

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Diligent Recruitment – Intelligent Recruitment
TRANSCRIPT

Diligent Recruitment – Intelligent Recruitment

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Tory Wilson, Florida Department of Children and Families; David DeStefano, Kids Central Inc; Keith Gold, Gold & Associates

00:00:00 [Music Introduction]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: "Where's the beef?" Well that catchphrase from the 1980's has lasted, even though the famous commercial has passed its time. But what does a slogan from the fast food chain Wendy's have to do with foster care and adoption; or better yet, what does it have to do with saving a state millions of dollars? Well, it's about delivering a message that sticks and understanding your audience.

[00:00:55]: Welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. I'm Tom Oates, and today, we're tackling Diligent Recruitment; in a big picture sense, the systematic approach to recruiting, retaining, developing and supporting a pool of families who can meet the needs of children and youth in foster care, which is not so easy because it involves huge outreach efforts to attract the families and then to educate, engage, train assess and eventually license the families. And from start to finish, there's a huge difference between the number of families who show initial interest and those who eventually open their homes to children and youth in need.

[00:01:33]: But what if you knew your audience? You knew them so well, those most willing and able to take on this grave and needed cause, knew them so well that you knew the exact methods to use and messages to craft to move them from interest to action greater than before.

[00:01:47]: Well, today, we're gonna hear about a different approach applied within diverse communities within the state of Florida, who are grantees within the Children's Bureau's most recent Diligent Recruitment cluster. The Florida Intelligent Recruitment Program takes a page from Madison Avenue and the research that marketers apply to understand what makes you more likely to choose Corn Flakes over Fruity Pebbles. This time the subject isn't breakfast, its foster care.

[00:02:13]: We're joined by David DeStefano, Chief of Strategy for Kids Central, Inc., a community-based care provider of child welfare services in Central Florida and Florida's 5th circuit. Along with Tory Wilson, an integration specialist with the Florida Department of Children and Families. Now, as part of their efforts in this grant, they engage Keith Gold, a long time creative director and advertising executive who worked on campaigns for Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Federal Express and yes, he was part of the team that created the "Where's the beef?" campaign. Keith's company worked to gather deep understanding who and what makes up the ideal foster parent and helped develop specific marketing strategies for those specific agencies to use.

[00:02:58] In our conversation, we talk about the approach, getting buy-in from leadership to try the new strategy, and also how it supported streamlining the licensing process, resulting in cutting the time

to licensure by nearly 70%. Alright, so here's the meat of the show, our conversation with David DeStefano, Tory Wilson and Keith Gold.

TOM OATES [00:03:23]: So folks, I want to thank you for joining us today and David, I want to start with you. The idea of a marketing approach to recruitment, talk to me about where that came from.

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:03:32]: It's actually something that had its genesis about ten or twelve years ago from work that I was doing in another state, um, basically we sat on that work for a while and when the federal government originally came out with its diligent recruitment approach and framework, we began to relook at that approach, proposed for an early grant round of the diligent recruitment, did not win that grant round, but the client we were working with, Kids Central, at the time, took that information, began working with Keith Gold and, over the next couple of years, refined it, tested some implementation in the Kids Central area and when this last round of Diligent Recruitment, the DR3, came around, we went ahead and proposed again, to really look at taking a unique approach to foster care and adoptive family recruitment, much like you open a browser and whatever you searched yesterday comes up as an ad on your browser and if marketing companies can target me because of my demographic, my age group, my income level and tell me that I'm likely to eat Cheerios for breakfast, why can't we do something like that with foster parents? Look at the best of the best foster parents what drives them to make those decisions to foster or adopt children and use those demographics, psychographic, geographic data to drive our foster home recruitment.

TOM OATES [00:04:53]: Yeah, we're gonna pull on that with Keith himself in a little bit to talk about all of that background that went into that marketing approach. So, Tory, you know, the approach comes to you and this idea is brought in, how do you go about funding this kind of an effort?

TORY WILSON [00:05:08]: So as David was talking about, he was doing work with Kids Central Inc., which is one of the community-based care lead agencies in Florida - Florida is a privatized state into these what we call CBC agencies and so as he was speaking you'll know they came up with this idea and they had approached some like-minded CBC's in the state who were also interested in approaching recruitment of resource families differently and interested in this idea of intelligent marketing and then they really presented the idea to the department and so in partnership we agreed to go forward on this federal Diligent Recruitment grant. Initially each agency had the resources that they thought they could take from their current funding, which varies from CBC to CBC, is primarily state dollars, and with the intent of recruitment and retention activities for resource families but they also, some CBC's, also have other private donations and other resources as well. And so they had each initially agreed that they had the resources to move forward with this and to fund the additional marketing activities that would be part of the grant. Unfortunately, then Florida saw a huge increase in the number of children that we have in out of home care and so then we did get approval from our federal project officer to alter our budget and to use some of the federal grant dollars on these marketing efforts. And so that's how it has moved forward and really gained some momentum with the CBC agencies being able to experiment with different marketing approaches.

TOM OATES [00:07:00]: And getting the idea of, okay here's an approach that we like, we have a way to fund it, that's only a little part of the battle, because you're dealing with something that's different, that's actually, you know, moving away from what's been done in the past and maybe what's been proven to work at a certain level. So talk to me about then once the idea is there and you can realize that maybe the funding is there, there's still buy-in from leadership to actually give you the thumbs up.

Talk to me about you know kind of presenting this idea to leadership to get them to agree to move forward.

TORY WILSON [00:07:31]: Well recruiting resource families isn't a new endeavor - it has been a challenge for the child welfare system as long as it's been in existence and in Florida, with the privatized model, we see our community-based agencies really being experimental and innovative and really accessing research and trying to figure out what is the secret, what's the right combination of activities, and nobody feels like they've hit on that yet and so this was a new approach and another way to think about how you might recruit and do those targeted efforts to get the right families in their system. Florida is very committed to having high quality foster parents, and so figuring out how to recruit for more of those and particularly those who will take older kids, which then reduces the number of kids they need to have in group care or congregate care, which then ultimately saves your system money. And so some of it's a return on investment concept, in that if you have the right mix of foster homes up front, it does save your system money, so it is a worthwhile investment.

TOM OATES [00:08:44]: What were kind of those initial questions that leadership was asking you when this approach was being presented to them? What were their kind of big questions, and they were really either concerned about or wanted to make sure that you guys had answers to?

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:08:58]: When we started the project, there was a number of lead agencies that were excited about participating in it and wanted to participate in it, unfortunately because of the limited number of dollars we had to limit the number of participants in the project and we really started by selecting those lead agencies of differing geographics, demographic: organization from the North side of Florida which is a lot more rural Bible-belt type of environment, a couple of organizations from Central Florida and then originally one for Southern Florida, a very urban area. Unfortunately due to some changes in their circuit, they've since left the grant project, but the original concept was to really look at different geographics and demographics across the state and see what drove foster home recruitment - that concept in and of itself was enough to excite the leaders, the CEOs of the organizations, to want to participate and then we were able to get the buy-in of leadership at the DCF level with this concept to say go ahead and pursue this grant on behalf of the state on a statewide level with these partners.

[00:10:02]: So our participation in and of itself was not a difficult thing to get interest in - getting it started, getting it up and rolling was a little bit of a different story as we got into the grant, but the initial startup there was a lot of excitement, a lot of buzz around the state about it.

TOM OATES [00:10:17]: And so I want to bring in Keith Gold now, and so Keith, talk to me about your involvement - how did you get involved in this specific target group?

KEITH GOLD [00:10:26]: Well, we actually started doing a lot of work on various boards on a pro bono basis with agencies throughout the State of Florida and beyond. That's something that I've been personally involved in for my whole career and so it didn't start off as us really trying to work on a federal project that was going to involve lots of partners or anything like that, it really started off as something that was more of a personal kind of mission for myself and other folks that are in our organization. We're a tithing company, so that's a little bit different we donate at least ten percent of our time and money and efforts to charitable institutions and so again that's really how we first got involved with some of these agencies in the State of Florida.

[00:11:12]: And as far as this particular project is concerned and really studying this demographic group, we had a project that we conducted for Kids Central, where we were really looking at not necessarily an idler population of youth that needed placement and foster or adoptive homes, but really just primarily foster kids and in the 5th judicial circuit of Florida - which is kind of a central, somewhat rural section of Florida - and with that they wanted to find out what really makes someone an ideal foster parent, because one of the things that we find in Florida is that there's a, well, there's a great need, for one thing, but there's a lot of people that start to become foster parents, or they become foster parents for a while and then they don't necessarily continue over time; it's not always easy, regardless of the amount of love and passion and whatnot that you have for these children in need.

[00:12:15]: And so we wanted to also find out for Kids Central, what causes the turnover and so we asked them to give us a list of the best of the best foster parents that they had ever had in the history of the organization and we conducted eighty one on one interviews with those persons to try to find out what made them different than everybody else and with that we found out that there were some different demographic characteristics, but there were also some different psychological characteristics among those persons.

[00:12:51]: Just a few of them and this is something that relates to the overall FIRP project if you will, but they tended to be older, those that were the best of the best, they had raised their own biological children, they had a deep-seeded faith, which this really because a calling for them to help those that were in need. They had a higher than average income - so they were able to stick with it - they did not necessarily have to have the funding to be able to care for these children. So, there are other characteristics as well, but those were some of them.

[00:13:26]: And so we did that project with the eighty interviews, we also followed that up with a statistical study among all of the foster parents that they had in their database to then compare and contrast those that we interviewed with the total population of foster parents. And we did find out from that statistical study that there were differences between the general population of foster parents and those that were determined to be the best of the best.

[00:13:53]: We did another study that was a statewide study on cases managers for the Florida Coalition for Children and in that case we interviewed case managers that were deemed to be the best of the best by all of the CBCs in the state and we went through the same kind of process, a couple hundred interviews, then we ask every case manager in the State of Florida to participate in a statistical study and then once again, we could compare and contrast those that were supposed to be the best by whatever, you know, definition that you have with the general population, we found there were some differences.

[00:14:31]: So with that idea, a group of folks got together and we made this application to get this federal grant where we could look at the foster and adoptive parents for older youth throughout various demographic parts of the State of Florida, or areas that have very different demography throughout the State of Florida, so very rural areas, you know very much urban metropolitan areas and some that were kind of in between and we took the same kind of approach where we started off interviewing in each of the partners' geographic areas, those parents - foster and adoptive for older children - that they thought were the best. I mean and again, we let them decide on what they considered to be the best, you know, we didn't necessarily pick those out, we used their own criteria for that.

[00:15:26]: And so, with that, again, we found that there were a lot of common denominators regardless if you were a large metropolitan area like Miami, or if you were in a more rural area in the Big Bend, Catchment area and uh you know towns that, you know, I've never even heard of. So, if you look at all those though, there were those common denominators among all those persons and some of those once again were that the parents raised their own biological children, they tended to be a bit older, they kind of felt like they had seen it or done it all, a lot of them had helper personalities, where they were first responders, or teachers, or had been in the military, so on and so forth, so they felt like they could deal with any kind of issue that was thrown their way and in a lot of cases there were a lot of challenges that these kids have just beyond the fact that they don't have their biological parents with them all the time.

[00:16:21]: And so, these were folks that you know were up for the challenge and they also felt like they had a great calling to do this, it was part of their faith-based calling and so all those things were very similar. One of the things that we found with this population, with the Kids Central population - and even case managers - is that a very high percentage of all of these folks that are in this for the long haul and that are considered to be the best of the best had experienced some kind of abuse, some kind of trauma in their life, or they knew someone who had - it could've been another family member, could've been a friend or a neighbor - but they had some experience with child welfare and they had some experience, personal experience, with some kind of trauma.

[00:17:11]: And so, when we presented this, some of our initial findings - for the Kids Central study, for the study that we did for the Florida Coalition for Children as well as this first study - people in the room were all shaking their head. It was the sort of thing that everybody knew but nobody had ever quantified. We looked at, for the first assignment, over a thousand different studies that had been conducted from coast to coast for decades and there was not one study that ever mentioned this, and yet everybody kind of knew it. And so that was one of the things that came out of this, I mean not only did we, you know, uncover some things that other people hadn't, but we also confirmed some things that people knew, but hadn't really come out in a formal way like with what we did here. So, sorry to be long winded but that's kind of how we got to where we are with this particular assignment.

TOM OATES [00:18:09]: Well so you were able to really dive in a actually construct or pull out the data that creates this persona for what makes the - like you said - the best of the best and then who are going to be the most likely not only to accept the engagement, but then also really see the whole thing through. So you get these profiles and you understand that there's obviously differences, like you talked about, in terms of geographic differences - the profiles from Northern Florida or Central Florida will look different, or Southern Florida.

[00:18:40]: So you have this information in front of you, what then is the approach that you're providing these localities to, you know, alter their marketing approach?

KEITH GOLD [00:18:50]: Well, one of the things that we did in the one on one interviews, and then also in the statistical studies, is we asked people questions not only about themselves, but their habits - their media habits where they get their information, what do they do for entertainment, so on and so forth, and there is a difference and this is pretty well known - uh, widely known - there are differences in a large metropolitan area like a Miami, then there are in rural areas, say like Ocala, horse country.

[00:19:23]: You know when we first started this study, a lot of the people that we asked, you know, how do they get their information, what kind of broadcast media do they listen to or do they watch, in the

rural areas, they hadn't even heard of Pandora. Now that's a for instance, an extreme example. On the other hand, it was widely used in areas like Miami. And so, you have to really tailor the way you're delivering your message based on how people are receiving it in these various geographic areas.

[00:19:51]: And certainly there are things about their demographic profile that's different as well, so anyhow, even though the overall message in general might be something that resonates with someone no matter where they are, the way it's delivered and the way it's received is quite a bit different based on where they're situated. So, we really got to the bottom of in each of these little pockets, these little geographic areas, how they get their information. In some areas, you know, they just get AM or FM radio and the community newspaper. And then you have large metropolitan areas where people aren't necessarily reading the newspaper much at all.

[00:20:34]: And so that's not anything that we really uncovered in this, I mean there's a lot of secondary information that's out there on this but we were able to get it right down to the specific radio station or the specific newspaper or lifestyle magazine or, you know, movie theater that, you know, they would be getting this information. And so, that's a big part of what we did with the study.

TOM OATES [00:20:57]: So, instead of that whole blanket approach, you've really defined the 'who' and you've really defined the 'how'. Talk to me about what you told those agencies about the 'what' - about crafting that message and actually delivering it out.

KEITH GOLD [00:21:11]: That's a great question. One of the things that we had to do to begin with is really understand the positioning of each of these different agencies, because if we came in with some kind of a new message that didn't look and feel like that organization, it wasn't going to be received very well and so we had to kind of fit their personality - and the personality in a Miami is a lot different than the personality say of an agency in Ocala or in, you know, Panama City or Tallahassee or wherever, so they also had existing campaigns that were running and so we had to kind of integrate this with what they were already doing. They couldn't just stop what they were doing and launch a new campaign. If they had have, it wouldn't have been recognized as coming from that local provider. So, we had to sit down with them, we had to talk about what their existing campaigns were, we presented the research, and together we developed a plan that was customized for their Catchment area.

[00:22:12]: And so again, the plan that was originally created in South Florida was a lot different than rural central area, different than rural Northeastern or Northwestern Florida. So, they all had to be very different. So, with that plan, together, we looked at the messaging overall and so we knew those things from the research that were gonna resonate the most. But how was that spoken, how was that said, how was that communicated in each of these different market areas and reflecting the personality of that agency?

[00:22:46]: So we talked to them about how this could be created. We actually worked with them on creating ads that would fit all of these various criteria in their marketplace whether they were broadcast ads, print ads, direct mail pieces, whether it was faith-based, you know, peer to peer kind of marketing or whatever it is as we worked with them on their specific messaging. And what we found out in the end is that those partners that kind of followed this prescription that was created for each of them they had a great return on their investment.

TOM OATES [00:23:20]: Were there any commonalities in terms of what, you know, the framework, obviously the messages are different and the medium is different - were the things you said to them to

say hey listen across the board, here's how you get your return on your investment, here's how you get somebody from interest to actually action?

KEITH GOLD [00:23:40]: There were a number of things that are common. One of the things is the message has to be very simple. You know, a lot of times, you know - and we're in the marketing world here in my company - but everybody likes to be very clever and come up with a lot of, you know, kind of out of the box kind of thinking and that sort of thing and within the agency walls or within even the CBC walls, everybody thinks that's really exciting and clever and whatnot, but in everybody's busy world - the consumer out there - isn't necessarily understanding it, isn't getting it.

[00:24:10]: And we don't have the kind of dollars in the campaign like what we're talking about here to just make sure that everybody gets it regardless of whether it's clear or very clever or anything else, I mean, you're just kind of shoving it down their throats and in this case, we don't have the kind of money, we don't have that kind of repetition, so we have to make sure that anything that's said is really well understood, so number one is it has to be very simple.

[00:24:35]: Number two is that what a lot of people were doing is they were really looking at this from the parents' perspective - what is the parent going to get out of it? And what they were missing is what's the child's need? And so in many cases because of the way this had historically been done throughout Florida - focusing on the parents - you know, you don't have to be a perfect person to be a perfect parent for this, which is a great line and whatnot but what is missing is the need. It's all about you, it's not about the need. And so when you look at a lot of other charitable organizations and that sort of thing it's about the need - whether it's something for the Humane Society, or you name it, what's the need?

[00:25:16]: And the way that we were able to quantify this is that in the studies that we did people said yeah we understand that - and these are prospects that I'm talking about in this case, that we talked to, that had the right demography, the right psychological makeups, so on and so forth - they understand that was a need, in general. You know, yes there are kids that need a foster home and yes there are kids that need to be adopted, but they didn't understand that it was right in their backyard and that it's right now, and that it's urgent.

[00:25:45]: And so, we also had to make sure that we're talking about the children that are hurting - that have been abused, abandoned, neglected - and they're right there in their neighborhood and they need somebody just like you, somebody that's called to do this. And so, the second thing is really making sure that we're talking about the need which is the child's need more so than the parent's need. So it has to be simple, has to be needs-focused - focusing on the child's need - and then it also has to be delivered in the way that people in that particular market area are getting messages, like we talked about and it's a lot different in one part of the state than it is in the other, it's a lot different in one part of the United States than it is in the other.

[00:26:33]: So, those are the things that we really tried to make sure that everybody kind of stayed focused on and again everybody couldn't just drop what they had already been doing before, they had to kind of work this into the campaign that they had. But what we found over time is that as the agencies had worked this kind of approach into what they were already doing, it really was paying off.

TOM OATES [00:26:56]: So, Keith just kind of broke down what he was able to provide, now let's talk a little bit about the results that you guys are seeing. So, you know, Dave, how are the numbers of foster families in those jurisdictions, what are they looking like after this approach?

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:27:10]: Well, as Tory mentioned earlier, it's been an interesting couple of years in the State of Florida, we've seen a marked increase in the number of children coming into the system of all varying age groups. As we've increased and enhanced our recruitment across the different areas in the state, partners have had varied results, but I'll focus in on Kids Central, the agency that I primarily do work with and for.

[00:27:35]: Five years ago - we're in an area of about, a youth population of about 195,000 - five years ago, they were able to recruit 35 new foster homes in a twelve month period. Those numbers have increased each subsequent year that we've been involved in using this marketing approach 55, 69, 70-something, this year we hit 100 homes as of last Friday, this fiscal year. So, it's been an exciting year and quite frankly, that's made a huge difference with the influx of kids coming into the system.

[00:28:06]: We've been able to increase the number of older youth coming into care, and of course, that's our target demographic, we're really trying to get permanency for older youth and that starts with being able to have the right resource families - foster and adoptive families – for them at the point that they come into care.

[00:28:21]: We've seen a significant increase - statistically significant increase - in the number of kids coming into care that are able to go into foster homes. We've seen a reduction of youth coming into care that going immediately into group or congregate care, so that has made a huge difference for us across the system.

[00:28:41]: The bottom line for something like that in our area with the increase of children that we've seen coming into care, this effort has saved us over \$2 million in the last twelve months. Costs that we've been able to avoid because we've had these new foster homes, because we've increased our capacity of homes in our system and homes that will take children of the age group coming into care and are ready and prepared and supported in their ability to care for those youth.

TOM OATES [00:29:08]: Man, you're just hitting on all the, kind of, big bullets that when you're presenting what this could look like to leadership, it's nice to see that actually delivering on those things, at the level you'd like to see, you know, at least at the introductory level.

[00:29:29]: But there's a part of Diligent Recruitment that also involves, you know, you're getting the interest and you're hitting the right families as you talked about, but then there's that time period of keeping them within the process - because it's so much to get the home studies and the licensing process - has this helped in any way, even though you're talking about what we call an intelligent marketing approach, so you're getting the right folks, but what about the internal steps and processes that get from interest to licensure?

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:29:50]: That's a great question. The marketing has increased the inquiry and I've told folks from day one of this grant - and I think this echoes through all the leadership of the grant - you know, we'd rather get 100 inquiries from 90 well qualified foster parents able to care for kids that are coming into care than 1,000 calls from 40 qualified foster parents.

[00:30:10]: So number one, we've seen an increase in the number of folks that are calling in that understand what the requirements of fostering are, and are willing to do that with the kids that we have coming into care. The second piece with that is we've also taken a complete look at Diligent Recruitment as a concept, looking at the customer service, looking for relative caregivers of families, casefile mining and each of the partners had some varied results and some different approaches to this.

[00:30:41]: One of the partners has implemented some new casefile mining, looking for relatives approach - their placement in relative homes has increased substantially. Other partners have taken a real close look at some of the customer service aspects of getting foster families and adopting families through the licensing and or approval process - streamlining those processes, putting new training processes into place; we've been able to get families through training more quickly, we've been able to retain those families once they are through, we've been able to place children in those families' homes more quickly than we were prior to this project starting and overall, retention across the families of foster partners has increased markedly.

[00:31:27]: One of the partners moving from about below the standard deviation in terms of recruitment and retention in the state to leading the state in retention recruitment, which means we're not only getting better foster parents who are ready to care for the kids, we're keeping those foster parents longer and that's important to us also.

[00:31:45]: Through all the marketing pieces we have to remember that word of mouth between current foster parents and potential foster parents is still a huge, huge piece of marketing and it's still a huge source of potential families. We can't capitalize on that and leverage that unless we can keep the current foster parents happy, well supported and satisfied with the services we are giving them as foster parents.

TOM OATES [00:32:09]: And especially you talked about something, and Tory, I want to pull you in on this because what's overlooked besides the big dollar figure that David mentioned in terms of saving money for the state, is that there is a growing need for foster families because you've had a larger number of children and youth coming into care. Where did that come from, where is that change in the addition of all these extra children and youth? What's, has there been a cause to that?

TORY WILSON [00:32:36]: Well, as a department we have an entire team now devoted to results oriented accountability and really trying to dig down into precisely what is working, what isn't working and what are, kind of, your cause and effect scenarios. So we don't have all of the answers yet, but we do know, around the state, we implemented a new Child Welfare Practice Model and we can see as it rolled out implementation of that correlates with the increase in the number of kids entering out of home care.

[00:33:17]: So, ideally it's because we're more accurately identifying children who need out of home care, that's certainly one angle. The other piece, which is true for Florida, as it is for most of the rest of the country, is that this opioid crisis and substance use and all the variations of your pills out there in the opioid world is having an impact, you know we have stories almost every day of passed out parents found in cars with kids in the backseat or some version of opioid abuse, and so it is having an impact on our system as it is in other places.

TOM OATES [00:34:01]: Those are the types of lessons that kind of cascade across state lines. David, I want to bring you back on something. You talked about the customer service aspect - so what were

those efforts that changed to keep those families engaged to get them licensed, I mean you talked about, you know, hitting the right families and word of mouth, but from kind of start to finish, what changed from again interest to licensure?

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:34:29]: It was a long-term, year-plus long project that we worked with some external consultants internally, brought all the best minds together, so to speak, to really look at our processes and our procedures and the efficiency of some of those processes. We looked at how long it took to get folks from that initial inquiry into a class, how long it took them to get to the class, were there efficiencies or losses in the class, were people dropping out because they couldn't get into a class quickly enough, or through a class effectively and in their mind quickly enough, why were we losing folks why were we losing interest?

[00:35:10]: We started by revising those processes and monitored outcomes related to that and one of the major measures we used was used was the time it took from folks finishing their class - their foster, adoptive training class - to the point they actually were approved and/or licensed. When we started this, the average time was about 215 days, from the time that someone finished class to the time that they were able to get licensed.

[00:35:39]: Through process efficiencies, reducing what we would call waste in kind of a six sigma sense, we were able to drop that to below 60 days. We had folks who were literally being approved and licensed within days of them being able to finish the class, and ready and supported to take foster parents.

[00:35:58]: So that whole customer service approach right from the start - get folks engaged, keep them engaged, keep their interest level high, get them ready quickly before they lose interest in what they're doing and thinking this process is taking too long - that was critical for us.

TOM OATES [00:36:11]: Reducing by, like, one quarter of the time, that's amazing. Tory, did you kind of see this across the board in terms of the numbers that your staff was looking to kind of evaluate this process with? Were you expecting numbers like this?

TORY WILSON [00:36:28]: No, not necessarily it was definitely a decrease in what we term the licensing cycle time and one of the things we've had lots of conversations about you know - as Keith was talking about the need for your marketing message to convey that there's an urgent need - one of the things we've talked about is that if we're conveying we have an urgent need but then we take 6 months to license your home, that doesn't stand up, you know we can't make that case to foster parents that the need is urgent and then it take us so long to license. So it was very important to us to decrease the licensing cycle time, to get those homes through the process and hearing about kids who need to be placed with them.

TOM OATES [00:37:17]: This is really, really interesting in terms of, not only connecting, we talk about connecting with the potential parents, the potential foster parents and hitting the community and then pushing them through the process, and I shouldn't say push, but really streamlining the process to walk them through it much, much, much quicker.

[00:37:34]: So, this all sounds great and we understand, though, that grants end - yet you've found ways to help out. Talk to me about long term. What does sustainability look like for this effort?

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:37:47]: Well, I think that's something we're working on very closely right now, you know, spreading of information, spreading the word, so to speak, about what we've been able to do - we're just in our initial phases of that. But I think it's going to boil down to really and especially in this environment when you cross the State of Florida, when you have lead agencies with fixed contracts who are required to take any child that comes into care, the increase in out of home care has been quite a financial burden, so we really need to, in terms of sustainability, look at this from a fiscal perspective as well as a family satisfaction perspective in a Child Welfare outcomes perspective, so looking at kind of from a triple framework, so to speak.

[00:38:32]: From a fiscal side, I think we can show that the increase in foster homes has really resulted in a net cost savings in those areas that have been most successful. We're working on the ties to child permanency right now - ties to child well-being and we can effectively say that youth are in a more family-like setting at initial removal are more likely to be placed with families, that improves child well-being.

[00:38:59]: So from a sustainability standpoint, I think we need to hit on all of those pieces and really emphasize that tie to the permanency, the well-being to really generate that interest, and then frame it fiscally. But it really, at the end of the day, it's really about achieving permanency and the best thing for children and families across the state.

TOM OATES [00:39:19]: And you also touched base on a sustainability aspect is word of mouth, you know, happy quote, unquote, when you're talking about customer service, happy customers lead to more happy customers. And, so hopefully there's also that good feeling that you get along the way. Tory?

TORY WILSON [00:39:33]: Well, I was just gonna add that for us when we're talking about sustainability, it's very important for us to make the case that using intelligent marketing is effective, we know across our sites that it has had a, resulted in a dramatic increase in inquiries from potential resource families, but then the other side of that - which you guys have both now touched on - is the customer service aspect.

[00:40:02]: And so, that is the other piece that we're very focused on embedding into the systems now, is making sure that systems are responsive to resource families, not only through the licensing process, but once they have children placed and they need support from case managers, and others in the system, that everyone understands their role in retaining those families and providing the supports necessary.

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:40:28]: To build on a little bit on what Tory just said, you know, as you look at all the aspects of Diligent Recruitment and all the pieces that go into Diligent Recruitment as a concept, you know, I'm starting to see a real hierarchy in some of these steps. It doesn't do any good to recruit families and get the inquiries if you can't get them through the process effectively. It doesn't do any good to look for foster homes if we haven't first looked for applicable relative placements. If we don't have the process and the procedures in place, the recruitment isn't going to be as effective or, as impactful for our system of care. So really looking at Diligent Recruitment as a whole has been something that we've realized through this process is important. You just can't focus on one piece.

[00:41:20]: As a matter of fact, as careful as we've been at Kids Central looking at our processes and procedures and outcomes and monitoring and tracking that, the influx and the stress associated with

putting and licensing 100 homes in a relatively small area has strained our system and our staff and that coupled with the financial impact of having so many more kids coming into care, we've had to walk a very, very fine balance of staffing that process, making sure that we can keep our numbers low and we've seen an impact on the customer service side, it's the balance and managing that that's so critical.

TOM OATES [00:42:00]: That's a really good thing to think about in terms of you know the this the victim of your own success, so to speak, in terms of being able to handle all of that but you know, David, you touched based and Tory, you as well, about the growing number of children and youth that you, in the State of Florida, were seeing coming into the system - and Florida's not alone in those issues. So for other agencies, for other organizations that are hearing this and thinking, hey this could be something we may want to test out; what's the one thing that you think you would do differently in this approach under the school of, if I knew then what I know now, what would you tell yourself back then?

DAVID DESTAFANO [00:42:40]: I think looking back on it, one of the struggles and one of barriers that we had getting the project up and off the ground was the fact that each of the partners had existing collateral marketing material, pieces in place and had to change those processes; that took us a little bit of time and I think we would've been more aware of that and been able to try and incorporate some of those concepts into what we were doing to leverage what was already in place rather than recommending an immediate change in processes, took a little bit of time for us to move through that - so that's something in hindsight I would be more aware of. Tory, I don't know if you have anything to add to that.

TORY WILSON [00:43:22]: Well, I would just add and I agree with that observation, but the other thing is that I do think - despite the initial hurdle of the partners having to kind of finish up their currently running marketing strategy - they were very invested in the concept of let's try something new around recruiting resource families.

[00:43:48]: The thing that we didn't do a good job up front - making sure all the partners understood - was that this Diligent Recruitment approach isn't just about recruitment, that there is a lot more to ensuring that you're doing right by the youth we serve - that you're identifying the homes that will meet their needs, that you're building a system that will be supportive that will result in permanency - which includes you know some of these other child-specific strategies, it includes the customer service pieces that we've been talking about. And so, I think our project was slow to move towards the understanding of... this isn't a simple approach, you can't just do one piece of this and be successful.

TOM OATES [00:44:42]: So, Keith, I wanna bring you back in and earlier you talked about and Dave and Tory just mentioned about those campaigns that are already going on for all these agencies, they still have this marketing approach that they're trying to do in their current activities, but for all those agencies out there and what you may have seen across the board in your studies through Florida - if there would be one piece of advice you would advise agencies to maybe alter in recruiting foster parents, what would it be?

KEITH GOLD [00:45:11]: Focus on the needs of the children more so than the needs of the parents. Yes, I mean, you've got to satisfy needs that you have as a human being. It has to fit with your life goals, it has to fit within your family structure, it has to fit within your belief system. But we can't lose sight of the people that we're trying to help, and a lot of the marketing that's out there focuses on the parent more so than the child in need. And so I think if anything if we can do one thing, its focus on that child

that is in need, that's hurting, that needs a parent - a forever parent, hopefully - today, right in their backyard.

TOM OATES [00:45:51]: Folks, this has been a great way to look at maybe a different way, though not a new way in terms of looking at marketing across the board and something that we're all actually a part of in our day to day lives in any kind of piece of media that we consume - someone's targeted us, and why can't that be done for foster parents and for foster families and the kids in our communities? So, hey, I want to thank Tory Wilson, Dave DeStefano and Keith Gold for carving out a big chunk of your time and showcasing all this with us, so folks, I appreciate it and thanks and have a great day!

[00:46:28]: One of the key reasons the marketing strategies put together for the different agencies was so successful was that the effort they actually put into to really understanding the audience. Now that effort involved - and you heard them mention this - the number of hours spent interviewing caseworkers and foster parents. Two or three focus groups can't equal the insight gathered from hundreds of hours of conversations. Now, from all that qualitative data, many of the strategies just bubbled up to the surface, so you've gotta understand, this was a lot of work.

[00:47:58]: And also the messages - they were simple and urgent, you know, sometimes we want to cram in all the information we have to help make our case or sway some thoughts, but the Florida Intelligent Recruitment Program kept messages clear and singular.

[00:47:11]: Now, on the web page for this podcast which you can find on Children's Bureau's website at acf.hhs.gov/cb, just search 'podcasts', we'll have links to some of the findings from some of the grantees involved in the earlier Diligent Recruitment Clusters. We'll also point you to Information Gateway's web section on recruiting and retaining resource families, which has a collection of state and local examples along with recruitment strategies and tools, so just head to the podcast page over at the Children's Bureau's website, acf.hhs.gov/cb and search 'podcasts'.

[00:47:46]: We'll have more podcasts on Diligent Recruitment coming your way, so look out for those, and as always please let us know what questions or needs you have for supporting families or training in your staff. You can find us at childwelfare.gov, or contact our information support services team at info@childwelfare.gov. Thanks so much for being a part of this community and joining us for this and all the episodes of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast series. I'm Tom Oates, and we'll talk to you next time!

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:48:16]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.