

State of Idaho

Foster Parent Exit Interview Summary Report

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IDAHO FOSTER PARENT EXIT INTERVIEW SUMMARY

DECEMBER 2006 - JUNE 2007

In Spring, 2005, the Department of Health and Welfare (DHW), Family and Children's Services Program Managers asked the Resource Family Training Program to collect data from foster parents who were exiting the Idaho Foster Parent Program. In Autumn 2005, a pilot study was conducted to test sample questions and procedures. The results of that pilot led to some protocol revisions during the spring of 2006, and the design of a formal study during the summer and early fall of 2006. During the period between December 2006 and June 2007, 174 foster parents exited the foster parent program in Idaho. Of those exiting foster parents, 64, or 36% participated in exit telephone interviews regarding their foster parenting experiences and reflections and learnings.

The information presented below summarizes the data collected. As can be expected with any phone interview process, respondents provided information based on their current interpretations of their experiences. Some interviews show patterns of responses that are focused totally on a problematic theme that perhaps led to the foster parent exiting the system. Other interviews show patterns of biases that cloud responses to fairly straightforward questions. The quantitative responses have been taken at face value. The narrative responses have been filtered by analyzing only those responses that related closely or directly to the questions asked. This may have limited the number of responses coded, but it also increased the degree to which responses provided meaningful information related to the target questions.

The following report includes six sections, each pertaining to a type of information deemed valuable to the system. Each section concludes with a short summary that emphasizes learnings that may be important to the system. The report ends with recommendations that are based on the findings and that provide an overview of the learning of the evaluator. The information presented is designed to be used in a formative program improvement process and is not an evaluation of the program itself.

Section 1: Demographic and Fostering Context Information

Respondents were asked a number of questions to help describe the fostering context they experienced. Table 1 below shows that there were differences between two groups of foster families: those that had fostered for 3 or more years (average 6.8 years) and those who had fostered for 2 years or fewer (average 1.4 years).

The data show that the longer term foster parents were licensed to care for more children, had more children in their home at any time, and actually served many more children than the group that had served for 2 or fewer years. In addition, the long-term foster families were more likely to adopt a child than were those who served for a shorter period of time. On the other hand, shorter-term families were 22% more likely to have fostered a child that was related to them.

Table 1: Demographic Comparison

Interview Questions:	Group 1: 3+ Years n=22	Group 2: 1-2 Years n=38
How long did you have a foster care license as a resource family in the State of Idaho?	6.8 years	1.4 years
How many foster children were you licensed to have in your home?	3.2	1.6
What was the largest number of foster children you had in your home at one time?	3.4	1.7
How many children have you fostered in total?	Ave. 40.6	Ave. 2.5
Have you been a Resource Family/Foster Parent for a child that was related to you?	36% yes	58% yes
Do you have family members and/or close friends that are or were Resource Families/Foster Parents?	50% yes	47% yes
Did you adopt a child placed in your care?	72% yes	21% yes

Foster parents were also asked the ages of the children they fostered. The following table shows that foster parents who fostered longer were likely to take in children from a wider range of ages, probably because many of the Group 2 foster parents had a targeted and relative child as a fostering goal.

Table 3. Ages of Children Fostered

What were the ages of the children you typically fostered?		
Age Groups	Group 1 3+ Years (n=22)	Group 2 1-2 Years (n=38)
0-2 years	50% yes	55% yes
3-5 years	27% yes	42% yes
6-12 years	36% yes	37% yes
13-18 years	14% yes	18% yes
All Ages	36% yes	5% yes

Exiting Foster Parents were asked if the number of children in the home at one time created problems for them. For Group 1, 77% indicated that the number of children had not been problematic; for Group 2, 89% of the foster parents indicated that the number of children had not been problematic. This difference may have been due to the much smaller number of children brought into the home by Group 2, and also by the fact that they fostered many more children who were related to them. For those families that did have difficulties, seven gave information as to the nature of the problems, with disruptions between foster child and natural children or spouses accounting for 57% of the responses, with seriously disturbed behavior characterizing the other 43% of the responses. In 4 out of 7 cases, the child was removed from the home to provide a solution to the problem.

Summary of Section 1

Data show that foster parents who had remained in the system for 3 or more years had several characteristics that may be helpful to fulfilling the need for foster placements in Idaho. First, they were licensed to foster more children at any given time, and they had larger numbers of children in their home at any one time. In addition, they were willing to accept children of all ages at a much higher rate, and were almost 3 times more likely to adopt a child.

Foster parents who exited after 2 years or fewer of service, on the other hand, were much more likely to foster a child that was related to them and less likely to have the placement end in an adoption.

Section II: Recruitment into Foster Parenting

Exiting Foster Parents were asked questions about their induction into the foster parenting program. Of major interest was what had gotten them interested in becoming foster parents in the first place, in light of the fact that there was a lengthy application and licensing process to go through. A first question asked of the participants was to describe what brought them into the program in the first place. Table 2 below shows the response for the two groups. The responses indicate some important differences. First, longer-term foster parents (Group 1) had adopting as a more immediate goal of fostering, as shown by a 26% difference in this response area. Second, the short-term group (Group 2) was much more focused on serving children who were related to them.

Chart 2: Motivation to Foster Parent

What brought you into the foster parent program?		
Motivational Categories	Group 1 3+ Years (n=14)	Group 2 1-2 Years (n=31)
Potential adoption	36% yes	10% yes
Family/Keep Relatives out of Welfare system	21% yes	61% yes
Altruistic/helping society	43% yes	29% yes

Twenty out of 64 foster parents responded to a question about who encouraged them to join the foster parenting program. Their responses grouped into three main categories of influence, as seen below in Table 3.

Table 3. Encouragement received to join the program.

Were there any persons who encouraged you to join the program? (n=20)	
Motivators	% of Respondents
System Persons, i.e. DHW employees, CF workers	40%
Family/relative/friends	40%
Other foster parents	20%

Foster Parents were next asked how fully the requirements and expectations for licensing were explained to them as they started the program. Eighty-two percent of Group 1 foster parents and 79% of Group 2 foster parents indicated that the requirements had been fully and clearly explained to them up front. For the 20% of foster parents who did not report receiving full explanations up front, there were some difficulties experienced by the lack of information. One family went ahead, only to be told in the end that they couldn't foster because of the husband's past record. Another family received a child who needed 24 hour care, when they already had a disabled adult in the home. Another family experienced a change in the rules and had to get rid of their swimming pool to continue fostering. Finally, three families didn't know about the resources that were available, which would have helped them. In particular, one family didn't know about the rules for reimbursements for damages so that their claim was not allowed because it was under the guidelines.

Summary of Section II

It appears that the two groups of exiting foster parents had quite different motivations for joining the foster parenting program. Group 1, or those who served for more than three years, seemed motivated by the thought of adopting a child and by helping out society. Group 2, or those who served for fewer than 2 years, seemed highly motivated to take care of a family member and used foster parenting as a means to do so.

Section III. Initial and On-going Training

Exiting foster parents were asked about the training they received as they became and continued to be foster parents. For Group 1 parents, who had fostered for an average of 6.8 years, 50% had completed PRIDE training as part of their fostering program. In Group 2, who had fostered for fewer than 2 years on average, 82% had received PRIDE training. This difference probably represents the extent to which the PRIDE training availability has increased over the last three years in the state, as 78% of Group 1 foster parents with 4 years or less of service had also received the PRIDE training.

Those foster parents who had taken the PRIDE training found several aspects of the training to be most helpful, as shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Most Helpful Aspects of PRIDE Training

Category	% of Responses (n=20)
Specific skills or strategies to deal with specific behaviors	30%
Global system information (foster program goals; state's role)	30%
Learning about different perspectives on fostering (natural parents/workers/court)	20%
Networking and sharing with other foster parents and foster parents panel	20%

Foster parents were also asked about things PRIDE training didn't prepare them well for. This question elicited 25 responses, with several of the response illustrating some frustrations with the training experience in general, such as:

- "They make it sound like everyone works as a team, but once you have the kids in your home, the team goes away."
- "PRIDE wasn't realistic about the behaviors. It was phony, like a dream world."

Other responses indicated that people who were to foster a relative did not perceive themselves as being foster parents and therefore didn't need PRIDE. In fact, 20% (5 responses) of total responses were in this category, illustrated by the response: "For me, I didn't need it because I was just doing it for my grandkids." Other responses show that 40% (10 responses) of the foster parents did not learn anything new from the training, as illustrated by the response: "I knew most of it already, it didn't prepare me for anything new." In addition, 12% (3) of responses found the training to be of low quality, while 24% (6) responded that there were specific things that they wanted more of, such as the following:

- "What to do when you don't click with the child's case worker."
- "More information would have been nice on children with special needs, and to also show that sometimes children don't always go home."
- "Most of the scenarios used were of older children, but we mainly had younger children."
- "Focused on the negative things that happened and not enough on the positive things that could happen with kids in your home, and didn't cover practical day to day stuff in home."

Foster parents were next asked how prepared they felt when they received their first child. The two groups of foster parents had similar perceptions, as shown below.

Table 5. How Well Prepared When Receiving First Child

Category	Group 1 (3+ years) (n=20)	Group 2 (2 years or less) n=38)
Very Well Prepared	55%	50%
Somewhat Prepared	30%	42%
Not Well Prepared	15%	8%

When asked what or who had helped them feel prepared, the following responses were recorded:

- 50% responded that their past personal experience as parents, or their past experience with the child had helped them feel prepared to foster parent.
- 35% responded that the case worker or licensing worker had helped them feel prepared.
- 15% responded that the PRIDE training had helped them feel prepared.

One addition response was instructive:

- "When we took the training they had a mentoring program and having those experienced foster parents helped a lot. Feeling like we could call them when we finished the training was so helpful. Case workers have no idea what you are going through or what this end is like. We are still friends with the people that mentored us."

Foster parents who responded that they did not feel well prepared when they received their first child were also asked about what should have happened so they could have felt better prepared. Their responses grouped themselves into the following categories:

Table 6. What Should Have Happened to be Better Prepared

Categories	% of Responses (n=22)
Nothing, or just more experience with fostering ("Spur of the moment; nothing could have been done differently".)	41%
More communication with DHW ("I got 3 kids the first night from 2 counties. I was overbooked my first night as a foster parent.")	18%
More background information about child/family ("Didn't know how sick the child was.")	18%
More understanding of expectations ("I was not prepared to do supervised home visits when it wasn't up to us.")	14%
More clothing or supplies ("She came with nothing, no diapers, no clothing.")	9%

Some responses indicate that some experiences started off with the new foster parents being placed in an awkward position. Some examples:

- "They didn't tell me the child's name until the day after I got her and she was one year old so she couldn't tell me her name."
- "My first set of kids, there were three of them. Nobody gave me any info, and it was [a holiday] weekend. No instructions and no workers were available since it was the holiday weekend."
- "Easier if we would have known what was expected on our side and parents' side and we didn't realize we would be transporting the kids to [their home town] all the time."

Foster parents were next asked about trainings after receiving their first child. First, foster parents were asked if they had been encouraged to attend trainings. Eighty-six percent (n=22) of Group 1 and 84% (n=38) of Group 2 reported being encouraged to attend trainings. There were 44 responses that directly addressed the type of encouragement they received, with 34 (77%) of respondents reporting receiving flyers or other mailings, 14 (32%) (all duplicated counts) reporting being encouraged verbally through case workers or phone calls, and 4 (9%) respondents citing email encouragement. Two respondents indicated that they had been notified of trainings, but not really encouraged to attend, and 5 (11%) respondents did not attend trainings because of travel distance or language barriers.

Foster parents were also asked what type of trainings they attended, and if they were helpful. The most common training type foster parents reported attending was about behavior or behavior modification, with 55% of respondents citing this type of training. For Group 1, 100% of respondents reported that the trainings were either helpful or somewhat helpful, while 85% Group 2 respondents reported that the trainings were either helpful or somewhat helpful, with 15% of Group 2 reporting that the trainings had not been helpful.

Things that had been helpful in the trainings were information presented about specific topics (6 out of 10 responses) and networking or sharing with other foster parents (4 out of 10). Things that could have been more helpful were more networking (3 out of 6 responses) and more in-depth information (3 out of 6 responses).

Summary of Section III

The information collected from exiting foster parents about the PRIDE and other trainings did not prove to be enlightening. A majority of responses indicated that the trainings were helpful, but there was no sense that the trainings were what made or broke the fostering experience. More than 50% felt well prepared to receive their first child, with much of that preparation being their past personal experiences with children. It is likely that a more targeted approach to collecting information about the impact of training would be helpful, particularly a 6 month follow up study done with foster parents who go through PRIDE in 2007.

Section IV. DHW Support During the Foster Parent Experience

Exiting foster parents were asked to rate out of 5 (high) a bank of 13 statements about the quality of the supports they received from DHW during their experience. Analysis of the responses to the quality statements showed that there was little difference between the two groups this report has tracked with one exception discussed below, so the table below shows the average response from the whole group for each statement (n=60). Responses are presented in the sequence asked of the participants.

Table 7. How True for You? (5 = Very True)

Statements	Average Response out of 5 (high)
1. Agency personnel were available and open to hear my needs.	3.7
2. Social Workers made face-to-face contact at least once a month with me and the child(ren) in my care.	3.7
3. My Phone calls to the social worker were returned within 48 hours or two business days.	4.0
4. It was clear who to contact at the agency when I had a question.	4.1
5. If issues arose with the social worker, his or her supervisor was available to assist me in problem solving when requested.	3.8
6. The amount of contact the social worker made with me and my family was sufficient.	3.7
7. The agency supported my own family	3.6
8. I was encouraged to participate in the child's case plan.	3.8
9. Networking with other resource families and relative caregivers was made available.	3.4
10. I was given notice of and encouraged to attend court hearings for the child(ren) in my care.	3.8
11. Efforts to maintain appropriate sibling contact were encouraged and made available to me	4.0
12. Opportunities were made available to work with the child's birth parents.	3.8
13. I felt a valued member of the child welfare team.	3.7

Generally speaking, Group 2 had slightly higher ratings on all items than did Group 1, which indicates progress on the part of DHW in maintaining supportive connections with foster parents. In particular, item #2, monthly meetings, showed a 28% increase between Group 1 and Group 2, with Group 2 having had much more recent experience entering the system and therefore perhaps less likely to be influenced by memories of times years ago when support wasn't available.

There was variance within the scores, however, and that variance leads to an interesting finding. Before rating the statements themselves, foster parents were asked the extent to which the health, education, and behavior information they were provided with prior to receiving each child was very adequate, somewhat adequate, or inadequate. It turns out that the responses to this question show a strong relationship to the total quality bank statement score. In other words, when the scores for all 12 items are totaled, we have what might be seen as a total experience quality score. To complete this analysis, item #11 was removed from the spreadsheet, as this item did not apply to too many foster parents and was thus left blank. In addition, many other individual responses were deleted due to other blank items, so that the resulting analysis lacks the robust nature of a larger sample. The information is presented here because it is provocative and may lead to further discussion.

The table below shows the groupings according to the extent that foster parents perceived adequate information being provided to them, and also shows the average total quality score for each group and the percent out of 100% possible that the averages represent. The analysis seems to show that those parents who believed that they got either very adequate or somewhat adequate information had much higher perceptions of DHW as supporting them throughout the fostering experience. On the other hand, those foster parents who perceived the background information for children in their care to be inadequate judged many other supports offered by DHW as being inadequate also.

Table 8. Adequacy of Information Received for Each Child

Adequacy Grouping	Average Total Score out of 60	Percent of Possible
Very Adequate (n=13)	53.5	89%
Somewhat adequate (n=14)	44.1	74%
Inadequate (n=8)	33.6	56%
Inadequate with outliers removed (high scores well outside the standard deviation) (n=6)	27.3	46%

After providing information around the quality of services provided by DHW, exiting foster parents were asked, "If a friend who was interested in maybe becoming licensed as a foster parent were to ask you, would you say that the general support was very good, somewhat good, or not very good?"

This question revealed that 52% of the foster parents perceived that the support had been very good, with 33% believing that the support had been somewhat good, and 15% responding that the support had been not very good. However, this question showed relationships to some other questions asked in the total experience quality rating. The table below shows these relationships by showing the results of a Pearson correlation coefficient analysis and the amount of variance not counted for by the relationship between the scores. As can be seen, the listed items account

for around 50% or more of the variance between the scores. These direct and positive relationships indicate that foster parents who perceived strong support on the individual items were highly likely to refer to the program as providing very good support overall.

Table 9. Relationships between Perceptions of Support and Other Variables (n=60)

Relationship of Perceived General Support to:	Strength of Relationship	
	Pearson r	Unexplained Variance
Sufficient contact	.777	40%
Feeling valued as a child welfare team member	.76	42%
Supervisor availability	.75	44%
Availability of background information for each child being placed	.71	50%
Own family support	.699	51%

This analysis, combined with the relationship shown above between the amount of information foster parents received for each child before placement and their positive perceptions of the total experience quality items, leads to a tentative conclusion. The data suggest that the adequacy of the information received prior to receiving a child colors the extent to which foster parents perceive the department as being helpful over a range of other supports. In addition, the more foster parents perceive support in the key areas of a) being a child welfare team member; b) support for their own family; c) sufficient contact between agency and family; d) the availability of a supervisor when there is case worker-family conflict, and e) adequate background information for each child, the more foster parents are likely to perceive that the general overall support provided by DHW was very good. Another way of saying this is: Offices that provide adequate background information on placements seem also to provide support for the family, make sufficient contact with the foster parent, have a supervisor who is responsive and available, include the foster parents as a valued team member, and produce an experience for the foster parent that leads them to perceive the overall support as very good.

Exiting foster parents were also asked to provide narrative data around the extent to which they felt supported by the program. First, foster parents were asked what type of background information they did not receive. The table below shows the percent of response in various categories.

Table 10. Types of Information Perceived as Lacking (n=31)

Category of Information Lacking	% of Responses
Medical Information ("We didn't know the child had genital warts, and I run a day care.")	23%
Information about needs of child ("Need to know things like, do the kids wet the bed, favorite things to eat, favorite toys.")	23%
Just generally inadequate ("Having to get information instead of being given it")	23%
Information about behaviors ("I had no idea the little girl screamed or bashed her head into doors.")	16%
Generally adequate ("None that I can think of.")	16% *

*Does not sum to 100% because of rounding

Those foster parents who reported the general support as being "very good" were asked what types of supports were most helpful.

- 63% of responses referred to the case worker or the system or "they" as being a valued support ("They were willing to be great listeners." "Just the case workers themselves.")
- 25% of the responses referred to getting questions answered ("They were able to answer questions very quickly.")
- 13 % of the responses reported that having a network of supports was very helpful ("Knowing we could call someone to bounce things off of and know what to do.")

Foster parents who reported that the general support had been either "somewhat good", or, "not very good," were asked what types of supports they didn't get.

- 65% responded that they needed more from the case worker position ("Sometimes case worker was not available or did not check to see how they were doing.")
- 23% responded that they needed more system or process information ("Expectations need to be clearer. When problems arise they forget who you are.")
- 12% responded that they had received good support ("I don't think there was any that we asked that we didn't get.")

Perceived Department Support Summary

The analysis of perceived department support by foster parents was somewhat hampered by small sample size due to the large number of foster parents who chose to pass on many items in this category. Out of a sample of 60, only 35 foster parents responded to all items. From the responses that were complete, however, some trends can be seen.

- First, social workers (called case workers by the foster parents) play a critical role in the perceptions of exiting foster parents; Social workers are seen as the number 1 support, as well as the number 1 reason for a lack of support.
- Second, for many of the sample foster parents, 'they' represents both social workers and the department and the program as a whole. This may indicate that some foster parents see the system as not including them, even to the extent that the social worker, who might have the closest relationship with the foster family, is seen as part of the system rather than as an individual.
- Third, there is a relationship between several actions taken by social workers and the support perceived by foster parents. The strongest relationship is between the adequacy of background information received by foster parents prior to placement and the extent to which they perceive they are supported by the department across a range of variables.
- Fourth, another strong relationship was found between a) the background information received; b) the degree to which foster parents felt a part of the child welfare team; c) perceived support for their own family; d) sufficient contact with the social worker; and e) the availability of supervisor support when there was social worker - foster parent conflict, and the extent to which foster parents were willing to refer to the overall program support as 'very good'. It may also be instructive that exiting foster parents refer to "social workers' almost exclusively as "case workers." The perception seems to be that foster parents are a case to the system, and not part of the system. Language in this instance may be very important.

Section V. Reasons for Leaving the Program

Exiting foster parents were asked several questions about their fostering experience and their decision to leave the program. First, foster parents were asked about the positive aspects of their overall experience with DHW.

- 71% of responses indicated that the support they received was a most positive aspect ("I think they really did look to the best interest of the child." "They were there for us through the whole ordeal.")
- 20% of responses indicated that the positive aspects had to do with personal fulfillment or making a difference ("Made me feel good about myself, and we did eventually make a difference for some kids.")

- 9% of responses indicated that being able to care for a relative was a positive aspect ("I think it was a gift from God to be able to be the foster parents for my granddaughter.")

Exiting foster parents were also asked their primary reason for discontinuing as a resource family. The following categories describe the responses provided by 59 foster parents.

- 41% gave personal reasons, including health problems ("I had a baby in Sept. and felt like I couldn't do it anymore." "Having to give back that baby, just emotionally I couldn't do it, it was so emotionally draining after raising it for a year it was awful.")
- 22% indicated that they adopted the child or got guardianship, or that the child was adopted by another family or returned home ("We adopted two beautiful girls, so our house was full." "The kids went back to their mother.")
- 15% indicated they had received poor support, and that was the primary reason ("We didn't feel supported and that we could never do enough. They got more of my time than my kids, and it was never enough for the state.")
- 10% gave a primary reason of a change in family circumstances that helped the child return home ("I only did it to care for my grandchildren.")
- 7% reported that they stopped fostering because the child was either adopted or returned to a parent ("The kids went back to their mother.")
- 5% reported that problems with the placement child was the primary reason ("Our son was molested by a foster boy in their home during a respite stay.")

Finally, foster parents were asked if there were things the agency or social worker could have done differently that might have helped them to decide to keep fostering. Responses fell into two categories:

- 82% responded "no" or words to that effect ("No, it was my own emotional state.")
- 18% responded that more support was needed for them to keep fostering ("Yes, they could have removed the child after the 5th time I called. If they could have moved him out I would still be a foster parent.")

Summary of Section V.

The responses to several questions reveal that the majority of the exiting foster parents felt supported during their experience. In fact, 71% indicated that the support was a highlight. The major reasons for leaving the program had to do with either adopting the placement child, having that child adopted by another person, or personal reasons, including changes in health or family status or moving. Overwhelmingly (82%), exiting foster parents said there was nothing the Department could have done to influence them to stay in the program.

Section VI. Impact of Experience

Exiting foster parents were asked several questions about their experiences in foster parenting. First, foster parents were asked what they had learned from their experiences.

- 27% of responses represented increased personal capacity to care and comfort children as a result of their experiences ("I learned how to parent really difficult kids." "Learned how to serve and welcome children in our home.")
- 25% of responses related to learning positive things about the foster parenting system and about DHW. ("Very positive, good outlook on the childcare system." "There is a need in our state for more funding for health and welfare.")
- 23% of responses related to learning more about the needs and rights of children ("I never knew the need, the great need." "Learned that there are lots of sad homes out there - very sad for children.")
- 13% of responses indicated learning about the negative aspects of the system ("I learned not to trust people, and that really disappointed me." "I learned that the system is really messed up, there are too many kids and not enough people.")
- 13% of responses indicated that the foster parents had gained a wider perspective on life as a result of their experiences ("It gives you another perspective on how people see things." "To be very appreciative of my kids, and everyone has a story.")

A second question asked foster parents about some things they could do now, or do differently, after having been foster parents. Analysis of the response showed that most foster parents had gained important outlooks or skills, although a small percentage responded in terms of the increased freedom they had now that they were no longer foster parenting.

- 28% of responses related to understanding people and situations better without blaming or being judgmental ("Understand peoples' situations better without blaming them." "More compassion for people who have issues like that.")
- 28% of respondents felt that they had gained better parenting skills ("I am now better with my own kids, better at disciplining and being more consistent." "I have learned to sit and listen to my children.")
- 18% of responses indicated a new found freedom after stopping to foster parent ("We can go on a trip without calling anybody." "Now my house is clean and I have more free time.")
- 13% of responses indicated an increased open outlook on the system ("I'm much more open to the needs of foster kids." "I'm more confident in discussions about foster care and adoption.")

- 13% gained a different perspective on life or changed what the future might hold for them ("I have re-entered a Ph.D. program to be an advocate for foster children." "I took a counseling course afterward and it helped see the child's point of view better.")

A final question asked of the exiting foster parents was: What would be your advice to other adults who are interested in becoming foster parents? Thirty five percent of the 54 respondents replied: Just do it! However, there were some qualifiers and suggestions couched in those and other responses:

- 64% of the responses related to cautioning potential foster parents to researching it and getting to know what they're getting into ("They should do it if interested, but research it and really know what they're getting into." "Wonderful experience. Just make sure it is something you and your family can handle." "Wow.... Be sure they know what they are getting into, because even when you think you are prepared it is such a life changing experience.")
- 21% of the responses related to the rewarding and fulfilling aspects of foster parenting ("It's an incredible experience and it's worth it." "Go for it. Good experience. Just sign up and do it.")
- 15% of responses suggested that potential foster parents get as much training and information as they can ("Be sure to get as much training as you can, be sure to have a good support group and try to get as much information as possible about the child beforehand." "Take the love and logic course.")

Summary of Section VI

Exiting Foster parents gave testimony to the power and life-changing nature of the foster parenting experience. At the same time, foster parents also portrayed a sense of warning: future foster parents need to take extra steps to learn about the system, because the system does not always prepare foster parents for the reality of the experience, and the system sometimes does not communicate reality to foster parents. In terms of learning, the absence of references to the social workers was interesting; for whatever reason, social workers seem to be involved with managing individual cases, but not with helping foster parents become more proficient or able to be successful foster parents.

Recommendations

The exit interview data suggest that the foster parenting experience is different for at least three groups of persons. The first group is comprised of those persons who are interested in foster parenting for a longer period of time and who potentially wish to adopt a child. They exit the system after serving for many years and after serving many children, often having adopted one or more. The data indicate that they exit the system when their families grow up, or when they have a change in health or life status.

The second group is comprised of those persons who have a relative child that needs support and who they do not want placed in the child welfare system. They serve as long as the child needs

support, and exit when the child is returned home or when they gain legal custody of the child. This group does not necessarily see themselves as foster parents and do not always perceive that they need the training to be a foster parent.

The third group is comprised of those persons who are willing to try fostering, but who are not necessarily committed to providing long-term services. They seem to serve until they experience a change in life status, such as having a baby, or experience difficulties with a placed child. This group honors the experience but focuses more on their own families.

These three groups experience the system differently and probably need differentiated support in coming into the system and remaining in the system. Group 1, the long-term group, is the group about which this interview process seemed to learn the least. They are or become self sufficient over time and learn to understand the difficulties in the system and to recognize and appreciate whatever supports they do get. Group 2, or those who are fostering a relative, may need additional supports in recognizing the extra supports needed by children who are living with extended family members not including their biological parents, especially supports regarding social growth and schooling. Group 2 seems to be focused more on the adults involved than the children, in terms of responses to the survey. Group 3 seems to need support in forming a vision of their role in the fostering system. Group 3 potentially may represent a valuable asset in temporary care, if they can successfully support one or more children. All three groups share an appreciation for receiving information and support from the social workers, with Group 3 needing the most support.

The first recommendation is to implement a comprehensive evaluation of the PRIDE training program, and to shape that data collection so that social workers and others acquire a better sense of the type of foster parents coming into the system. All three of the groups described above have a valuable role to play in foster parenting; it is important the social workers gain a sense of the level of commitment of various resource families so that they can match them with children they will be successful with, given the individual situations of the resource families and the needs of the child.

A second recommendation is that a six-month follow-up study be completed around the PRIDE training and other available training, such as core, CEU, mentoring and on-line training. The exit interview data provided interesting, but not strongly formative data around the usefulness of the PRIDE training. A further study might help clarify what types of training are most appreciated and used by the different groups. This study should also include an on-going satisfaction survey of existing foster parents. To make this possible, it will be important that the foster parent application process include a release of information statement that allows DHW and its contracted partners to maintain confidential contact with foster parents throughout their fostering experience.

A final recommendation is that the Regions use the 13-item total experience quality rating bank questions (see pages 8-9 and Tables 8 and 9 above) to collect feedback information from existing resource families. Because of the relationship between the items on the rating scale and the overall satisfaction of the fostering experience, it appears that this feedback information would allow regions to target specific areas that current resource families perceive as inadequate. The

data suggest that the more those items on the scale are strengthened and implemented, the more likely it will be that exiting and remaining foster parents will feel positive about their experiences and be willing advocates for foster parenting across the state.