

## Arizona Department of Child Safety Foster Home Recruitment, Licensure, Use, and Retention

**CONCLUSION:** The Arizona Department of Child Safety (Department) maintains a supply of licensed family foster homes (foster homes) to provide care for children who have been removed from their homes because of alleged abuse or neglect. Foster homes care for a considerable portion of Arizona's children in out-of-home care. According to a Department report, over 5,500, or 41 percent, of these children ages 0 to 17 were placed in foster homes as of June 30, 2019. The Department contracts with multiple agencies (contractors) to help recruit and support foster homes, and new contracts were awarded effective September 1, 2019. Prospective foster homes must meet several requirements to become licensed, and the Department's licensing standards are generally consistent with model standards. Additionally, the Department reported placing over 40 percent of children in out-of-home care in foster homes during fiscal years 2018 and 2019, although federal fiscal year 2017 data indicates the Department used foster homes to a lesser extent when compared nationally. The Department has also engaged in recommended foster home recruitment practices and estimates needing additional foster homes for certain groups of children, such as teenagers and large sibling groups. However, feedback provided by foster parents over several years has consistently indicated a need for improved Department customer service and more information about children in their care. In addition, we identified inadequate intake practices that could impede foster home recruitment efforts. Finally, the Department should continue improving its contract monitoring approach.

### Department's licensing standards are generally consistent with model standards, and Department has engaged in recommended foster home recruitment practices

State law requires the Department to license foster homes, and prospective foster homes must meet several requirements to become licensed, including completing pre-service training, undergoing various background checks and assessments, and passing a life-safety inspection of their home. We found that the Department's licensing standards are generally consistent with model standards from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the National Association for Regulatory Administration. According to Department data, 3,969 foster homes were licensed as of June 30, 2019, with a total capacity of almost 9,000 beds.

The Department reported placing approximately 41 to 43 percent of children in out-of-home care in foster homes during fiscal years 2018 and 2019. According to federal data for federal fiscal year 2017, the most recent year for which this data is available, Arizona placed children in nonrelative foster homes to a lesser extent when compared nationally; however, it placed children with relatives to a greater extent. According to State law, placement with a relative is preferred to placement in a foster home.

Additionally, the Department carries out common foster home recruitment strategies, including general and targeted recruitment, and requires its contractors to recruit foster homes that meet the needs of children in its care. The Department also requires its contractors to guide prospective foster parents through the licensure process, and it tracks and has set targets for the number of individuals at specific stages of this process. Contractors are also required to provide multiple supports to foster parents.

Consistent with best practice, the Department uses data to estimate its foster home recruitment needs and estimates needing additional foster homes for teenagers, large sibling groups, and children with special health care needs. According to a 2018 U.S. Government Accountability Office report, nearly all states have reported difficulties recruiting foster homes for these groups of children. The Department also estimated needing additional foster homes of specific ethnicities/races. Children might be placed in a more restrictive or less ideal setting when a foster home that can meet their needs is not identified.

## Foster parent feedback consistently indicated a need for improved Department customer service and more information about children in their care

According to best practice literature, foster parents who are content in their fostering experience are the best recruiters of new foster parents; conversely, foster parents who are discontent and spread negative word of mouth about fostering dissuade others from becoming foster parents. We reviewed Department efforts to obtain foster parents' feedback from 2014 through 2018 and conducted our own focus groups with current and former foster parents. Through these efforts, foster parents have consistently identified Department customer service as an area for improvement. For example, foster parents have consistently reported poor communication from Department staff and lack of support during transitions of children from their homes. Foster parents have also reported feeling excluded from decisions about children in their care, difficulty accessing needed supports, and pressure to accept foster placements.

**Customer service in child welfare**—Customers' perceptions of the way they are treated, the responsiveness of the services provided, and the extent to which they are engaged in teamwork to meet the needs of children and youth.

Foster parents have also consistently identified a need for more information about children in their care. Statute requires the Department to provide specific written information to foster parents about children who are placed with them, and the Department's policy is to provide this information through a written placement packet. However, foster parents have consistently reported that the information they receive is incomplete or inadequate. The Department's contractors and the Arizona Ombudsman-Citizen's Aide Office reported similar concerns. We also noted that some information was missing from 6 placement packets we reviewed.

### Recommendations

The Department should:

- Develop and implement a customer service model to improve foster parent recruitment and retention.
- Provide foster parents with complete, updated written placement packet information.

## Inadequate intake practices could impede foster home recruitment efforts, and Department monitoring of prior contracts did not ensure contractors fulfilled several requirements

The Department and its contractors share responsibility for handling phone inquiries from prospective foster parents, referred to as intake. Best practice guidance indicates that intake should be timely, welcoming, and accommodate non-English-speaking callers. We called the Department and 10 contractors in English and Spanish to evaluate their intake practices and experienced difficulty reaching several contractors because of busy phone lines and full voicemail boxes, unreturned phone calls from some contractors and the Department, and contractors who did not speak Spanish or who did not invite us to an orientation in response to our calls in Spanish. In addition, we reviewed 10 contractors' websites to see if they provided Spanish-language information and assistance on their websites, which they are required to do, and noted that only 2 of the 10 contractors did so. The experiences we had in making these calls, particularly the Spanish-speaking calls, could deter some prospective foster parents from pursuing licensure because of never being called back or not feeling welcomed. The Department reported that it had not monitored its contractors' or its own intake practices but developed strategies to improve intake as a result of our calls.

Although the Department has performed some contract monitoring for its contracts ending October 30, 2019, this is one of several core contractor responsibilities the Department did not monitor. For its new contracts effective September 1, 2019, the Department has begun to apply an active contract management (ACM) approach.

### Recommendations

The Department should:

- Develop and implement procedures to ensure contractors and Department staff adequately handle intake in English and Spanish.
- Ensure contractors maintain websites with information about how to become a foster parent in Spanish.
- Continue implementing ACM for its new contracts.