENT FOSTER PARENTS TO RECRUIT NEW FOSTER HOMES

- <u>Emphasize the positive experiences of fostering children</u>. The agency should ensure that foster parent recruiters emphasize their positive experiences of foster parenting. Focus group participants felt that negative stereotypes about foster children, as well as negative perceptions about the agency's bureaucracy, discourage many people from becoming foster parents. The agency could screen potential foster parents to select those with positive attitudes about fostering.

- <u>Clearly convey the requirements of becoming a foster parent</u>. Many foster parents agreed that they were initially unsure about their eligibility (e.g., being single or too old) to become foster parents and believed that many who are interested in fostering do not pursue it because the criteria for selecting foster parents are not available or disseminated.

- <u>Target recruitment to desired populations.</u> The agency should target recruitment efforts to families that can care for the children the county serves (such as medically fragile children and children with other special needs).

- <u>Ensure that agency resources are in place to provide timely response to new foster parents recruited through these efforts.</u> The agency must be prepared to return phone calls, enroll parents in training, and place children in licensed homes without delay.

5. A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR IMPROVING FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

<u>Remaining areas of inquiry include:</u>

- <u>To what extent does the employment of women outside the home affect foster parent participation rates?</u> Existing research studies have yielded conflicting conclusions about the extent to which the increasing role of women in the workforce contributes to the decreasing numbers of foster homes.

- <u>How might increased payment levels impact foster parent recruitment and retention?</u> Existing research studies have yielded conflicting conclusions about the contribution that payment levels have on foster parent rates of participation. Specifically, future research should identify the level at which rate increases would have a positive impact on foster parent participation. Future research also could examine how foster care quality may be affected by the payment levels foster parents receive.

- <u>How do demographic characteristics affect foster parent participation rates?</u> Research indicates that satisfaction levels, motivating factors, and retention rates may be affected by race and age. Future studies should more closely examine these possibilities so that recruitment and retention efforts can be tailored to foster parents with particular demographic characteristics.

- <u>What is the impact of foster parent training on foster parent retention?</u> While some studies document improved retention rates as a result of foster parent training, others were unable to find such training benefits. Future research should examine what specific curricula would have the largest impact on retaining foster parents and identify the most effective methods for delivering training to diverse populations.

- <u>How might agencies involve foster parents more effectively in case planning and decision-making activities?</u> Existing research, as well as focus group participants in this study, emphasize the importance of involving foster parents in decision-making. It has been established that involvement in case planning and decision-making can increase the levels of foster parent satisfaction. However, future research needs to identify model programs and best practices for accomplishing increased levels of involvement, as well as the resources needed by the agency to increase such involvement.

Foster Parents' Decisions to Continue or Cease Fostering

Limited numbers of foster homes and increases in the need for foster home placements have created a crisis in the American foster care system (Kamerman & Kahn, 1990, General Accounting Office- USGAO, 1989). The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2000) suggests that today more than half a million abused and neglected children reside in out-of-home placements in the United States. The Foundation argues that, unless the foster care system increases the number of available foster homes, the quality of children's out-of-home care will suffer. Specifically, the pressure to license marginal foster homes will increase and more children will be inappropriately placed in institutional settings, out-of-home placements that do not match their needs and characteristics, and distant placements that limit family visits.

In Alameda County, this national crisis is mirrored by its own current shortage of suitable foster homes. In light of this situation, Alameda County child welfare administrators launched this study to examine factors that contribute to foster parent recruitment and retention and how foster parents decide to continue or discontinue fostering. According to the literature, about 80% of foster parents that terminate their involvement in the foster care system do so voluntarily (Baring-Gould, Essick, Kleinkauf, & Miller, 1983). Studies suggest that increasing demands on foster parents, increasing numbers of women in the workforce, low compensation rates, and foster parent recruitment methods all affect the numbers of new homes entering the system. Foster parent retention rates appear to be influenced by foster parents' personal characteristics and motivations for fostering, training, compensation rates, and foster parents' relationships with social services agencies. In general, studies reveal that foster parents will continue to care for children if they feel satisfied with their overall experience. Further, there is evidence that any kind of extra attention provided to foster families increases their longevity as foster care

providers (Chamberlain, Moreland, and Reid, 1992). Unfortunately, little is known about specific strategies that foster agencies might implement to provide the kinds of support foster parents desire. Even less is known about foster parent recruitment or the reasons foster parents may discontinue providing care. Therefore, the current study sought to investigate the following research questions:

1. What motivates individuals to become foster parents?

2. What factors influence foster parents' likelihood to continue foster parenting over time?

3. What factors influence foster parents' decisions to stop providing care?

4. What strategies would improve recruitment and retention of foster parents in Alameda County?

These questions were addressed through a qualitative study consisting of focus groups conducted with foster parents in Alameda County. Focus group interviews examined the experiences and decision-making processes of foster parents who (1) completed foster parent training and never fostered children, (2) provided care for a few years and then stopped, and (3) provide ongoing care.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of literature summarizes the current state of knowledge regarding the national shortage of foster homes. In particular, attention is devoted to factors that may contribute to low foster parent recruitment rates. These factors include policy changes and requirements, women's employment status, compensation rates, and recruitment methods. Next, literature on foster parent retention is reviewed, including factors such as foster parent motivation, personal characteristics, training, compensation rates, and relationships with social service agencies.

Finally, connections are drawn between findings from the review of literature and potential strategies for increasing foster parent recruitment and retention.

Recruitment

Several authors suggest that shortages in foster homes are linked to difficulties in recruiting new foster parents (e.g., Smith & Gutheil, 1988). According to the literature, low recruitment rates appear to be the product of the increasing demands placed on foster parents, the increasing numbers of women who work outside the home, the low amount of compensation to foster parents, and the methods used to recruit foster parents. Studies of these factors are summarized below.

Foster Parent Requirements. One factor that may contribute to decreasing numbers of individuals willing to provide foster care is the increase in demands placed on foster parents. The traditional idea of foster care suggests that children are placed into foster families to enjoy the benefits of regular family life. Today, however, foster families have less autonomy because changes in rules and regulations suggest that they must change their households to accommodate formal rules and agency goals (Hurl & Tucker, 1995). In addition to these expectations, the serious emotional and behavioral problems of foster children present complex challenges for modern foster parents. Furthermore, recent legislation regarding concurrent planning requires some foster parents to make a permanent commitment to care for children while they are simultaneously expected to facilitate reunification with birth parents through visits and other means.

Studies suggest that these challenges prompt some individuals to decide against becoming foster parents. In their study of 629 new foster care homes in Ontario, Canada, Tucker and Hurl (1992) found that, between 1968 and 1990, additional agency requirements of

foster families were associated with lowered rates of entry into foster parenting. In addition, the authors found a significant relationship between the increasing numbers of children with serious problems entering foster care and the decreasing numbers of parents becoming foster care providers (Tucker & Hurl, 1992). Given these findings, it may be beneficial to identify how agencies can support new foster parents in raising difficult children while meeting agency requirements.

Women's Employment. Another factor that may affect recruitment rates is the increase in the number of parents working outside the home. For example, the number of currently licensed foster parents likely to be employed outside the home increased from 40% between 1980 and 1985 to 59% in 1995 (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). The change in employment status of many women may have a particularly important effect on recruitment, as mothers frequently are primary foster providers (Doelling & Johnson, 1990). However, the results of studies assessing this impact have been inconclusive.

An eight state study in 1980 tested the hypothesis that the quantity of foster care services is determined by three factors, including foster parents' market employment. Using a random sample of 1,094 foster mothers who were working either part-time outside the home, full-time outside the home, or not working outside the home at all, the authors found that the time available to foster mothers for providing care related directly to their employment status and significantly affected the number of foster children placed in a foster home (Campbell & Downs, 1987). When foster mothers had less time available for providing foster care, fewer children were placed in the foster home. The authors speculated that this trend also was likely to influence the probability that a family would decide not to provide foster care for any children at all. Further analysis found that non-working foster mothers were 1.5 times more likely to be

active foster care providers than eligible foster mothers who worked full-time. The authors concluded that women's employment outside the home plays an important role in the supply of potential foster care providers.

Using the same data obtained in their 1992 study of 629 foster homes in Ontario, Canada, Tucker and Hurl examined the factors that affect the numbers of new foster homes. In contrast to the findings of Campbell and Downs (1987), Tucker and Hurl (1995) found no significantly reliable relationship between a 30% increase in women's labor force participation and a decrease in the number of new foster families. However, measurements in this study were based on estimates, and may have been too imprecise to reveal a relationship between these two trends. The authors suggested, however, that foster mothers may be a unique sub-population of individuals who are less likely to enter the work force than other women. In addition, they hypothesize that an increase in women's labor force participation may, in fact, lead to an increase in new foster mothers because women who have participated in the labor force may want to stay home and still contribute to their family's economic status. This theory may warrant further investigation.

There are several noteworthy differences between the two studies concerning women's labor force participation. The studies were conducted 10 years apart, had different sample sizes and methodologies, and were conducted in different countries. Campbell and Downs (1987) tested the relationship between recruitment rates and the numbers of children in placement as well as the status of foster parents (active or inactive). Hurl and Tucker (1995), however, examined the relationship between foster family entry rates and estimates of labor force participation. In spite of these differences, both studies hypothesized that there is a relationship between the employment of women and the decreasing number of foster care providers. The

mixed results of these studies suggest that further research is needed to provide a fuller understanding of the impact that women's employment may have on foster parenting participation.

Payment Levels. While there are several studies that examined the impact of financial incentives on foster parent recruitment rates, they have not clearly shown that increases in funds offered to foster parents leads to increases in the number of new foster homes. Tucker and Hurl's (1992) study of foster homes in Ontario, Canada examined the impact of payment rates before a major increase in payment in 1973 and after the pay increase. The economic incentive was found to have no effect on the number of new foster homes. The authors suggested that either foster parents are not motivated by money, or that the rates of increase were not large enough to attract new families who might otherwise not choose to foster children.

In contrast, Simon (1975) concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between the level of payment to foster parents and the number of foster homes available. To study the impact of funding levels on the number of families willing to provide foster care, Simon examined the differences among various states, and to examine changes over time. Interviewing a random sample of 1,094 foster families from eight states, the authors found that foster mothers who received the highest rate ($180 per month) were three times more likely to have children in their homes than foster mothers who received the lowest foster care rate ($95 per month). Although results varied across the states, this trend was consistent and statistically significant in seven of the eight states.

These results suggest that increasing foster care rates might lead to increases in the number of foster homes. Campbell and Downs suggest that foster care rate increases may increase the number of foster parents because higher rates provide incentives for women to

choose fostering over employment outside the home. However, the mixed results of studies pm payment rates and women's labor force participation suggest that this conclusion should be interpreted with caution.

Further research is needed to better understand the effect of increased payment rates on the supply of foster homes. Specifically, future research should seek to identify the level at which raising payments may increase foster parent participation. Specifically, do payments need to be increased by a specific percentage to have an impact on foster parent participation, and is there a level beyond which payment increases have no effect? In addition, continued exploration of the impact of increased foster care payment rates should consider the unanticipated implications of using money to increase recruitment (Hurl & Tucker, 1995).

Recruitment Methods. Several studies have focused on how recruitment methods affect the number of new foster homes. Some studies have found that the use of foster parents as recruiters increases the number of new foster homes. Other studies have devoted attention to how the use of various media sources and procedures affects the number of new foster homes. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2000) asserts that foster parents are the best recruiters of other foster parents, but that they need to have reasons to be enthusiastic about the foster agency. The Foundation also suggests that foster parents are more likely to recruit others to be foster parents and become adoptive parents if they feel a sense of empowerment and self-worth.

As part of a project to recruit new foster families, the Salvation Army Social Services for Children in New York City tested a new method of recruitment. A group of foster parents were trained to recruit in their neighborhoods. They were paid $250 for their work and training and were given supervision and support by the agency. The foster parents provided education and support to the families they recruited during the home-study process and were then paid $100 for

each family that was approved. The program was evaluated using a number of methods including examining agency forms, tracking prospective foster parents, and checking reasons for withdrawal. Based on these evaluations, personal recruitment was found to be more successful than recruitment using the media. The program resulted in a 49% increase in the number of foster care beds in one year (Smith & Gutheil, 1988). The rate of increase for the rest of New York City for the same time period was only 6.1%. The authors emphasized the linkages between changes in the organization (e.g. home study process) and changes in recruitment strategies in order for the program to work.

Another way in which foster parents can assist in the recruitment process is through providing suggestions for the agency's overall recruitment methods. Rodwell and Biggerstaff (1993) surveyed a random sample of 169 foster homes in Virginia, as well as foster care supervisors and administrators, to get their suggestions about foster parent recruitment. The purpose of the foster parent survey was to obtain a profile of foster care families and to assess their perceptions about their family, the children they care for, and the services they provide. Families were also asked to make suggestions for the improvement of foster parent recruitment and retention. Supervisors and administrators were given highlights of the results of the foster parent survey, as well as data on foster children, and asked if the data reflected their experience. If not, they were asked to alter it to reflect their view.

Results revealed that supervisors and administrators emphasized the importance of personalizing recruitment announcements on the radio and television. The data suggested that professionals, followed by foster parents, were the most convincing in recruiting families. The authors suggest that regularly scheduled information meetings should be held for potential foster

families and that the recruitment program should only be used when the agency is prepared to respond to the number of new families that may be recruited.

Both of these studies suggest possible ways to improve the recruitment process such as using professional foster parents as recruiters and personalizing media announcements. In the past many foster parent recruiting programs have focused on being very selective and may have discouraged potential foster parents. Some authors suggest increasing the number of foster homes requires that recruitment programs shift their focus to encourage individuals to become foster parents (Smith & Gutheil, 1988).

In sum, there are several factors that may contribute to low foster parent recruitment rates. Policy changes and requirements, increasing numbers of children with special needs, women's employment status, low pay rates, and methods of recruitment may play a role in the limited number of available foster homes. It is important to learn more about the influence of these factors, particularly those that have inconclusive findings, in order to better understand why recruitment rates are low and what can be done to increase foster parent recruitment. Effective recruitment is the first step toward finding enough homes to serve the needs of children who require out-of-home care. The next step is retaining these homes once they are licensed.

Retention

According to Jones (1975), there is little to be gained from aggressive recruitment efforts if large numbers of people engage in foster parenting only for a short period of time. Thus, it is important to address factors that influence the decisions of foster parents to continue foster parenting. A number of variables have been explored as predictors of foster parent satisfaction and retention rates. Satisfaction is studied as an outcome in several of these studies because it has been found to affect the intentions of foster parents to continue foster parenting (Denby,

Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). Variables that have been explored as predictors of retention and satisfaction include foster parent motivation for fostering, personal characteristics of foster parents, foster parent training, payment rates, and foster parent relationships with social service agencies. A summary of this body of literature is presented below.

Motivation. Several studies suggest that the motivation of foster parents is related to whether or not they will remain foster parents over time. In particular, specific parental motivations have been linked to foster parents' likelihood to continue or discontinue fostering. In order to assess these predictive factors, Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) examined data from 539 active licensed foster homes in Ohio. The data revealed that parents who agreed with the statement "wanted to take in children who needed loving parents" were more likely to be highly satisfied with their position as foster parents. This finding was indirectly associated with foster parent intentions to continue because overall satisfaction with fostering was found to have the strongest effect on the intentions of parents to continue providing foster care. Thus, parents who were motivated to foster because they wanted to take in children who needed loving parents were more likely to continue providing care due to their high level of satisfaction as foster parents.

Another way of studying the impact of foster parent motivation is to study its influence on termination. This type of study was conducted in Portsmouth, England in an attempt to address the decreasing availability of foster parents by learning more about the experiences of former foster parents (Jones, 1975). Ex-foster mothers and ex-foster fathers were interviewed in order to assess their perceptions of their fostering experiences. Interview data was used in conjunction with information from other sources such as case files and discussions with social workers and administrators. It was determined that most ex-foster mothers returned to foster

parenting because they wished to help children (39%) or for family-oriented reasons (52%). As

Jones points out, these findings may indicate that families who foster to meet their own needs

may have high expectations that foster children will meet those needs. These high expectations

may lead to disillusionment and a decision to stop fostering if their expectations are not met.

In an attempt to identify specific motivations associated with continuing or ceasing to

foster, Reindfleisch, Bean, and Denby (1998) compared motivations among closed and open

foster homes in a Midwestern state. Through administering a survey to 720 closed foster homes

and 804 active foster homes, the study revealed that foster parents who were motivated by wishes

to adopt, but who were not able to do so, were over two times more likely to discontinue. It

appeared that when foster parents who sought to adopt were successful, they discontinued their

service as foster parents.

In summary, the literature suggests that most people continue or discontinue fostering

based on their motivations to take care of children or expand their families. Furthermore,

motivation to become foster parents also has been found to vary by race. In an examination of

the acute shortage of African American foster homes, Denby and Rindfleisch (1996) mailed a

cross-sectional survey to 702 foster homes that closed during a one-year period, and to 804

randomly selected active foster homes. The data revealed that African Americans were more

likely than whites to be motivated to foster because they wanted a sibling for their own child,

because of financial incentives, or because their own children were already grown. Therefore, in

order to fully understand the effect of motivation on foster parent retention it also may be

necessary to examine how motivation varies by race.

Personal Characteristics Several studies suggest that certain characteristics of foster

parents predict their satisfaction and retention. However, findings regarding these variables are

mixed and some studies have found that personal characteristics of foster parents are not related to their satisfaction or retention.

Boyd and Remy (1979) conducted a test of whether foster parent assertiveness, activism, or program participation have beneficial influences on foster parent training or license retention. The authors mailed questionnaires and obtained data from 105 foster parents in the San Francisco area who had been licensed two years prior to the study. Families were asked to fill out questionnaires that provided information about foster child characteristics, foster parent assertiveness and community activism, participation in the foster program, and foster parent training. The data revealed that both foster parent assertiveness (measured by an assertiveness inventory) and community activism (evaluated by participation in different activities) predicted license retention.

Additional personal characteristics that have been investigated include foster parent age and race. One study of former foster homes in England found a significant positive relationship between mother's age at recruitment and length of service. Mothers who were younger when they were recruited tended to voluntarily terminate earlier, and mothers over age 30 at recruitment fostered longer (Jones, 1975). Similarly, in a survey of 809 active, licensed foster homes, age and satisfaction were found to be related (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). However inventories completed by 48 foster mothers before and after participating in training found no relationship between age and satisfaction (Fees, Stockdale, Crase, Riggins-Caspers, Yates, Lekies, and Gillis-Arnold, 1998).

Race also has been found to play a role in the impact of age on foster parenting. In their examination of the shortage of African American foster homes, the study by Denby and Rindfleisch (1996) revealed that older, white foster mothers reported greater satisfaction than

their younger counterparts. However, age did not influence the satisfaction of African-American foster mothers. Further research is needed to identify the specific ways in which foster parent age, race, and other personal characteristics may influence their satisfaction and retention.

Training. Several studies have explored the impact of foster parent training on retention. In most cases, training had a positive effect on foster parent satisfaction and retention. However, there are several studies that found no beneficial effect of training on foster parent retention.

In interviews with ex-foster mothers, Jones (1975) found that almost 60% of mothers who voluntarily stopped fostering felt they received no preparation for becoming foster parents. An additional group (24%) said they had received only one brief visit from their social worker. Thus, most (84%) mothers who stopped fostering felt that they had not been adequately prepared for the job. This finding suggests that inadequate foster parent training may result in voluntary termination.

Similarly, Boyd and Remy's (1979) retrospective study in San Francisco found training to be significantly associated with license retention, even after controlling for the effects of parent assertiveness, parent activism, and foster child risk. The study suggested that there are two basic types of foster parents: those who have a low probability of responding to social situations and reported little community involvement, and those who are highly assertive and actively involved in their communities. Through further analyses, the authors concluded that training was beneficial to every combination of foster parent type and foster child type and suggested that foster parent training should be mandatory and universal.

Consistent with Boyd and Remy's study, pre-training and in-service training were found to be beneficial to foster parents in a study comparing a treatment and control group of licensed foster parents in Florida (Simon & Simon, 1982). The treatment group received training at the

same time as they were being screened to become foster parents. The training program used (based on the Nova model developed by Nova University's Foster Parent Project) a team philosophy of foster care in which parents were expected to work with social workers in developing and implementing the case plan. After being licensed, foster parents in the treatment group were invited to attend in-service training that included further emphasis on the development of parenting and behavior management skills. The control group was made up of foster parents in the same district who were licensed before the foster parent training was available.

In the first year after licensing, the parents in the training group accepted twice as many foster children and took more foster children with special needs than parents in the control group. In addition, children placed with trained foster parents were less likely to be re-placed, trained homes were less likely to have a child removed because of inability to control the child, and placements in trained homes were less likely to fail. Although this study did not address retention rates specifically, it demonstrated a relationship between training and several aspects of foster parenting including the number of children cared for, the type of children cared for, and the general success of foster care placements.

Unfortunately, research suggests that many foster parents miss important training opportunities. Of 616 current and former foster parents who completed a large-scale survey in New York state conducted by the Professional Development Program of the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, State University of New York in 1993, 40% did not receive any training on how to carry out service plans or how to be active partners in the service planning process (Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka, & Russell, 1998). Of those that did receive training, pre-service training in service planning predicted quality of foster parent involvement in

service planning, and involvement with the planning team predicted foster parent satisfaction. Therefore, overall training in service planning had an indirect impact on foster parent satisfaction.

Consistent with these findings, foster parent satisfaction also was found to be associated with training among foster mothers enrolled in foster parent pre-service training throughout Iowa. Training was based on the revised Nova curriculum. Participants in the study were asked to complete pre-test surveys prior to attending training. A post-test survey was then completed after training. These surveys were followed by a phone survey six months after training and another written survey 12 months post-training. An exploratory factor analysis revealed three areas related to foster parent satisfaction (Fees et al., 1998). One of the three, "role demands satisfaction" (satisfaction related to the diversity of required foster parent involvement), was predicted solely, and significantly, by parents' ratings of the usefulness of the pre-service training. Interestingly, a negative association was found between foster parents' level of education and their satisfaction with the training, suggesting that the higher the level of a foster parent's education, the less satisfied she would be with the training. The authors concluded that training is a small but important part of foster parent satisfaction.

In contrast to the studies highlighted above, some studies have failed to document a reliable relationship between foster parent training and job satisfaction. In their comparison of open and closed foster homes in the Midwest, Rindfleisch, Bean, and Denby (1998) found that training did not predict foster home status. Lee and Holland (1991) found similar results. They investigated the impact of training on foster parents via the MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) training program. The MAPP training method focuses on the rights and obligations of foster parents, including shared decision-making between foster parents, birth

parents, and agency workers, and mutual selection of foster parents by the agency and agency by foster parents.

In this study, Lee and Holland compared two groups of foster parents who had completed MAPP training with a third un-trained group. All foster parents completed the Adolescent/Adult Parenting Inventory (AAPI). The AAPI includes scales measuring developmental expectations, value placed on physical punishment, parent-child roles, and empathy toward child's needs. No significant differences were found between the trained and untrained groups, or in the trained group before and after training. Lee and Holland suggest that the failure of their study to demonstrate an effect of foster parent training on outcomes may be due to the measures they used.

For example, Hurl and Tucker (1995) suggest that training helps to establish that problems are inevitable and solvable. Second, "training alerts the family that caring for others' children is not the same as caring for one's own. While [these benefits] will not cause a fundamental shift in a family's existing repertoire of problem-solving routines, it is likely to result in more deliberate decision-making about their use" (p.107). Finding that training did extend the honeymoon period of new foster parents, Hurl and Tucker (1995) suggest that the positive effects of training keep parents from terminating early. Therefore, perhaps the measure Lee and Holland used (the AAPI) did not fully assess all the merits and goals of foster parent training. Similarly, it could be that only particular types of training are helpful to foster parents and they were not captured by Lee and Holland's (1991) methodology.

In summary, the bulk of research suggests that there are important benefits to participating in foster parent training. Almost 40% of foster parents surveyed in Virginia suggested that increased training would improve retention (Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993).

Perhaps more focus needs to be placed on the composition of the training. Several studies have emphasized benefits associated with training foster parents to be paraprofessionals and to work as a team with social workers (Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka, & Russell, 1998; Simon & Simon, 1982). Teaching foster parents coping skills for dealing with a child's removal also has been associated with active foster home status (Urquhart, 1989). Additional factors that may affect the composition of beneficial training include attention to foster parent race and level of education. African American foster parents have been found to be significantly more likely than white foster parents to report that their ideas about parenting were different from those used in training (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996). Furthermore, at least one study found that foster parents' satisfaction with training decreased as their levels of education increased (Fees et al., 1998). These factors may affect the intended impact of training on foster parents. More research is needed to further explore and clarify what differences among foster parents are important to attend to in regard to foster parent training, and how training programs can be specifically tailored to address these differences.

Payment Levels. Research suggests that payment of foster parents is related to retention of foster parents. A California study utilized existing literature and phone interviews with child welfare directors in several states. Reuslts revealed that many states had very low payment rates and that in California rates have not increase since 1990 (Simmel, Lim-Browdowski, Goldberg, & Austin, 1997). Several studies indicate that these low rates deter foster parent retention.

One Oregon study explored the change that resulted when foster parents were given an increase of $70.00 per month (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). A group of 72 foster children and their parents were assigned randomly to one of three experimental groups. The first group received the payment increase as well as enhanced support. The second group received

only the payment increase. The third group served as a comparison group and received normal

foster care services. Results revealed that the group with only the payment increase had a lower

dropout rate (14.3%) than the comparison group (25.9%). The authors stated that the increase in

payments seemed to increase foster parents' sense of feeling valued. Interestingly, even the

control group demonstrated a lower dropout rate than families excluded from the study, which

the authors attributed to the special attention they received while involved in the study. They

suggest that simply increasing payments without associating the increase with enhanced support

may not produce the same positive results.

Similar results were found in Hurl and Tucker's (1995) study of 629 new foster homes in

Ontario, Canada to examine the impact of environmental factors on foster home entries and exits.

Although an increase in board rates was not found to influence foster parent recruitment, it was

found to have an impact on retention. Board rate increases had a significant effect on delaying

the risk of foster parent exits (Hurl & Tucker, 1995). The authors hypothesized that the pay

increase may help offset some of the challenges of foster parenting as well as validate the status

of foster parents.

In summary, research suggests that foster care rates do affect retention. However, it may

be that this influence varies depending on who is being assessed. Denby and Rindfleisch (1996)

suggest that African-American foster parents tend to be more concerned about low payment rates

and clothing allowances than white foster parents. It would seem though that this finding might

be attributed to income rather than race. Of the African-Americans in the cited study, 68% had

an income of $30,000 or less, while 65% of the whites in the study had an income of $30,000 or

more. Payment rate may be more important to foster families with less overall household

income. More research is needed to explore how payment rates affect retention of different types of foster parents.

Agency Relationships and Support. Wilkes (1974) reports that the encounters of foster parents with foster agencies are a major source of stress. Problems with red tape, communication with social workers, and a lack of support have powerful effects on foster parent retention.

A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2000) describes new approaches to supporting foster families in, "Family to Family Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care: Recruitment, Training, and Support." Designed in 1992, the Family to Family model is designed to serve foster children and families in a manner that is neighborhood and community-based as well as culturally sensitive. One goal of the Family to Family initiative is to increase the number and quality of foster families by integrating the components of recruitment, training, and support.

The report argues that the primary reason foster parents stop providing foster care is due to the lack of responsiveness, communication, and support of foster care agencies. While low reimbursement and the heavy demands associated with foster care are addressed in the program materials, the report suggests that communication and support from foster agencies appear to be the most important factor in retaining foster parents. Additionally, the Family to Family model recommends that foster agencies shift attitudes and values, as well as practices, if they are to encourage foster parents to continue providing care. A re-conceptualized set of agency values includes viewing foster and birth families as their partners in caring for children and in attaining the goal of family reunification. The report asserts that simply increasing reimbursement rates or training without changing agency values, is unlikely to increase the number of foster families. Additionally, the Family to Family model makes a number of specific suggestions for supporting foster families that include seven elements: appreciation, respect, care-giving assistance, crisis

services, professional development, emotional support, and personal development. The specific

agency strategies for supporting foster families are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Family to Family Tools for Supporting Foster Families

APPRECIATION	• Recognize individual foster parents (with permission) in press releases, newsletters, fliers. • Say a simple "thank you" on sticky notes attached to routine notices, with thank-you cards, and with follow-up phone calls after meetings.	• Remember birthdays, anniversaries, mother's day, and father's day with calls or cards. • Hold special events for foster families – picnics, parties, barbecues, ice cream socials. • Send each family a personal letter of appreciation from the agency director.
RESPECT	• Return all phone calls as soon as possible. • Make sure staff are trained to understand and support the foster parent role. • Ensure that staff are culturally competent and do not talk down to any caregiver. • Practice listening fully to foster parents' concerns and issues. Avoid interrupting even when you understand from the first few words what the problem is and how to solve it.	• Set appointments at times convenient for foster family and make sure that staff is prompt. • Follow delays or cancellations with a call or note of explanation and apology. • Use proper social etiquette --ask caregiver's preference for terms of address (i.e., first name or Mr., Miss, Mrs., or Ms.).
CAREGIVING ASSISTANCE	• Offer as many free items as possible (e.g., books, toys, clothing, bedding, transportation). • Return phone calls as soon as possible. • Offer respite or day care. • Identify community resources and help set up links to them. • Provide frequent words of encouragement or pep talks --these often mean more than money. • Offer in-home training sessions for special care-giving issues.	• Make sure the foster parents have affordable liability insurance, medical cards for the children, lists of providers. • Reimburse expenses as soon as possible. Have funds available to supply emergency needs, and make access easy for vouchers or other cash equivalents. • Set up a "warm line" that foster parents can call with questions about parenting. • Seek tutors to help children with schoolwork.
CRISIS SERVICES	• Return phone calls as soon as possible. • Guarantee 24-hour, 7-days-a-week access to the agency and offer multiple ways to gain that access. • Offer family preservation services, dispute mediation services, and legal service access.	• Support the foster family against a child's initial allegations of mistreatment until the matter can be investigated. • Maintain contact with the foster family to provide emotional support after a child's departure.

Figure 1. (Continued) Family to Family Tools for Supporting Foster Families

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	• Train staff members and foster parents together in order to help forge the bonds among them. • Offer "real life" training opportunities. • Use experienced foster parents as trainers and support group leaders, as mentors to new caregivers.	• Set up developmental education as a continuing process. • Offer per-diem compensation to foster parents commensurate with their training and experience. • Provide mutual ongoing assessment and discussion of foster parents' training needs.
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	• Return phone calls as soon as possible. • Set up buddy-family or mentor-family programs. • Cluster support groups for geographic areas or special child care issues.	• Ensure regular in-home contact with a social worker. • Offer easy access to professional counseling services.
PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT	• Include foster parents in policy and program development and planning. • Build foster parent associations and encourage them to engage in advocacy. • Include foster parents in all planning for their child's care and for activities such as birth-family visitation, service delivery, etc.	• Invite foster parents to court hearings, case reviews, case conferences, meetings, etc. • Give foster parents a copy of the individual plan for the child in their care. • Ask successful foster parents to help train new foster parents and staff members. • Include foster parents in all recruitment activities.
GENERAL TECHNIQUES	• Family services worker has monthly contact with foster parents to advocate, solve problems, secure/share additional information. • Foster parents have phone listings to go "up the chain of command" to the Office of the Director with any unresolved problems.	• Recruitment staff produce regular newsletter to be mailed to all foster parents, updating them on events, training, policy and procedure changes. • Staff assist foster parents in obtaining WIC and other program services.

To test the hypothesis that relationships between foster parents and social service agencies affects the quantity of foster care services, Campbell and Downs (1987) conducted a survey with 1,094 foster parents across eight states. Components of the survey included the state board rate, time available for fostering, and problems with the state agency. They found that the absence of problems between foster parents and the agency contributed to increased foster parent activity and a greater number of children in their home (Campbell & Downs, 1987). While the authors do not provide specific suggestions for program modifications, Campbell and Downs conclude that, in order to increase the quantity of foster care providers, social service agency administrators should explore program changes that would improve foster parents' interactions with their agencies.

Similarly, Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka, & Russell (1998) tested whether increased participation in the service planning process would increase foster parent job satisfaction. In New York state, a random sample of 1160 foster parents were surveyed on the following factors: foster parent satisfaction, quality of involvement in service planning, involvement with service planning team, in-person caseworker contact, and in-service and pre-service training in service planning. The findings indicated that foster parents who had face-to-face contact with their social workers were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs. The authors suggest that foster parents who experienced more contact with social workers had higher levels of satisfaction because the quality of foster parent involvement in service planning was also found to be associated with high caseworker contact. Therefore, the authors argue, it is the increased involvement of foster parents in service planning that directly affects their job satisfaction.

Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby (1998) studied several agency variables with regard to foster home closure. Data were obtained from surveys mailed to 804 open and 720 closed foster homes

in a Midwestern state. The survey examined foster parents' reasons for becoming licensed, reasons they might cease fostering, role and relationship with agency representatives, opinions about fostering and of themselves as foster parents, effects of training, and role, workload, and social support. Many agency variables contributed to home closure. For example, the negative perception of agency red tape contributed substantially to the likelihood of losing a foster home placement. Other variables associated with closure included having several caseworkers at the same time and beliefs that the social worker did not reach out.

In a more recent study by the same authors (Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean, 1999), similar results were found among active, licensed foster homes in Ohio. Specifically, this study investigated how agency factors may affect foster parent satisfaction and intent to continue. The study found that concern about agency red tape was related to lower levels of satisfaction while accessibility to social workers was related to foster parents' intent to continue fostering.

Finally, recent research has devoted attention to understanding the specific problems experienced by foster parents in their relationship with foster agencies. Using focus group interviews, Berrick, Needell, Shlonsky, Simmel, and Pedrucci (1998) found that parents often felt they were not valued by social workers and were not treated respectfully. Foster parents said they do not feel included as part of the child welfare team and that they want to be included in decisions that are made about their foster children. Another area of concern for foster parents was the lack of availability and accountability of caseworkers. One suggestion made by foster parents was for social workers, as part of their training, to take on the job of a foster parent for a period of time so that they would better understand the demands of the job.

In sum, existing literature on foster parent retention has revealed several agency factors that can be detrimental to experiences of foster parents. Research suggests that foster parents

would have higher job satisfaction if their interactions with foster agencies were improved in both quality and quantity. The literature indicates that foster parents want to be involved in service planning and decision-making and also desire more access to the information, support, and approval that caseworkers can provide.

In contrast to the ways in which agency factors may have harmful effects on the experiences of foster parents, the literature suggests that agency support for foster parents can positively influence their retention. A particularly difficult aspect of foster parenting is coping with loss when a child is removed from the home. Urquhart (1989) conducted surveys on experiences with separation and loss with 101 closed and 275 open foster homes in New Mexico. The study revealed that the open homes had more intense agency contact at removal, more preparation for removal, and more involvement in decision-making concerning the removal than closed homes. These findings suggest that agency involvement and support designed to help foster parents cope with loss may prevent foster home closures.

Not only must foster parents cope with basic stresses of their jobs, but they also are being asked to care for an increasingly challenging group of children with special needs (Tatara, 1994). The demands of caring for these children have been found to affect foster parent retention. For example, Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) conducted a survey of 809 active, licensed foster homes in Ohio to learn more about what variables influence the satisfaction of foster parents and their decision to continue fostering. The findings revealed that concerns with the difficult behavior of children, as well as feelings that they cannot handle the children, was highly correlated with low levels of satisfaction among foster parents. Dealing with difficult behaviors was also highly correlated with the likelihood of ceasing to engage in foster parenting. These

results indicate that foster parents may need high levels of support to deal with difficult children and in order to continue fostering.

In addition to the beneficial effects of support from the foster agency, support from other sources, particularly other foster parents, has been positively associated with foster parent retention. In a study of 72 foster children and their families in Oregon, support in the form of contact with other foster parents had a strong impact on retention and placement success (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). Participants were assigned to one of three groups, one of which received enhanced support and payment. Foster parents in the support group attended a weekly meeting with other foster parents and a facilitator (a former foster parent), and they were phoned three times a week by the facilitator for a check-in. The study found that the support and payment group had a lower dropout rate (9.6%) than the payment only group (14.3%) or the comparison group who did not receive any extra services (25.9%). In addition, children whose foster parents were in the support group had significantly more successful days (measured by them staying in their foster homes) and showed a significantly greater improvement in behavior (measured by regular behavior reports given by foster parents) than those in the other two groups. The authors noted that, following the study, foster parents in one county persuaded their office to continue to provide them with support for the group meetings.

Several other studies also have documented the important role of support in foster parent retention. In a study comparing open and closed foster homes in the Midwest, receiving less support from other foster parents was related to foster home closures (Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998). In her survey of 275 open and 101 closed foster homes in New Mexico, Uruquhart (1989) found that open homes reported having significantly more support from other foster parents than closed homes. Similarly, Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) found that the

frequent sharing of experiences with other foster parents was highly correlated with the intentions of foster parents to continue providing foster care. Foster parents in focus groups also noted the helpfulness of foster parent association meetings. They stated that the meetings offered an opportunity to find mentors and to "express feelings and concerns in a safe environment" (Berrick et. al, 1998, p. 221). The foster parents recommended that new foster parents attend these meetings.

In sum, the bulk of research concerning the relationships of foster parents with social service agencies is consistent and indicates that problems with agency red tape, accessibility of caseworkers, and communication between foster parents and social workers are some of the problems that may lead foster parents to terminate care. In addition to support from the agency, support from other foster parents also is related to foster parent retention. The literature suggests that agencies need to increase the access of foster parents to both of these sources of support in order to improve foster parent retention.

Summary

A number of studies have explored foster parent recruitment and retention factors that may contribute to the current, national shortage of foster homes. Factors thought to influence recruitment rates include increasing demands on foster parents, the increasing number of women in the workforce, the low amount of compensation foster parents receive, and the methods used to recruit foster parents. While some studies have consistent findings, others are inconclusive or contradictory, leaving a number of unanswered questions. If the increasing demands being placed on foster parents are a factor in low recruitment rates, what benefits or support might encourage individuals to overcome these challenges and become licensed? What impact, if any, is women's increasing employment outside the home having on foster parent recruitment rates?

What level of payment increase would impact foster parent recruitment? Would alterations in recruitment methods lead to sufficient increases in new foster homes?

The research on foster parent retention also suggests questions for future research. Factors thought to affect retention rates include foster parent motivation and personal characteristics, training, compensation rates, foster parents' relationships with social service agencies, and the support they receive. The strength of the influence that foster parent motivation and personal characteristics have on retention rates remains unclear. As these are factors the county does not control, are there other things within county control that may mitigate against potential negative effects of these two factors? A number of studies have demonstrated the beneficial influence of training on recruitment rates. However, what should be the context of foster parent training? What training topics would have the largest effect on retention rates? Should training components vary according to the characteristics and qualifications of different foster parents?

Foster parent compensation appears to be important to both retention and recruitment rates. But how much money would be sufficient? Should this amount vary according to the financial status of foster parents? Is the impact of increased payment rates due simply to the increased financial compensation or because it makes foster parents feel appreciated? Studies show that foster parents who receive support and have good relationships with social service agencies are more likely to be retained. What specific strategies or agency characteristics lead to good relationships with foster parents? Do agencies have the resources to provide foster parents with more social worker contact? Would arranging foster parent support groups serve the same purpose? Or, must foster parent support come from both the agency and from peers in order to be effective?

In order to address some of these questions and to learn more about the specific issues affecting foster parent recruitment and retention in Alameda County, a qualitative study was conducted. Foster parents who chose not to provide foster care, those who provided care and then stopped, and those who continue to provide care, were interviewed in focus groups. The goal of the study was to further explore recruitment and retention issues in foster parenting, to identify methods of increasing foster parents' satisfaction, and to provide recommendations to Alameda County for implementing strategies to attract and keep foster parents.

METHOD

Participants

Seven focus groups were conducted with approximately 64 individuals representing three categories of foster parents: (a) foster parents who completed MAPP training and never fostered children, (b) foster parents who completed MAPP training and left the agency after providing foster care for less than 5 years, and (c) foster parents who provided foster care for 5 years or more and were still with the agency. Individual letters of invitation were sent to all 515 licensed foster parents in Alameda County, identified by the county's Department of Social Services information management system. Additionally, letters of invitation were sent to 117 households who completed MAPP training but were not currently licensed by the County. The participation of a total of 632 households was elicited for the focus groups.

Five of the focus groups were comprised of individuals from all three categories of foster parenting status, one consisted only of individuals who were currently providing care, and another only of individuals who had completed MAPP and never fostered any children. It should be noted that the study was ideally designed to interview the separate categories of foster parents in separate focus groups, however, practical concerns, such as the number and timing of

participant responses in each category, forced the bulk of focus groups to include mixed representation of foster parents with diverse experiences. To gather demographic information and confirm foster care status and experience, all focus group participants completed contact summary forms. Over half (52%) of the participants identified themselves as current foster care providers and another 8% specifically identified themselves as "fost-adopt." Seventeen percent said they had ceased fostering after providing care for a few years and another 17% said they completed MAPP but never fostered any children. Finally, 4 participants (6%) indicated that they had some other type of foster care status.

Over half (57%) of the participants were Caucasian, over one-third (38%) African American, 2% had mixed heritage, and another 14% declined to report their ethnicity on the contact summary form. On average, participants were 43 years of age when they were first licensed to care for foster children. The youngest age when first licensed was 25 and the oldest was 64 years of age.

Participants generally held high levels of education and household income. Of the 60 participants (94% of the total) who reported their education levels, over one-third (37%) had some college, another quarter (25%) held bachelor's degrees, and another 22% held master's degrees or higher. Only 16% had less than high school level of education or a high school diploma or equivalent. For the forty-six households who reported their annual household incomes, the average annual household income was $66,000; the smallest income was $14,000 and the largest income reported was $150,000. For the forty-seven (73%%) households who answered the question on the contact summary form, 6 years was the average amount of time participants had fostered children. The shortest amount of time fostering was less than one year and the longest was 35 years. Forty-three households reported the total numbers of children for

whom they had cared. Total numbers ranged from zero to 200 children, excluding one individual who reported caring for approximately 800 children in his or her professional role as the director of a private foster care agency. Excluding this individual, participants cared for an average of 18 children. Eighteen households (28%) indicated that they were currently receiving a special care rate. Finally, 44 participants (69%) had completed MAPP training. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of all focus group participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Total Participants	**100%**	**(n) = 64**
Race/Ethnicity	100%	(n) = 64
Caucasian	57%	30
African American	38%	24
Mixed Heritage	2%	1
Declined to Report	14%	9
Age When First Licensed	86%	(n) = 55
Average age	43 years	
Lowest age reported	25 years	
Highest age reported	64 years	
Education Level	94%	(n) = 60
Less than high school	3%	2
High school diploma/GED	13%	8
Some college	37%	22
Bachelor's degree	25%	15
Master's degree or higher	22%	13
Annual Household Income[*]	75%	(n) = 46
Average income	$ 66,000	
Minimum income	$14,000	
Maximum income	$150,000	
Years as a Foster Parent[*]	77%	(n) = 47
Average years	6 years	
Minimum years	Less than 1 year	
Maximum years	35 years	
Foster Parent Status	100%	(n) = 64
Currently fostering	52%	33
Foster-adopt	8%	5
Ceased fostering in the past few years	17%	11
Never fostered children after training	17%	11
Other foster parent status	6%	4
Total Number of Children Fostered	70%	(n) = 43
Average number of children[†]	18 children	
Minimum number of children	0 children	
Maximum number of children[†]	200 children	
Completed MAPP Training	69%	44 foster parents
Receiving Special Rate[*]	29%	18 households

[*] Calculation generated from number of households, rather than individuals, who participated.
[†] Excluding one foster parent who fostered 800 children as an agency director.

Procedure

Consistent with Dillman's (1978) total design method, three rounds of correspondence were mailed to all 632 households. Individuals interested in participating were asked to return consent forms using postage-paid envelopes provided with the initial letters of invitation. One week after individual letters of invitation were sent, researchers sent reminder postcards were sent to all households. Three weeks after the initial invitation, another invitation to participate was sent, containing another copy of the consent form and reply envelopes. A total of 151 households returned their consent forms. Ten of those who returned consent forms later declined to participate. Due to incorrect addresses, approximately 50 letters were returned as undeliverable. Researchers telephoned individuals on a first come, first served basis, to schedule their participation in focus groups and provided reminder telephone calls the day before the scheduled meeting. Researchers concluded conducting focus group interviews once they reached a point where no new information emerged.

Researchers developed interview protocols based on information obtained from the review of literature as well as consultations with the county. Specific questions used in each of the three categories of foster parent focus groups are summarized in Figure 2 and were designed to explore the following areas:

- Value of participating in MAPP training.
- Motivation for becoming a foster parent.
- Individual and agency factors that affect decisions to continue providing foster care over time.
- Individual and agency factors that affect decisions to stop providing foster care.
- Strategies for improving recruitment and retention of foster parents in Alameda County.

Two focus groups were conducted in a public meeting room at the Temescal Branch of the Oakland Public Library. All other focus groups were conducted in a meeting room at the

Lake Merrit United Methodist Church. Child care was provided to participants by church staff. Focus groups lasted between one and a half to two hours and light refreshments were served. Two researchers were involved in conducting each focus group interview. For each focus group, researchers compiled filed notes, documenting participants' responses. In addition, researchers recorded their own personal reflections about the culture of the group (e.g., individuals' tones, perceived tension among participants). Researchers' personal reflections were recorded to make any researcher biases explicit, thereby creating the opportunity to incorporate them as sources of data that may influence the study's findings.

Figure 2. Focus Group Questions

ALL PARTICIPANTS

MAPP Training
- What made you decide to take part in the MAPP training?
- How did you hear about the MAPP training?
- What about the training was helpful, encouraging?
- What about the training was not helpful, discouraging?
- What important information was missing in the MAPP training?

Becoming a Foster Parent
- How did you hear about becoming a foster parent?
- What factors made you want to become a foster parent?
- What kinds of Dept. of Social Services-sponsored events have you participated in? What was helpful?

Suggestions?
- What suggestions would you make to help the county recruit more foster homes?
- What suggestions would you make to help the county retain more foster homes?

DISCONTINUED AFTER MAPP
- What factors kept you from becoming a foster parent for Alameda County?
- Did you decide to become a foster parent for another county, agency, or FFA? What factors influenced your decision?
- What might have caused you to make a different decision?

DISCONTINUED AFTER A FEW YEARS OF FOSTERING
- What were some of the positive aspects about your experiences being a foster parent?
- What were some of the negative aspects about your experiences being a foster parent?
- What made you decide to stop being a foster parent?
- What would have made it possible for you to continue to be a foster parent?

CURRENTLY FOSTERING
- What factors have made it possible for you continue being a foster parent?
- What would make it easier for you to be a foster parent?

Analysis Strategy. Using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glauser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), researchers shared and discussed their observations of the groups, comparing them with previous findings and relevant literature, and finally, documented themes that emerged within, and across, the focus groups. The field notes of the researchers were separately analyzed for themes and patterns by the each of the researchers who conducted the focus groups. The responses of participants were considered "themes" if they were mentioned at least twice during the focus group or if at least two participants provided similar information. Responses offered by only one of the participants, or mentioned only once during the focus group, were omitted unless they provided particular insight into recruitment or retention of foster homes. Each time a new theme was generated, researchers reanalyzed all the data to determine if the new theme coincided with the data. This process was repeated through several iterations, continuing until a saturation point was met and no new themes emerged. Researchers shared and discussed their observations of the groups, comparing them with previous research findings and relevant literature, and documented the themes that emerged across the focus groups.

Finally, a procedure called a "member check" was utilized to ensure that key themes identified by the researchers were corroborated by the focus group participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A member check involves asking representative members from each focus group to review preliminary findings so that their feedback may be incorporated into the final report.

RESULTS

Focus group participants were asked to share their thoughts and experiences about MAPP training and fostering. Participants also provided suggestions for improving foster parent recruitment and retention.

MAPP Training

Some foster parents who attended the focus groups had never participated in MAPP because they were long-time foster care providers and MAPP was not required at the time that they first began fostering. Among those who had participated in MAPP, members from all three categories of foster parents agreed that they participated in MAPP because the County informed them that it was required of them. Some foster parents also heard about the opportunity to participate in the training from friends who had positive experiences participating in MAPP.

Helpful Aspects of MAPP Training. Foster parents found the opportunity to meet county staff to be a helpful aspect of MAPP training. In fact, some perceived that the contact with county staff during training would help them get children placed in their homes: "*I felt like staying in touch with the people at training would help you get a child.*" Many foster parents also mentioned that interacting with other prospective foster parents helped them develop partnerships and support networks with others who would also soon become foster parents.

Foster parents also reported that training helped them understand and recognize the complex issues they would confront as foster parents: "*They did a good job of talking about what the children and their families are like.*" Likewise, the role-playing activities and other exercises helped foster parents understand the feelings that foster children would be experiencing while they were in their homes. One foster family noted that whenever they encounter foster children's challenging behaviors, they say, "*Oh yeah. They told us about that.*" Some

participants suggested that the training activities were helpful to their own personal relationships because they forced them to closely examine their values (e.g., child discipline) and identify ways they could support one another.

Most foster parents also found the panel discussions to be one of the most helpful activities in MAPP training because it gave them the opportunity to hear about real events and circumstances in which foster parents find themselves. Finally, foster parents had mixed reactions to the interactive role-playing activities and homework assignments included in MAPP training. Some found these activities to be very helpful and insightful, while others felt uncomfortable role-playing or doubted the usefulness of these activities.

MAPP Training Recommendations. Foster parents described a number of issues that they felt were important, but missing, from MAPP training. Most foster parents felt very dissatisfied with the explanation they were given of the county's foster care process. They were frustrated with the lack of information the county provided about "*how the child welfare system works*" and "*what to expect*" (e.g., court hearings, relationships with birth parents). One parent described the process she confronted after training as "*a big, dark hole*." Another parent felt that it was unfair, both to herself and to the child she fostered, that she did not understand the process. Some foster parents also felt that they got stonewalled when they asked questions during training: "*They always said, 'Ask your social worker.'*"

Other specific areas foster parents mentioned that were missing from, or inadequately described, during training included adoption processes, caring for drug-exposed or disabled children, and caring for infants. One participant noted, "*In retrospect, it wasn't even close to covering issues that are really important.*" Foster parents also were dissatisfied with the extent to which the county's foster family licensing process was enumerated. Many felt that the home

study visit was invasive and even insulting. They wished that training had prepared them better for the expectations of their homes during the home visit. One foster parent noted, "*I'm proud of my house! And here comes this lady telling me what's wrong with it. One thing after another. I felt really bad.*" Others agreed that they felt as though the social worker who performed the visit saw them as suspects, rather than as people generously opening their hearts and homes to foster children.

Other participants agreed that there is a large discrepancy between reality as a foster parent and the team-based model described in MAPP training. Many were also under the impression that the MAPP social worker leading their training courses would continue to work with them and assist them in the coordination of their placement and adoption goals. Foster parents also felt dissatisfied with the extent to which training informed them of important community and county resources (e.g., clothing allowances, financial assistance, medical coverage). Foster parents were dissatisfied that child care was not available during training classes.

Many participants also reported that the training included too many "*horror stories.*" While exposure to difficult issues was considered valuable and useful, participants felt that the emphasis on negative experiences was not adequately balanced with positive illustrations and that the negativity caused many of their classmates to discontinue participation during the MAPP classes. Participants felt that many people will "*rise to the occasion*" once they actually have foster children in their homes. During training, one foster parent remembered thinking, "*Do we really want to do this?*" Foster parents felt that the agency inappropriately discouraged individuals who may have felt uncertain about their abilities to cope with the difficulties associated with foster parenting:

"We don't hear enough of the successes – that it may be rough, but you can do it. It's not balanced enough. Most kids turn out to be okay. I thought the purpose was to discourage you, weed people out. "

Becoming A Foster Parent

Foster parents were asked to describe how they found out about the opportunity to foster and to discuss factors that motivated them to provide foster care. Word-of-mouth was the most common way that participants first learned about becoming foster parents. Many foster parents mentioned that they were encouraged by friends, family, fellow church members, and co-workers who were fostering children. Other individuals learned about foster care opportunities from radio or television advertisements (e.g., "Brian's Kids"). Finally, some participants learned about the opportunity while employed in agencies that have relationships with the county child welfare system (e.g., Children's Hospital). On participant said, *"Working in this field, I've seen a lot of placements disrupt. I thought, 'I can do better than this.'"*

Childhood experiences, the love for children, and an awareness of the need for foster parents were the predominant factors that motivated individuals to become foster parents. For example, one participant had been "taken in" when she was a child and she wanted to provide the same loving environment to other children who were similarly abandoned by their birth parents. On the other hand, some foster parents cited their particularly positive childhood experiences as the primary reason for becoming foster parents: *"I had a lot of love at home growing up...I wanted to give that to a child who didn't."* Most foster parents readily agreed that they simply *"love children"* and they want to *"provide good homes to good kids."* One said, *"I'd be lost without kids in my home. I've been dealing with kids all my life."* Another foster parent said, *"My kids are grown up and I still have lots of love to give."*

Many other foster parents also reported that they were motivated by knowing, or learning, that there were great numbers of children in need of foster homes. Along with this awareness was the belief that foster children are vulnerable and desperately need advocates to ensure their needs are met. Still others suggested that they wanted to adopt foster children because they were unable to have children of their own.

Attending Social Services-Sponsored Events

Most foster parents had participated in at least one event sponsored by the county Department of Social Services (e.g., foster parent dinner, foster parent picnic, training). They reported that the most helpful aspect of these events was the opportunity to interact with other foster parents. Exchanging phone numbers, resources, and anecdotes (e.g., how to access WIC, programs available at Children's Hospital) with one another were the most valued aspects of attending the events. Some foster parents reported that the other foster parents they met at the events become their support networks: "*It's helpful to listen to the wisdom of people who have done it a long time.*" Finally, some foster parents reported that the events were perceived as a token of the county's appreciation for their services: "*If they want to buy me dinner once a year, I'll definitely let them.*"

Factors Affecting the Decision to Continue Foster Parenting

Foster parents who have continued to foster children were asked to describe factors that have made it possible for them to continue to foster and to identify supports that would make their roles as foster parents easier. Attachment and commitment to the children in their homes, the support of friends and family, and individuals' own financial resources were the primary reasons foster parents cited as enabling them to continue to foster.

Relationships with Children. Attachment and commitment to the children they care for was a common reason for continuing to provide foster care. *"I just love being a mom,"* reported one foster parent. *"Your heart is there,"* said another. Some participants also agreed that providing care to children feels like their *"calling."* Another participant noted that, *"No matter how low you get, you look at the child."* Other similar responses were : *"The kids -- it's not the money!* *"When you see the baby and you hear what the baby went through"* and *"It's self-rewarding -- the kids keep in contact with you and let you know how they're doing."*

Social Support. Participants cited marital and relationship partners and friends as important sources of support that enable them to continue fostering. One woman said, *"My husband is an amazing support. We support each other -- otherwise we could not pull it off...It's a team effort."* While foster parents readily mentioned these individuals, they also made a point of noting that county staff were generally not among their reliable sources of support. This finding is discussed further in the section on foster parents who discontinued fostering.

Resources. Finally, personal financial resources were mentioned as a factor that enables some foster parents to continue. For example, financial success in one woman's career enabled her to spend a portion of her time in retirement caring for foster children. Personal financial resources also enabled another foster family to obtain legal advice and therapeutic services they felt were necessary to sustain their family through the struggles they confronted as foster parents.

Factors that would Make Foster Parenting Easier

Participants who have continued to provide foster care were asked to describe factors that would make it easier to continue fostering children. These foster parents reported that financial assistance, information, services, respect, and teamwork would make it easier for them to continue their roles as foster parents.

Resources. Foster parents widely agreed that increases in financial support, as well as improvements to the timeliness of disbursements, would make it easier to remain foster parents. The high cost of living in the Bay Area was mentioned as an important factor that places financial burdens on foster parents as well as other families. Additionally, foster parents felt that the financial support provided by the county for respite services, child care, and clothing were inadequate and unrealistically low.

With regard to other types of services, foster parents suggested that the availability of respite and child care services would make it easier to continue fostering children. Additionally, some participants suggested that they would benefit from free, legal counsel so that they could obtain information on foster parents' rights and explanations of the child welfare system.

Information. Many participants said that receiving more information from the county would make their roles as foster parents easier. One foster parent said, *"The county isn't forthcoming. I ended up learning a tremendous amount from other foster parents instead."* In fact, foster parents agreed that some social workers were unaware of the some of the community and public resources that they discovered on their own. Foster parents also reiterated their frustration with the lack of information the county provided them about child welfare processes. For example, some foster parents reported that they did not realize that they had access to things such as liability insurance or clothing allowances until learning about them long after children were placed with them.

Foster parents also wished that more information regarding children's case plans and assessments could be shared with them. Some foster parents agreed that they had never been informed about any children's case plans. Another foster family reported that, despite their belief

that state law requires it of the county, no formal needs assessments of foster children were ever provided to them.

Respect and Teamwork. Finally, foster parents felt that they would have an easier time continuing to foster children if they truly felt that they were respected and were part of the team of important individuals caring for children in out-of-home care. *"You don't get any validation from the county,"* one foster parent reported. *"We expected to be treated as a family and valued for being a family unit...We feel like hired help."*

In general, foster parents felt unappreciated for the services they provide and also felt that the county did not treat them as partners or team members in meeting children's needs. For example, foster parents expressed dissatisfaction and frustration because social workers and judges had not consulted with them regarding the children's status, needs, or reunification plans. After all, one foster parent suggested, *"No other family knows the child as well as we do. We just want acknowledgment for that."* According to one foster family, a judge decided to increase visitations between the child and his biological family. This decision was made without any consultation with the foster family who had informed the social worker that the child's visits with family had always resulted in significant developmental delays, followed by a week of recovery for the infant who was born exposed to drugs (i.e., infant was over-fed, diaper not changed, medication withheld).

Deciding Not to Foster After Training Completion

Foster parents who completed MAPP training, but decided not to foster children, were asked to explain factors affecting their decisions, as well as to identify what might have caused them to make different decisions. They were also asked to discuss their participation with other foster care agencies.

Foster parents who completed MAPP training but never fostered children for Alameda County referred to feelings of frustration as the basis for discontinuing their relationships with Alameda County. Strong dissatisfaction with the agency forced some participants to remove themselves from the agency's pool of foster parents. Many individuals were frustrated by the lack of communication they received from social workers and attributed this to the busy schedules of social workers. Other individuals perceived that the department would be too invasive and play too large a role in the activities of their homes (e.g., "*dictating*" methods of discipline). "*The state requirements* [of your home] *were the second-to-last thing we had to go through* [to be licensed]. *If people were told up front what the state requirements are, a lot of people probably wouldn't do it.*"

Finally, the most common reason that individuals never cared for foster children after completing MAPP training was that the county never placed children in their homes. Foster parents were unsure why children were not placed with them. Some worried that being divorced, single, older in age, lesbian, or Caucasian kept the county from placing children in their homes. Most individuals who did not provide foster care after completing training stated that they would have remained with the county if, in fact, children would have been placed with them. Foster parents offered the following comments:

> "*[The county] should keep in mind -- there's all these kids who need homes. It seems like foster parents have to measure up to almost inhuman standards.*"

> "*I felt like we weren't in the mold -- outside the box in some way. It matters. There's real people who really want to help.*"

> "*Biased social workers cause a problem. It shouldn't take a year and a half to find a match. I went to the adoption fair and was crushed when nothing there panned out.*"

*"Kids don't seem to be the focus [of placement procedures], but
rather, finding perfect foster parents."*

"I'm not gonna beg for a child..."
*"I wanted to foster a child. The county never gave me any
legitimate reasons why no one had been placed with me."*

*"They let you believe you would be able to foster a child after the
10 weeks of training. As it turned out, I never got a child. No one
called me. I asked a supervisor why and complained to licensing.
Licensing came out to my house for the one-year follow-up even
though I had never got a child. I got very discouraged."*

Fostering for Non-County Agencies. After being licensed for as long as one year and still

not having any children placed in their homes, many foster parents decided to seek foster care

and adoption opportunities at other agencies. One foster parent who left the county for a private

agency reported, *"With the other agency, it took no time at all."* Another said, *"We gave up*

waiting and accepted a child from our church." In addition to seeking greater chances for

fostering children, some individuals stated that they decided to utilize other agencies because

they perceived that they would be more *"supportive."*

Deciding Not to Continue Fostering After a Few Years

Foster parents who cared for foster children for a few years and then stopped were asked

to identify not only their positive and negative experiences as foster parents, but also the factors

that caused them to decide to discontinue fostering. Overall, their most positive memories of

foster parenting were of the children, while the most negative were problems they encountered

with the child welfare system.

Positive Aspects of Fostering. Participants thought most fondly of the children for whom

they provided foster care over the years. One participant said that, in spite of the problems she

had with social workers and the child welfare bureaucracy, *"there are these children."* Some

former foster parents also said that it was very rewarding to witness the great changes in children while staying in their homes: *"It's great...You get this skinny baby who won't eat much...Then you see it become a fat, little baby who eats everything!"* Foster parents who cared for drug-exposed infants expressed particular satisfaction from observing such transitions: "They told us all this bad news about how she would do in school and then we watched her excel." Other positive aspects of foster parenting experiences included Family Support Services, Special Start, and their relationships with some social workers and other foster parents.

Negative Aspects of Fostering. The negative experiences with the child welfare system centered around the following five areas: (1) communication with social workers, (2) support from the county staff, (3) timeliness of service delivery, (4) encounters with biological families, and (5) respect from and teamwork with the county staff. Foster parents felt that these were the major areas the county should address in order to retain more licensed foster homes.

First, former foster parents recalled great frustration about the interactions they had with social workers. The most common complaint was that the response time form social workers was much too long. Some examples of statements from participants include:

> *"Social workers don't call you back when you call them about the child doing something bad. They only respond about things that were good."*

> *"Social workers only communicate through voicemail. They don't have real conversations...All we get from social services is voicemail!"*

> *"They don't return our calls or let us know about court hearings even though that's where major decisions are made."*

> *"Social workers only respond on an overwhelmed, emergency basis. As you go, you learn more about needing to be independent."*

Another common complaint from participants was that social workers often failed to provide them with important information. One foster parent noted, *"We asked the social worker if our child was entitled to WIC. She didn't know. She had to ask the receptionist...who did say the child was entitled."* Other foster parents felt that they could not rely on social workers to find out about services. One participant learned of respite services through a patron at the library where she worked.

Second, foster parents felt negatively about the extent to which they were supported by the county. Speaking about a foster child they eventually adopted, one family stated, *"From the moment we brought him home, we've been on our own...We don't have anybody. We feel very alone."* Foster parents felt that the county needed to offer more moral support and financial support in order to retain the foster parents who care for children in the county.

Third, foster parents complained about the delays with which the county delivered services. While foster parents that completed training and stopped offering foster care expressed frustration over never receiving children, continuing foster parents also were frustrated with the time it took for the county to place children with them. Foster parents were confused by the delay because they perceived that, given the great need for foster homes in the county, the county would have a backlog of children needing placements in newly licensed homes. To remedy this delay, some foster parents agreed that the county should institute an agency limit on the amount of time between licensing foster homes and placing children with them.

The delay with which the county delivered financial assistance to foster parents also was a common concern among focus group participants. One foster parent said she was lucky that she and her husband had sufficient financial resources since, oftentimes, the county would deliver financial assistance late or, sometimes, never: *"If we needed the financial assistance*

immediately, we probably couldn't continue (fostering)." Other foster parents felt that the county did not broker services, such as tutoring and counseling, quickly enough to respond to children's immediate needs.

Fourth, the encounters between foster parents and the children's biological families were among the most negative experiences of fostering. One foster parent described the devastation she felt when a child's birth mother accused her of abusing the child. Another foster family complained about the state in which their foster child would be returned to them after weekend visits with biological family (e.g., developmentally regressed, dirty diaper, ill). Some foster parents also believed that the county arranged visitations inappropriately. Describing what felt like a *"drug drop,"* one foster family spoke of meeting a child's birth family for the first time in a McDonald's parking lot. Others agreed that it is very frustrating when the county fails to give them 24-hour notice of visits. They also agreed that visits are canceled repeatedly with little notice: *"You're on a roller coaster going through this."*

Finally, foster parents reiterated that the county did not treat them with as much respect as they felt they deserved. Foster parents restated that they did not feel like members of a team operating in the interests of children. Some participants did not understand why important information was withheld from them and perceived that the county dealt with them in a secretive manner. For example, fost-adopt parents were frustrated because they were not told of the birth parents' situations, assuming that having this knowledge might have given them indications about the likelihood of eventually being able to adopt the foster children. One foster parent noted, *"I opened my home to someone. It's a horrible feeling to do that and be dealt with secretively."* Some foster parents also noted that children's case plans were never shared with them.

Foster parents were very disappointed that their input about children's needs and progress was seldom solicited by the county or the courts. Foster parents felt that they should be included in case conferences before social workers write children's court reports. While caring for a medically fragile toddler, one foster family reported that the county never arranged for them to discuss the child's needs with the birth family before their visitations. One of the foster parents reported,

> *"The focus is not on the child...This is about parental rights and the legal system, not the child... They never ask us how he's doing before a hearing or how he's doing when he comes back from visits with this birth family...And the lawyer has never called to ask about the child's special needs...We are documenting it all, but no one has asked us for it."*

Factors in the Decision to Stop Fostering. Foster parents identified their negative experiences as the primary factors affecting their decisions to stop fostering for Alameda County. However, a number of foster parents also stopped fostering because their initial goal had been achieved, either providing foster care for a great number of children or finding a foster child to adopt. Additionally, a small number also attributed their decision to personal life events (e.g., got a new job, "*getting too old,*" arrival of grandchildren).   Unsuccessful adoption was another source of the frustration that prevented some foster parents from continuing to foster children for Alameda County. Fost-adopt parents reported that failed adoptions were so emotionally difficult that they lost interest in continuing their efforts to provide foster care.

Recommendations for Recruiting New Foster Homes

All focus group participants were asked to provide suggestions that would help the county recruit and retain more foster homes. All focus group participants agreed that current foster parents are the best resource for recruiting other foster parents. This recommendation was

followed by suggestions about the content of recruitment messages and about increasing

incentives to individuals interested in foster parenting.

Participants agreed that having foster parents (current and past) describe their positive

experiences is the best method for recruiting new foster parents. Specifically, participants agreed

that media and public education campaigns need to do more to *"tone down the horror stories"*

and emphasize the positive experiences of foster parents. Some of the negative perceptions

concerning recruitment efforts included statements by participants that foster parents have no

rights, that foster children have too many behavior problems, and that drug-exposed infants are

too difficult to care for. Some foster parents proposed that the county contact human resources

departments of large companies so that they can advertise foster care opportunities to employees.

Videos that advertise fostering also could be played in workplace lunchrooms and waiting rooms.

Additionally, foster parents felt that more individuals would be interested in fostering if

the county were able to increase financial incentives. Not only did foster parents suggest that

more people would foster if they were paid better, but also that more people might be interested

if the county could offer financial assistance for the high cost of living in the Bay Area. One

participant mentioned that, in Los Angeles, foster parents are given access to repossessed homes.

Other suggestions for recruiting more foster homes included targeting the recruitment to

the communities that over-represent the foster care population but under-represent the foster

home population (i.e., African Americans). Some former foster parents, confused because the

county never placed children with them, doubted that the county really needed more foster

homes. Perhaps, they suggested, the county is recruiting and licensing foster homes that do not

meet the needs of the children who are in the foster care system and thus, not placing children in

many of the licensed homes (e.g., Caucasian families, families who will not accept children with medical or psychological needs).

Feedback from Non-Participants

Three individuals were unable to participate in focus groups, but were interested in providing feedback via letters or phone conversations about their experiences fostering for Alameda County. Additionally, several people could not participate in focus groups because their own physical ailments kept them home-bound or because they had heavy responsibilities caring for others (e.g., hospitalized child, mother with Alzheimer's disease). One family wrote a letter to the researchers, indicating that they wanted to adopt children for many years and believed there were many children in Alameda County in need of the love and family they believed they could provide. However, after completing MAPP and other licensing requirements, they encountered many obstacles. They found that the population of children was portrayed very negatively and heard mostly horror stories. They also felt that MAPP was geared toward "*weeding families out*" of the system. The family believed that training should be separate for those individuals interested in permanently adopting children (versus fostering) and were frustrated that answers to their questions about how realistic their prospects were for adopting were ambiguous.

Another individual reported completing the MAPP training and home-study process, only to find the system "*completely non-responsive*" and "*haphazard.*" The individual did have a positive experience with a well-organized, conscientious social worker and has high regard for "*pockets of people*" in the child welfare system. It took one year after completing MAPP for the individual to have a child placed. Finally, the individual described the system as "*crying for help.*"

Finally, another individual, who completed most of MAPP before adopting the child of a friend, said that MAPP training was "*incredible*" and could not imagine parenting without the knowledge she gained in the MAPP classes. She said that MAPP helped her identify her own limitations and realize that she could not help all children.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that contribute to the problems of recruiting and retaining foster homes. By interviewing individuals who have provided foster care and those who completed training and did not foster any children, researchers attempted to identify participants' positive and negative experiences fostering for Alameda County. In combination with existing literature on foster parent recruitment and retention, this report makes recommendations to the county based on themes that emerged from participants' experiences and perceptions.

Focus group participants were primarily current foster care providers who had high levels of education and household income. Most had participated in MAPP training and felt that the most useful aspects were the opportunities it gave them to interact with other new foster parents and becoming exposed to the issues they would confront bringing foster children into their homes. Foster parents recommended that MAPP training incorporate more information about child welfare processes and functions. Most participants became foster parents because of their love for children and felt compelled to help the great numbers who need loving homes. This attachment and commitment, in combination with personal support and resources, enabled many to continue fostering, even in the face of challenging personal and bureaucratic obstacles.

Research by Smith and Gutheil (1988) linked shortages in foster homes to difficulties in recruiting new foster parents. Additionally, existing literature suggests that foster parents are one

of the most effective recruitment agents (Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993). Most focus group participants reported learning about foster parenting via word-of-mouth and agreed that current foster parents are the most effective recruiters. However, participants emphasized that, to be effective, these recruiters must have positive experiences to relate to interested individuals. Foster parents were concerned about the extent to which current recruitment and training messages are designed to "*weed people out*," rather than encourage them to work in a domain in which they have indicated an interest. Participants suggested that, first, the agency should modify its operations to ensure that foster parents have more positive experiences. Participants suggested that if more foster parents were having positive encounters with the agency, word-of-mouth recruitment would occur almost without the county exerting additional effort.

Participants' specific suggestions for recruitment were consistent with the findings of Rodwell and Biggerstaff (1993). That is, regularly scheduled information meetings should be held for potential foster families and recruitment activities should only be conducted when the agency is prepared to respond to the number of new families that may be recruited. Conducting recruitment activities only when the agency is prepared to respond to new families may help address the concerns of foster parents about being recruited but never receiving children for foster care.

The problems associated with retaining foster homes may be more complex than those associated with recruiting new homes. Interestingly, researchers expected that foster parents who completed training and never received children for foster care would have decided to cease fostering. However, most who had not fostered children continued to have interest event though the county did not arrange placements with them after they obtained their licenses. The discrepancy between the perceived great need for foster homes and the fact that many eligible

homes never received children certainly calls for an explanation. Many of the foster parents who had given up on waiting for children had high incomes, high levels of education, and were strongly motivated to help provide loving homes to foster children.

Research by Hurl and Tucker (1995) suggests that retaining foster parents is difficult because they have less autonomy than they have had historically. Formal rules and regulations suggest that they must change their households to accommodate formal rules and agency goals. These concerns were evident in some of the participants' perceptions that the agency is invasive to their homes, particularly during the home study process for licensing foster homes. Foster parents were very discouraged by their perceptions that, during licensing, the agency went over their homes with a "*fine tooth comb*" and hurt the pride they felt about their households. In fact, some foster parents felt that if potential foster parents understood the level of invasiveness required by the agency's home study process, many would be too discouraged to complete the licensing process.

Despite the fact that some research suggests that there is a relationship between the increasingly difficult population of children entering foster care and the decreasing numbers of individuals becoming foster care providers (Tucker & Hurl, 1992), focus group participants did not say that foster children with special needs are a part of the negative experiences with the foster care system. Individuals who had ceased fostering after a few years also did not mention that foster children with special needs were a reason they decided to stop providing care. On the other hand, participants did note that potential foster parents might feel discouraged by negative stereotypes about foster children and suggested that recruitment messages emphasize the positive encounters most foster parents have with the children for whom they provide out-of-home placements.

Existing literature on the role of women's out-of-home employment on the supply of foster homes is inconclusive. While some studies (e.g., Campbell & Downs, 1987) demonstrate that foster mother's employment status predicts the number of foster children in their care, others (e.g., Tucker and Hurl, 1995) find no significant relationship between increases in women's labor force participation and decreases in numbers of new foster families. Focus group participants did not suggest that the time they spent working out of their homes kept them from having the time to foster children, however they did refer to out-of-the-home employment when describing their difficulties obtaining child care. Given women's high labor force participation rate, it is possible that making child care more accessible to foster parents would encourage some women who currently believe that their employment status would make them ineligible to become foster parents.

While some questions about payment levels remain unanswered, Simon (1975) concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between the level of payment to foster parents and the number of foster homes available. Increasing payment levels was recommended by participants regarding both recruitment and retention. While many participants made a point of stating that money was not the reason they continued fostering, they also felt that the payment levels were unrealistically low in terms of the costs of child care and clothing and the high cost-of-living in the Bay Area. Participants suggested that increasing levels of payment might help attract more foster parents and increase the satisfaction of foster parents. Additionally, participants felt very frustrated about the delays with which the agency delivered financial disbursements.

Research suggests that levels of parental satisfaction influence the likelihood to continue fostering. Therefore, strategies designed to increase the likelihood that foster parents will continue must include the factors known to contribute to their satisfaction with fostering. Focus

group participants were clearly motivated by their love for children. Studies by Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) indicate that this type of motivation is associated with high levels of foster parents satisfaction. The study also revealed that foster parents who are motivated by wishes to adopt, but who are not able to do so, are much more likely to discontinue. Some focus group participants who became frustrated after a long waiting period corroborated this finding.

Some focus group parent participants also noted that they discontinued their services as foster parents after they successfully adopted a foster child (Reinfleisch, Bean, and Denby, 1998). Participants also attributed their ability to continue fostering to their own resilience and determination. These findings correspond to research by Boyd and Remy (1979) who found that foster parent assertiveness plays an important role in license retention.

Many research studies have examined the role that foster parent training plays in retaining foster parents. A study by Lee and Holland (1991) examined the MAPP training program that is utilized by Alameda county. Unfortunately, the study did not reveal that MAPP had any significant effects on foster parents. However, Jones (1975) suggests that inadequate foster parent training may result in voluntary termination. Focus group participants who had not completed MAPP training did not express feelings of unpreparedness and participants who did complete MAPP mostly had positive regard for it. The predominant criticisms of focus group participants related to training involved specific areas in which the MAPP curriculum was lacking (e.g., child welfare system, home study process).

Additionally, participants were frustrated that, while MAPP emphasized teamwork in meeting children's needs, they did not feel like members of a team once they began caring for foster children. These findings are consistent with the work of Berrick, Needell, Shlonsky, Simmel, and Pedrucci (1998) who found that foster parents often felt they were not valued by the

social workers, were not treated respectfully, and did not feel included as part of the child welfare team.

Similarly, Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka, and Russell (1998) found that foster parents who had face-to-face contact with their social workers were more likely to be satisfied. Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) also found that foster parents have higher levels of satisfaction when social workers provide them with information when it is needed and show approval when the foster parents do well. Variables associated with closure include having several caseworkers at the same time and the belief that social workers do not reach out.

Foster parent participants also were dissatisfied with the level of support they received from the agency. They reported that they received most of their support from personal relationships and from other foster parents. However, studies by Uruquhart (1989) and Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) reveal that support from other foster parents is an important predictor of foster homes remaining open. Therefore, the agency should not only examine the extent to which social workers could provide more support to foster parents, but also identify ways that they could increase opportunities for foster parents to support one another.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly recommended that foster parents should receive higher payment rates. Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992 suggest that payment increases make foster parents feel more valued and decrease their likelihood of dropping out. Focus group participants suggested that increased payment rates would enable them to secure more continuous child-care, tutoring, and other therapeutic services that foster children need.

Possible limitations to this study include a low response rate, methodological considerations, and some of the focus group participant characteristics. While over 600 households were invited to participate in the focus group interviews, only 151 returned their

consent forms to indicate their interest in participating. Since researchers collected the responses of participants by taking notes as the interview proceeded, there were probably some comments that researchers were not able to write down. However, participants may have spoken more naturally, taking comfort in the fact that they were not being recorded.

Additionally, the research study did not examine foster home quality. Future research efforts would benefit from identifying characteristics of high-quality foster homes so that retention efforts could be tailored to recruiting and retaining foster families that are most likely to embody those attributes. Participants in this study were not screened for the quality of their foster homes. Therefore, the researchers can not be sure that the input they provided is based upon the practices and experiences of ideal foster family arrangements.

Finally, focus group participants tended to be current providers with high incomes and levels of education. These characteristics may have influenced the positive and negative experiences that participants reported. For example, perhaps education levels influence the extent to which foster parents expect the county to involve them in case planning and decision-making. The relatively high income levels of participants also may have influenced the extent to which participants complained more about the timeliness of financial disbursements than the actual levels of payment rates. Additionally, the fact that these particular individuals voluntarily elected to participate may indicate that they are some of the most committed, assertive foster families who value the opportunity to contribute to the county's understanding of their experience. On the other hand, individuals who voluntarily elect to participate also may be individuals who have had the most negative experiences as foster parents and appreciate the opportunity to draw this to the attention of the foster care agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations reflect the findings from focus group interviews with

foster parents. The recommendations also reflect findings obtained from the review of existing

literature on foster parent recruitment and retention. Additional recommendations for supporting

foster parents can be found in Figure 1 of this report.

1. INCREASE THE ROLE OF FOSTER PARENTS IN DECISION-MAKING

Foster parents perceived that the agency does not do enough to validate the important

roles they play in foster children's lives. By spending large amounts of time with foster

children, foster parents become well-acquainted with children's strengths and problems.

However, foster parents reported that there are few, if any, opportunities to convey this

knowledge to the social workers, lawyers, or judges who make important decisions about the

children's futures. Due to this dilemma, foster parents feel unappreciated for their services and

anxious about the fate of the children for whom they care. Additionally, the literature

emphasizes the power of including foster parents in planning and decision-making to keep them

involved and satisfied.

Strategies for increasing the role of foster parents in decision making could include:

- Involve foster parents in case planning activities. To increase the involvement of foster parents in decision-making, the agency could arrange for them to be included in regular case conferences. This change would give foster parents the opportunity to provide key decision-makers with important information about children's needs and behaviors. If regular case conferences do not occur routinely, perhaps they could be introduced into the system of care. In addition, foster parents could be informed of upcoming court dates so that they could have the opportunity to provide written updates on the children.

- Increase the frequency of interactions with agency representatives. (e.g., increase visitations, phone conversations, meetings with social workers).

- Increase the amount of information provided to foster parents. In addition to obtaining important information from foster parents, involving them in decisions that affect their foster

children also involves providing them with pertinent information. The agency should also identify pertinent information about children's case plans that could legally be shared and identify opportunities for providing the information to foster parents. In addition the county could pursue expansion of access to confidential information that may be relevant to foster parents in their provision of care.

- Explain the child welfare system during training. Foster parents were very frustrated that they could not understand the child welfare and court processes and did not feel as though the county had provided such explanations. The agency should examine its foster parent training curriculum to identify areas that could include enhanced explanations of the child welfare system's rules and procedures. For example, a brochure could be developed for foster parents describing the foster care process with a glossary and a flow chart describing the roles of judges, social workers, foster parents, attorneys, etc.

2. INCREASE SUPPORT TO FOSTER PARENTS

Foster parents, particularly those who had stopped providing foster care, reported feeling isolated and under-appreciated by the agency (during the time when they were fostering). While some noted that they received social support from personal relationships and other foster parents, they did not feel supported by the agency. Additionally, foster parents suggested that they had no agency representative that could be relied upon for advocating for their requests for services or information. Strategies for increasing the amount of support the agency provides to foster parents could include:

- Identify and address obstacles to providing valuable support to foster parents. Foster parents suggested that simple words of encouragement and appreciation from social workers would increase the levels of support provided to foster parents. The agency should identify existing obstacles (e.g., caseload size, mandated activities, agency culture) that may prevent its social workers from providing the words and actions of support that foster parents desire.

- Consider sponsoring more frequent appreciation events. The agency could convey messages of appreciation by increasing agency-sponsored foster parent appreciation events. Participants noted that they valued these type of activities.

- Increase opportunities for foster parents to support one another. The agency could consider organizing more activities to give foster parents the opportunity to relate common experiences and provide social support to one another. These activities could include increasing participation rates of foster parent support groups (perhaps through financial

incentives for support group attendence) and structuring training activities designed to further encourage foster parents to utilize one another in the years following training.

- <u>Increase foster parent payment rates</u>. The agency should examine the possibility of increasing foster parent payment rates as a means for increasing their support of foster parents.

- <u>Increase the access of foster parents to child care and respite care</u>. Support could also come in the form of child care and respite services. The agency should examine ways that it could provide foster parents with more access to these basic support services.

3. DECREASE DELAYS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

- <u>Place limits on the duration of time between licensing and placing children in new foster homes</u>. Many foster parents discontinued their relationships with the agency because they participated in training and never received contact from the agency about potential foster care placements. Foster parents were confused with the amount of time it took for children to be placed with them because they perceived that there were great numbers of children in need of out-of-home placements. To address discouraging placement delays, the agency should consider instituting a limit on the time between individuals obtaining foster care licenses and having children placed with them.

- <u>Identify, and provide explanations for, delays in placing children</u>. The agency should identify why they have many licensed foster parents who do not receive foster children. If the agency trains and licenses individuals who do not meet the agency's desired criteria (e.g., ethnic heritage not matching that of children in need of out-of-home placement, etc.), the agency should consider ways communicate these preferences to individuals seeking the opportunity to care for or adopt foster children. Additionally, the agency should consider ways to increase follow-up contacts with recently licensed foster homes to ensure that new foster parents feel supported and are given the opportunity to draw the agency's attention to instances where foster parents are not receiving child placements.

- <u>Deliver disbursements to foster parents in a timely manner</u>. In combination with the low payment rates they receive, delays in financial disbursements create hardships for foster families. The agency should examine the extent to which their disbursements are delayed and identify ways to disburse payments to foster parents faster.

- <u>Provide service referrals in a timely manner.</u> While the needs of children are of concern to both the agency and foster parents, foster parents reported that the county often delivered or arranged for services with great delay. The agency should identify obstacles that social workers may have in providing families with service referrals and implement methods to improve service referrals to foster parents.

- <u>Improve the response time of social workers to the requests of foster parents for communication</u>. The agency should identify the obstacles that prevent social workers from returning the phone calls of foster parents and dealing with requests for information more promptly. This effort could include interviewing social workers to better understand the daily challenges that prevent them from providing more timely requests for information or services. Armed with this knowledge, administrators could modify workloads, work tasks, or agency culture to improve social workers response time to foster parents. Alternately, the agency could assign a case aid or ombudsperson full responsibility for responding to foster parents and decreasing services delays.

4. UTILIZE CURRENT FOSTER PARENTS TO RECRUIT NEW FOSTER HOMES

Consistent with existing literature, participants recommended that the agency utilize current foster parents as their predominant method for recruiting new foster homes. Specific suggestions include:

- Emphasize the positive experiences of fostering children. The agency should ensure that foster parent recruiters emphasize their positive experiences. Focus group participants felt that negative stereotypes about foster children, as well as negative perceptions about the agency's bureaucracy, discourage many people from becoming foster parents. The agency could screen potential foster parents to identify those with positive attitudes about fostering. In addition, the agency may wish to provide financial bonuses for foster parents who support a recruitment family through the training and licensing procedures.

- Clearly convey the requirements of becoming a foster parent. Many foster parents agreed that they were initially unsure about their eligibility (e.g., because they were single, older in age) to become foster parents and believed that many individuals who are interested in fostering do not pursue it because they are unsure about the agency's selection criteria for foster parents.

- Target recruitment to desired populations. The agency should target recruitment efforts to families that can care for the children the county serves (such as medically fragile children and children with other special needs).

- Ensure that agency resources are in place to provide timely response to new foster parents recruited through these efforts. The agency must be prepared to return phone calls, enroll parents in training, and place children in licensed homes without delay.

5. INCREASE INVESTMENTS IN A RESEARCH AGENDA TO FURTHER IDENTIFY STRATEGIES OF IMPROVING FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Remaining areas of inquiry include:

- To what extent does the employment of women outside the home affect foster parent participation rates? Existing research studies have yielded conflicting conclusions about the extent to which women's increasing role in the workforce contributes to the decreasing numbers of foster homes.

- What affect does increased payment levels have on foster parent recruitment and retention? Existing research studies have yielded conflicting conclusions about the contribution that payment levels have on foster parent rates of participation. Specifically, future research should identify the level at which rate increases would have a positive impact on foster parent

participation. Future research also could examine how foster care quality may be affected by the payment levels foster parents receive.

- <u>How do demographic characteristics affect foster parent participation rates?</u> Research indicates that satisfaction levels, motivating factors, and retention rates may be affected by race and age. Future studies should more closely examine these possibilities so that recruitment and retention efforts can be tailored to foster parents with particular demographic characteristics.

- <u>What affect does training have on foster parent retention?</u> While some studies document improved retention rates as a result of foster parent training, others were unable to find such training benefits. Future research should examine what specific curricula would have the largest impact on retaining foster parents and identify the most effective methods for delivering training to diverse demographic populations.

- <u>What specific strategies could agencies utilize to involve foster parents in case planning and decision-making activities?</u> Existing research, as well as focus group participants in this study, emphasize the importance of involving foster parents in decision-making. It has been established that foster parents' levels of satisfaction are highly determinant upon such involvement. However, future research should seek to identify model programs and best practices for accomplishing increased levels of involvement. The extent to which agencies have the necessary resources for increasing foster parent support also should be examined.

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