

Site Visit Report: Missouri Extreme Recruitment Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition

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Award #: 90CO1038

Cluster: Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System

Grantee: Missouri Children's Division

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SUMMARY

In March 2008, the Missouri Children's Division (MCD) noted that the teen adoption program in St. Louis seemed to take an extremely long time to achieve permanency for youth in care. MCD realized that the typical efforts to find family members led to instability in the family. Due to these concerns, a coalition of partners developed an initiative to increase adoption, permanency, and reconnections. The Children's Bureau awarded a grant to the Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition (FACC), Children's Home Services, and the Adoption Exchange, to deliver direct service through the Extreme Recruitment grant with the assistance of several other partnering organizations. The resulting Extreme Recruitment project is a collaborative effort among agencies to increase adoption, permanency, and reconnection.

Extreme Recruitment (ER) is a 12–20 week individualized recruitment effort that includes preparing youth for permanency; conducting a diligent search to reconnect youth with kin; and achieving permanency through concurrent general, targeted, and child-specific recruitment. It consists of public and private partnerships, including MCD staff, contracted case management agencies, and contracted providers of foster/adopt training and post-permanency support services. The grant includes the following components, such as providing services to unite the family; supporting the family as a whole unit; working with parents to understand and address behaviors and cope with stress; establishing a sense of unity among family members; and allowing families to feel a sense of community and comfort

The program adheres to the following 10 principles in its diligent recruitment efforts:

10. No linear thinking. We try ALL recruitment tools at once. General recruitment is reactive; Extreme Recruitment is proactive.

9. Get out from behind the desk! Diligent search is done in the field, talking to relatives. It is not done in front of a computer.

8. Don't take "no" for an answer. Teenagers may say that they don't want to be adopted. Although they may not want to be adopted by a stranger, they DO want to be reconnected with their biological family. Youth never stop longing to get back to their birth families.

7. The number of strangers we can recruit is finite; the number of relatives we can recruit is infinite. The average American has 300 living relatives.
6. Biological family members are more likely to adopt kids with the toughest challenges. Family may have an advantage by already knowing the youth's history and needs.
5. Weekly meetings are necessary. Too much happens with Extreme Recruitment from week to week. If not, then the team is not trying hard enough.
4. Consensus drives Extreme Recruitment, not 100 percent agreement. Hear everyone's viewpoint. If unanimous agreement is not reachable, go with the majority.
3. Pay attention to educational issues. The youth and the preadoptive family have enough on their plates. Get the youth's educational concerns taken care of BEFORE the child is placed.
2. Build trust with the family. The youth's biological family has suffered incredible loss and grief. Honor it. Apologize to the family for the hurt that the child welfare system has caused.
1. It's not just about permanency; it's about identity. Long-term foster care strips youth of their identity. Extreme Recruitment gives it back.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

The Missouri Extreme Recruitment grant project (<http://modiligentrecruitment.org/>) is a collaborative effort among public and private entities to increase adoptions and permanency for children and teens. The target population is children and youth ages 10–18 who live in the St. Louis region, have been in care for 15 months or longer, and do not have an identified permanent resource.

Children and youth are randomly selected by experimental design from the target population. Once they are selected, the Extreme Recruiter contacts the child or youth's case manager and requests a family support team meeting. The team reviews the individual situation and approves or denies Extreme Recruitment services. If approved, the Extreme Recruiter continues to meet weekly with the case manager and other team members throughout the intervention.

The project provides time-limited intervention of 12–20 weeks. With team approval and based on written protocols, interventions may be extended beyond 20 weeks. Services are provided by Extreme Recruiters, private investigators, and a part-time supervisor. One private investigator and the part-time supervisor are paid by the grant, and two Extreme Recruiters and one private investigator are paid through community resources. The project holds weekly meetings to discuss family that are currently being served. The discussions include the case managers, team members, private investigator, and Extreme recruiters and revolve around intensive family-finding efforts. The goals of Extreme Recruitment are rates of 90 percent reconnection and 70 percent permanency for the children and youth served. To help achieve these goals, a family resource match is identified to parent each Extreme Recruitment child or youth. The original proposal called for 150 children and youth, randomly selected in Years 2–5, to receive 12–20 weeks of Extreme Recruitment services each from FACC.

Extreme Recruitment occurs according to the following schedule:

- Week 1: Identify paternity; complete initial genogram; assess educational needs
- Week 2: Complete case file review; complete expanded genogram; rate the child and their situation utilizing the Child and Adolescent Functioning Assessment Scale and social support tool
- Week 3: Identify "The Informant" (that one person in the family with all the right information); make contact with relatives (expand the genogram)
- Weeks 4–5: Identify 30–40 relatives/kin; review progress on concurrent recruitment checklist
- Weeks 6–7: Explore the potential for a family group conference; review expanded genogram, if needed
- Weeks 8–10: Reconnect child with family/kin
- Weeks 11–14: Continue reconnections efforts
- Weeks 15–17: Begin roadmap to permanency with possible matches
- Weeks 18–20: Match child

Need for This Service

In March 2008, the Missouri Children's Division noted that the teen adoption program seemed to take an extremely long time to achieve permanency for youth in care. A total of 1,082 children were identified in the project area who were age 10 or over and who had been in care for 15 months or more. In 2007, 355 Missouri youth aged out of the foster care system without familial support. Nationally, 38 percent of youth aging out experience mental health issues, 50 percent become involved in illegal drug use, and 25 percent become involved with the criminal justice system.

Organizations and workers began to think about how much could be accomplished if timeframes were established and enforced and if all of the recruitment activities, currently done in a linear fashion, could be completed at once by with partnering agencies to meet the goal of permanency, not just family-finding.

Sustainability

At the time of the site visit on May 23, 2011, the project was on hold due to ongoing contract negotiations between the lead agency and one of its partner agencies. No new referrals to the program had been made since December 2010. After the site visit, the lead agency was sent a letter by the Federal entity instructing it to come to an agreement with the partner agency or find a new partner. The contract negotiations were completed June 7, 2011, and the project has been continually moving forward since that time.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred at the Children's Home Society in St. Louis, Missouri. The Program Director, Sally Howard, convened a meeting that included the evaluator and a variety of staff from public and private partner agencies.

Meeting attendees included the following representatives from partner agencies that administer services relevant to the objectives, goals, and mission of the program:

- Jennifer Beavers, Adoption Exchange
- Mike Fitzgerald, Vice President, Child Advocacy Services, Catholic Charities of St. Louis
- Mary Gorman, Jefferson County Circuit Director, MCD
- Amy Hanson, Program Manager, Missouri Alliance for Children and Families
- Sally Howard, Grant Project Manager, Missouri Coalition of Children's Agencies
- Denise Kelley, Supervisor, Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition
- Jerrie Kenner, COO, Missouri Alliance for Children and Families
- Brenda Maley, CEO, Children's Permanent Partners
- Amy Martin, Grant Project Director, Missouri Children's Division (MCD)
- Jill Meyer, Grant Evaluator, St. Louis University
- Linda Middleton, Program Manager, Children's Permanent Partners
- Monique Mitalovich, St. Louis County Program Manager, MCD
- Rachel Neukirch, Children's Home Society of St. Louis
- Karen Nolte, CEO, Children's Home Society of St. Louis
- Melanie Scheetz, CEO, Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition
- Susan Shelton, St. Louis County Circuit Director, MCD
- Tena Thompson, St. Louis City Circuit Director, MCD
- Debra Zand, Grant Evaluator, St. Louis University

The group met for approximately 2.5 hours and addressed the following topics:

- Strategies developed
- Challenges encountered
- Barriers to implementation
- Unique program features

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

- **Weekly partnership meetings.** Extreme Recruitment is "one-stop shopping" for reconnection and permanency. Weekly collaborative staff meetings are held during weeks 1–20. During these meetings, the team reviews the action plan, reviews all recruitment efforts, and prepares youth for permanency. The weekly partnership meetings and subsequent task assignments save staff time and leave more resources and opportunities for working with the families. The following are the guiding principles for these meetings:
 - The case manager is never assigned the most tasks.
 - No action step is taken unless the team agrees.

- All agree when it comes to putting a case on hold.
- **Private investigator.** The use of a full-time investigator increases family-finding success, which in turn increases reconnection and permanency outcomes. The investigator has more time, experience, tenacity, and resources than the case managers to conduct thorough and exhaustive searches for family. The following resources are used by the investigator:
 - Social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace
 - Public records, such as those from obituaries; cemeteries; the Department of Motor Vehicles; government websites for property, leasing offices, and ownership; prison bureau databases of offenders; and online family reunion listings
 - Websites such as ancestry.com, publicrecordsnow.com, virtualgumshoe.com, ussearch.com, accurint.com, whitepages.com, zabasearch.com, and peoplefinders.com
 - Old case files, including hotline reports, psychological evaluations, witnesses, and reporters

Challenges

- **No new cases referred.** During the on hold period, ER cases tended to drift beyond the 12–20 week model. After contract negotiations were completed, however, the project has been continually moving forward.
- **Staying within service time.** The service should take no longer than 20 weeks for implementation and some outcomes. Some cases, though, are taking well past 20 weeks. The reasons and solutions for solving this matter are being investigated, and MCD is developing a protocol for case closure to address the issue.
- **Immediate inclusion.** The program should strive to make sure that all pertinent agencies are included as soon as the family has been brought in for services.
- **Recruitment difficulties.** Family support teams have a high denial rate (27 denials to 42 approvals) for ER services, which slows the process. Teams may fear “rocking the boat” when the child is in a stable placement. Due to the hold on new referrals during part of Year 3, it was difficult to reach that year's goal of serving 37 children and youth, especially when it was already slightly behind from Year 2. For that year, the project served 33 children or youth but had a goal of serving 37.
- **Seamless transition.** The transition between FACC, which delivers the initial 12–20 weeks of ER services, and CHS, which delivers longer-term support services, needs to become more seamless for the resource families.
- **Target population.** The target population has an average age of 15, and two-thirds of the youth do not have a termination of parental rights. Additionally, children and youth in the target population may exhibit:
 - Undiagnosed or untreated mental health problems related to trauma, depression, or anxiety
 - Ongoing behavioral problems, such as chronic lying, stealing, or aggression
 - Educational challenges because of learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral issues, and multiple changes in school environment.
- **Families.** Kin or resource families interested in parenting children in the ER program may:
 - Not fully understand the challenges the child faces
 - Become caught up in the enthusiasm of helping a child in need and “rescuing” them from the foster care system without taking into the account the reality of being a foster parent/guardian.
- **Marketing.** The project determined that it was not beneficial to purchase promotional time during a major sports season or on a day when sporting events are scheduled. Doing so seemed to decrease the numbers of people actually paying attention to the advertisement because they are too focused on the sporting event.

Recommendations

- Use promotional or marketing funds to help involve current foster and adoptive parents. The project can provide incentives for parents to spread the word and bring in other foster and adoptive parents. The ER project provided 150 \$20 gift cards to individuals and families who made referrals. The program also provides foster parents with letters, promotional bags, and business cards to help them spread the word about foster care and adoption.
- Provide ER promotional items (e.g., brochures, hand sanitizer, and post-it notes) to all partner agencies for community events.
- Provide 8"x10" pictures in an online heart gallery. The online heart gallery is an online archive of pictures of children seeking reunification and other permanency solutions. The larger size of the photo makes it easier to print and copy and share at community and church events.
- Use local media. The ER project ran 30 radio spots each week as part of their promotional campaign and received an excellent response. The ER program also is marketed two Thursdays per month in the print media and on gospel radio programs.
- Use incentives, such as gift cards, at every data collection point to increase long-term connections with youth transitioning or being emancipated. Retention rates have been problematic, so each data collection point is essential. The FACC tracking form asks for information about each youth's church, work, friends, hang-outs, and other items.
- Use the ER Support Checklist Fidelity Tool. This form asks youth to list individuals with whom they are close. Those relationships are tracked for a year to see how they change or evolve.

ATTACHMENTS

[Extreme Recruitment Fidelity Tools](#)

[Extreme Recruitment Manual](#) (PDF - 821 KB)