RESOURCE FAMILY RECRUITMENT IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

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Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose & Goal

The purpose of this analysis was to describe the current process of bringing families to provide foster or adoptive care—i.e., resource families—into the foster care system in Los Angeles County. Specific attention was paid to the bifurcated system comprising largely distinct Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and foster family agency (FFA) recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement efforts. The goal was to identify areas for improvement, where DCFS and FFAs can work complementarily to more efficiently and effectively recruit, train, assess, and approve new resource families, and place children in appropriate, safe, and secure homes.

Data Collection & Analysis Approaches

The data collection and analysis approaches were designed to describe each of the major points of the recruitment process, including areas for improvement and promising practices, and to document the impact of each piece of the dual system, with emphasis on identifying areas of need and potential solutions. To achieve these objectives, the evaluation team conducted a multiple methods study that looked closely, via qualitative methods, at how practices influenced outcomes, and the successes and challenges of the dual resource family recruitment system. In addition, quantitative and cost outcomes were derived from secondary data analysis.

Insights & Pathways Forward

The following summarizes key insights and pathways forward regarding the separate stages of becoming a resource parent: recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement. **Please see the full report for additional detail.**

Recruitment

Coordination of recruitment efforts should be increased.

DCFS and FFAs have developed and engaged in a variety of useful recruitment strategies. However, it was evident that there was also some redundancy, at least in part due to communication problems or lack of information sharing across agencies. Given the limitation of resources that can be devoted to recruitment, coordination of efforts between FFAs and DCFS seems a prime area for enhanced focus. Better coordination could help to reduce the time and effort needed to engage and process prospective resource families. While FFA and DCFS-Placement Recruitment Unit (PRU) staff noted that there is some coordination between public and private sector agencies around recruitment, most of those interviewed for this study remarked on the confusion many prospective resource families experience as a result of the dual recruitment efforts (i.e.,

FFA and DCFS). Another source of confusion that interacts with and confounds the existing recruitment system is communication of the requirements for dual approval (i.e., foster and adoption). Thoughtful coordination of recruitment efforts will reduce the inconsistencies in information relayed to prospective families from different agencies, as well as the confusion felt by many prospective resource families about critical issues that may affect their decisions, such as benefits, information sources, and approval requirements. Coordinating recruitment efforts, including response to inquiries in a consistent and strategic manner, may help to reduce confusion and increase motivation to foster children.

A potential approach to standardizing and effectively addressing responses from prospective resource families is the idea of "one-line" recruitment whereby a joint effort would be made to establish a single point of contact for prospective resource families. This cross-agency effort would require further analysis to implement, and require explicitly defining equitable support for the service and a fair and efficient process for disseminating referrals. However, the inquiry type, location, and characteristics of inquirers to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline suggest that the data could be gathered to support a transparent stakeholder driven process to be developed.

Further, Internet inquiries have increased as the number of personal referrals have decreased, suggesting online venues are not being effectively leveraged as a primary contact and resource point for prospective families. As an example, a single website and accompanying mobile application, including a common cross-agency registration process and calendar of orientations, could be developed as the central medium through which the child welfare system reaches out to families and brings them into the fold. Such straightforward approaches may help to alleviate some of the confusion that potential resource families feel about the dual system, and that many recruitment staff reported struggling to clarify. Such strategic cross-agency recruitment ideas and current efforts should be further explored.

Effective recruitment practices should be more closely tracked and studied, and findings should be disseminated.

FFA and DCFS staff involved in this study described their need for more systematic, complete, and reliable tracking of recruitment efforts. Much of the hard work and innovative recruitment work accomplished by these agencies is not quantified or characterized in ways that allow for efficient identification of promising or effective practices. Some promising approaches are highlighted in this report, but more complete tracking, and efficient analysis and dissemination of such practices would allow for better development and improvement of Los Angeles County resource family recruitment processes.

Additional efforts should be focused on recruitment of homes appropriate for the most difficult to place children.

Among the most consistent themes across FFA staff, DCFS staff, and resource families was the difficulty in finding appropriate homes for harder to place children (e.g., sibling groups, very young children, older children, and children with special needs). Many FFAs as well as DCFS-PRU do recruit resource families capable and willing to serve harder to place children (e.g., through Angels in Waiting, the Diligent Recruitment Grant program including support for the Kidsave program). However, those interviewed consistently described the need and desire to focus more effort on recruitment of such homes. The most common suggestion was to focus on establishing relationships with communities that tend to include families who have the knowledge, skills, and potential desire to care for hard to place children. This has been done to a limited extent with nurses, but such efforts could be expanded to include many other communities (e.g.,

other medical professionals, older adults, communities centered around specific disabilities or special medical needs). Increasing focus on relationship building with communities of families capable of providing appropriate care for the most difficult to place children appears to be a fertile area for development.

Current resource families should be further engaged in recruitment efforts.

Word of mouth referrals or recommendations can be very influential in families' decisions to seek additional information and to pursue foster care or adoption. As such, many FFA staff described informally enlisting current or previous resource families in their recruitment efforts. More formally, DCFS-PRU has supported the Recruitment Ambassador Program, in which trained resource parents help recruit and then support prospective resource families, and are compensated for every approved family they work with. The Recruitment Ambassador Program is promising as a more strategic approach to involving current or former resource families in recruitment efforts, but it is currently run at a small scale (approximately 15 families). Such practices, with accompanying resources, should be expanded and their effectiveness in Los Angeles County should be further studied.

Training

The training process should include a continuum of support.

To encourage commitment to this journey and partnership with the agency, some FFAs reported that one or a few staff members conducted orientations, trainings, and home visits. The central element of this approach was the consistent point of support for the family throughout the training and approval processes. This provision of a continuum of support for prospective families should be further expanded across agencies, and the impact of this approach should be studied.

However, the costs of additional pre-placement support must be weighed carefully. Resource Families represent a considerable monetary investment beyond the immeasurable value of opening their hearts and homes to children in need.

Uniform FFA training process and outcome data should be collected.

Data pertaining to the movement of prospective families through training were limited. Some FFAs do diligently collect information about training processes and outcomes, but the data gathered by these tracking systems were not sufficiently similar, or housed in a consolidated database, to be useful within the scope of this analysis. Complete understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of the training process will require that FFAs more uniformly and reliably collect information regarding the training process.

Existing resource families should be engaged to orient prospective families.

Among the innovations reported by some FFAs was the practice of conducting orientations in the homes of current resource families. This was described as a productive recruitment tactic that contributes to the support and commitment of prospective resource families who are entering the training and approval processes. In many cases, this practice also included the provision of incentives for host families. This approach, which draws on the lived experiences of others, holds promise and should be studied to identify its effectiveness. Successful orientation practices for partnering with existing resource families should then be promoted across the foster and adoption communities.

More effective and efficient ways to orient prospective resource families and engage current resource families regarding ITFC should be identified.

Despite DCFS initiatives to encourage Awareness of Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC), this area needs increased focus across agencies. Awareness among prospective resource families was reported to be low. Specifically, engaging new families in this type of care when they had no prior interest was described as an often difficult and time-consuming part of the orientation process. To overcome this challenge, some agencies reported recruiting and orienting current resource families to ITFC, as they may be more likely to have had enough experience to be able to understand the need for and develop a more positive orientation to the possibility of providing more intensive care. However, agencies also noted that this requires significant resources, money, attention, and time. Given the need for more families capable of providing this type of care, more effective and efficient ways to attract and orient prospective resource families and to engage current resource families regarding ITFC should be identified and developed.

Online orientation should be explored.

Staff members explained that the need to include the California Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) in each orientation limited the number of sessions they could provide each month. To remove this constraint, CCLD was in the process of moving their portion of the orientation online, as part of the Resource Family Approval (RFA) program, to be initiated in January 2017. This change may allow for additional sessions to be scheduled and may streamline the orientation process for prospective families, partly through moving the approval burden from the state to counties and FFAs. If such changes prove efficient and effective, it may be prudent to explore providing the entire DCFS orientation online—especially considering the increasing number of online recruitment referrals. While there will likely always be a demand for in-person orientation, an online venue would ensure that the demand for this training at any given time could be satisfied.

Assessment & Approval

High quality standards for the assessment and approval process should be adopted.

The evaluation team found variation between FFAs and DCFS, as well as across FFAs, in the extent and components of the assessment and approval processes. These differences were often confusing for prospective resource families and were a source of inefficiency and complication across agencies. Many FFA staff suggested that the adoption of high quality standards for assessment and approval across agencies would reduce confusion for prospective families and allow them to more easily share or transfer cases, thereby supporting more efficient allocation of resources across the system.

Transparency of the assessment and approval process should be increased.

Assessment and approval staff interviewed recommended that the extent, duration, costs, and requirements of the assessment and approval processes—both between FFAs and DCFS, as well as across FFAs—be made clearer and more accessible for prospective families. Further, progress through the assessment and approval process, including milestones completed or requirements outstanding, should be made clearer and more accessible for families engaged in the process. Currently, there is substantial variation across agencies in the degree of regular communication with families in the approval process, so routinized and increased transparency may contribute to support and retention. Additionally, identifying workers across agencies who are assigned to assessment and approval or other specific services might further support the efficient allocation of resources.

DCFS oversight and support for prospective resource families should be increased.

Another common thread of discussion was the potential positive impact of additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective families (e.g., more home visits, more time for relationship building and engagement during training and assessment). As training has been outsourced, DCFS assessment and approval workers' focus has shifted away from this area and toward approval. This has reduced their opportunities to engage and build rapport with families, which may be contributing to the increasing proportion of newly approved certified (i.e., approved by an FFA), rather than licensed (i.e., approved by CCLD), families each year. The importance of personal connections and relationship building evident in the recruitment, training, and approval processes suggests that additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective resource families may improve the quality and retention of homes throughout the DCFS assessment and approval process.

Placement

Interagency communication and collaboration should be improved.

DCFS and FFA staff highlighted interagency communication and collaboration as a particular hurdle for moving placements forward. While both parties to this process agreed that safety and successful placements for children are the goal, the understandable but sometimes conflicting agency perspectives can disrupt agency relations and communications. This issue has been acknowledged to some extent by both FFAs and DCFS, and both have collaborated on new strategies to address barriers to communication and coordination. Specifically, the interagency placement event planned for 2015 involving DCFS, FFAs, and resource families is an encouraging step and a potentially promising approach to collaboration.

Relationship building among agencies, families, and children is especially important. Broad approaches, such as conferences, trainings, and policy development workshops, might facilitate system-wide coordination and development. Likewise, more focused approaches, such as working groups or associations of parties with interest or stake in the placement of specific groups (e.g., those with specialized care needs, or of particular ages or races/ethnicities) hold promise to generate dedicated interest and involvement. Communication and collaboration appear to be fertile ground for sowing the seeds of an improved placement system.

Intake/admissions procedures should be improved.

As a symptom of the larger communication and collaboration difficulties between DCFS and FFAs around placement, the intake/admission process was specifically highlighted as problematic. DCFS staff described the need for more availability and responsiveness from FFAs, particularly for urgent or emergent placements/replacements. FFAs noted a lack of communication and inaccurate information from social workers regarding the types of placements needed or details such as specialized care needs, traumas, or child characteristics. Both issues represent significant barriers to efficient placement and appropriate matches. While CCLD regulations provide guidance regarding intake/admission, more standard and specific policies and procedures across agencies would standardize the process. More uniform procedures would simplify coordination between organizations, and ultimately improve efficiency after an appropriate placement and match has been identified.

The Foster Care Search System should be further developed.

The Foster Care Search System (FCSS), launched in 2014, has reportedly made the placement search process more efficient. DCFS staff supporting the FCSS reported it will ultimately include automation of FFA reports to DCFS, email reminders to FFAs when recertification of homes is required, and electronic signatures for approval of home certification. Each of these planned developments has the potential to increase efficiency

and communication while adding accountability. However, any system requiring manual data entry from multiple sources (i.e., FFAs, DCFS, and licensed families) requires safeguards such as routine data checks to ensure completeness and accuracy. Additionally, such user driven data systems require continuous technical support (e.g., maintenance of the system, training and troubleshooting for users) and organizational support (e.g., policies requiring use) in order to reach their potential and sustain effectiveness.

Preliminary Cost Analysis

The initial cost analysis data collected in this study suggest no meaningful differences between DCFS and FFA costs per family to recruit, assess, approve, and train families. During the post-approval period, however, costs per family were greater for FFAs than those reported by DCFS. In order to provide context for the post-approval period finding, the Full-Time Equivalent (one full-time staff person) was calculated in order to determine the staff ratio serving resource families. The DCFS staffing ratio is one full-time staff person for every 79 resource families, and the pilot sample FFA staffing ratio is one full-time staff person for every 8 resource families. The results suggest that FFAs devote more time to resource families post-approval.

It is important to note that cost data received from the FFAs surveyed and from DCFS were incomplete and not comprehensive, and thus cost findings are suggestive only. However, it can be stated that cost data made available to the research team indicate that post approval DCFS supports fewer staff per resource family compared to that supported by FFAs.

Overall Insights & Pathways Forward

There are opportunities to overcome the challenges of the bifurcated system.

At each point along the resource parent recruitment path, FFA and DCFS staff identified and richly described the challenges and limitations of the dual foster care recruitment system, Available data regarding the outcomes of these dual pathways largely support the notion that this approach has deleterious consequences for agencies, families, and children. While there is largely acceptance that the current bifurcated system is not preferable, many agency staff members have concluded that both foster care pathways need to be maintained in order to avoid losing homes. However, there is a great need for additional placements, and the potential consequences of moving to a single system warrants further study.

If policymakers and stakeholders decide that the dual recruitment system must be continued, at least in the short-term, there appear to be many opportunities for FFAs and DCFS to coordinate and collaborate at each stage of the process. As noted, recruitment processes could be much better aligned and streamlined across agencies, such that the first step onto the pathway is simplified for prospective families and efficiency and effectiveness are increased for FFAs and DCFS. High quality training standards could be adopted across agencies, possibly through common training curricula or protocols. This is being done currently in many counties throughout California using QPI California, a comprehensive training curriculum that has been approved by CDSS (see www.qpicalifornia.org). This would support greater consistency in how resource families are prepared, and thus increase the overall quality of the care they provide.

Participants from both DCFS and FFAs believed the requirement for dual assessment and approval for foster care and adoption limits the pool of potential resource families, but also encourages a higher standard of care. The redundancy and inflexibility of this process should be further examined and streamlined across agencies while maintaining appropriate approval standards. DCFS development of a Foster Care Search System

appears to already be improving the efficiency of identifying potential placements, but must continue to be developed, including additional efforts to ensure consistent FFA participation. Further, the process for working with FFAs or families after identification of appropriate placements should be standardized to increase efficiency. These and other opportunities to overcome the challenges of the bifurcated system exist, and they are largely acknowledged across agencies.

Cost per resource family should be taken into account.

Pilot study results indicate that no meaningful difference between DCFS and FFAs in pre-certification costs, including training. Differences do emerge after resource families are approved. This closely aligns with reports from FFA staff, who say they provide support to resource families that is individually tailored, available 24/7, and responsive to their needs. Likewise, DCFS staff reported a desire for reduced caseloads that would allow them to better tend to resource family needs. Of particular interest is the impact of post-certification support on resource family retention. FFAs were found to increase retention of placements year-to-year, whereas DCFS retention was relatively stable. Increased retention among certified homes may be a desirable outcome of the additional post approval investment of FFAs. Such cost implications should be more completely investigated.

Information systems capable of identifying and driving system improvements should be developed.

As described throughout the report, there are limitations and gaps in the documentation of processes and outcomes at each stage of recruitment. More complete tracking of initial contacts across agencies, for example, would allow for more accurate and timely information to drive decisions regarding public information strategies. Likewise, uniform data collection regarding training across agencies would help to identify more efficient and effective training models. More reliable assessment and approval information (e.g., regarding placement capacity and characteristics) would provide a more accurate understanding of the homes available to meet current needs, and potentially support a more strategic placement process. Finally, much information regarding placements and the experiences of children, their wellness, and their care is qualitative, anecdotal, and/or not readily analyzable. Such characteristics should be more accurately and reliably measured to support appropriate and safe placements. Opportunities abound to better use data to identify and drive resource family recruitment system improvements.