

Site Visit Report: Partners for Forever Families

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/families>

Award #: 90-CO-1034

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

Grantee: Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services

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Summary

In 2008, Ohio's Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) received discretionary grant funds from the Children's Bureau's Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care System grant cluster. The funds were used to implement Partners for Forever Families, a partnership between CCDCFS and other agencies and organizations throughout the county that have committed resources to help identify and facilitate connections between prospective resource families and children in foster care.

Although there had been an overall reduction in the number of children in foster care in Cuyahoga County in 2008, the children who remained in foster care had complex needs that made finding appropriate homes for them difficult. To help improve permanency outcomes for children and youth in care, Partners for Forever Families aims to:

- Increase the percentage of children who exit foster care through adoption in less than 24 months
- Reduce the median length of stay for children in foster care
- Increase the number of permanent homes for children who are teens and have been in foster care for 24 months or longer

To achieve these outcomes, the project established protocols that enable sibling groups to stay together and for reconnecting kin with youth who are 17 years and older and have not yet found a permanent home. Some of the tools CCDCFS is using to increase recruitment include the following:

- **An original stage play, *Sometimes Hope Is Enough*.** The play is about the journey of three siblings who grew up in different foster homes. Following the play, a panel of experts discuss some of the themes depicted in the play, as well as the realities of the children and youth who are currently in foster care.
- **Digital Me.** Digital Me is a video recording in which the children in care share their likes and interests, what they are proud of, and the unique aspects of their personalities. These videos are shown at recruitment events to prospective foster parents.
- **Community Collaborative Partnerships.** Connecting with established community organizations has increased CCDCFS's recruitment pool and has enabled the diligent recruitment activities to be more visible throughout communities where CCDCFS has not traditionally had positive relationships.

Outcomes as a result of the Partners for Forever Families include the following:

- Adoption workers are currently serving 26 families and have served a total of 56 families during the first 4 years of the grant.
- There was an increase in community knowledge about the need for adoption, kinship care, foster care, and permanency.
- Neighborhood Collaboratives identified 10 families who have now completed foster/adoptive parent licensures and are willing to adopt.
- Of the applications for fostering or adopting in 2012, 40 percent were child specific (relatives), compared to 21 percent in the previous year.

Partners for Forever Families staff are concentrating on aligning both policy and practices so that efforts toward establishing permanency for children and youth in foster care will continue to be a primary goal when seeking placements, even after the grant period. New worker training now focuses on achieving permanency for children of any age. Worker training on family finding has also been made available through the agency's Intranet.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Ohio's Partners for Forever Families" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

Project Description

Abstract

In 2008, Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) received discretionary funds through the Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care System grant to implement Partners for Forever Families. This initiative is truly a partnership in that CCDCFS is the lead agency and other agencies and organizations throughout the county have committed resources to this program to help identify and facilitate connections between prospective homes and children in foster care. The other agencies who are actively engaged in Partners for Forever Families include:

- Adoption Network Cleveland
- Beech Brook
- Case Western Reserve University
- East End Neighborhood House
- Harvard Community Services Center
- Murtis Taylor Human Services System
- Hough Services Providers Network at UMADAOP
- University Settlement

This public-private-university initiative and neighborhood-based approach intends to achieve the following outcomes over the course of the grant period (2008–2013):

- Increase the percentage of children who exit foster care through adoption in less than 24 months
- Reduce the median length of stay for children in foster care
- Increase the number of permanent homes for children who are teens and have been in foster care for 24 months or longer

To achieve these outcomes, CCDCFS focuses on recruiting and supporting relative/kin as resource families for children as soon as the child or sibling group needs to enter foster care. The project established protocols that enable sibling groups to stay together and for reconnecting kin with youth who are 17 years and older and have not yet found a permanent home.

The Partners for Forever Families program is designed to ensure that these practices become the standard and make permanency an overarching priority for the agency, as well as the communities from which the children and youth in foster care hail. CCDCFS determined the coordinated approach would be the most effective way to raise the visibility of permanency within the community. The child welfare agency tapped into the extensive, existing network of community-based providers to help engage and inform their constituency about children in foster care who are in need of permanent homes and connections. These organizations are able to use the connections within the community, as well as develop new relationships throughout the areas where each of the partners provide services and where CCDCFS may have had a difficult time gaining support.

Partners for Forever Families uses the following resources and tools, which are described later in this report, to enhance diligent recruitment efforts in Cuyahoga County:

- Strategic Planning
- Heart Gallery
- Digital Me
- Family Search and Engagement
- Customer Service Standards
- Data Collection

- Concurrent Planning

The community-based partners use data that describe their specific service area, which enables them to more effectively use tools such as the Digital Me and Heart Gallery in their recruitment efforts, by providing profiles of children who are similar to those who may be from those areas of the city and who may have other ties to those communities. The community-based organizations reach out to community members through houses of worship and other places where large numbers of people gather, which could be suitable locations to host recruitment events. Although identification of permanent homes for children in foster care is the primary goal for the recruitment events, CCDCFC and its community partners are aware that the current economic realities for some families may prevent them from making the commitment to bring new children or a sibling group into their home. In the instances where families are facing these economic pressures, Partners for Forever Families adjusts its recruitment message to attempt to engage individuals as mentors who can serve as permanent connections for older youth who are nearing adulthood, rather than as foster or adoptive parents.

Need for this Service

A number of factors led to the creation of Partners for Forever Families. The apparent need arose when Cuyahoga County staff and the Federal Government began to examine the data and outcomes for children in foster care. Although there had been an overall reduction in the number of children in foster care in Cuyahoga County at the time the agency applied for the grant in 2008, the children who remained in foster care had complex needs that made finding appropriate homes for them difficult. At that time, there were approximately 3,000 children in foster care. Of these children, approximately 80 were adopted and another 80 were placed on the adoption waiting list. Additionally, the county struggled to find homes that would take sibling groups. Other data also supported the need for diligent recruitment activities. For example, results from Ohio's Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) illustrated the difficulty the State was having with permanency outcomes. Results from the CFSR showed that the State needed to move more children to adoption, shorten the time that children stayed in foster care, and that more efforts needed to be made to find permanent homes for teenagers.

Site Visit Highlights

The site visit occurred on June 3, 2013, at the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) offices in Cleveland, OH. Highlights from the visit included the following:

- Partnership for Forever Families Leadership Meeting – The lead project staff from CCDCFS and the Community Collaboratives met to discuss success stories, community engagement events, and ongoing challenges. The team discussed:
 - The agency's recommitment to the Annie E. Casey Family-to-Family program, a neighborhood-based, family-centered system of foster care that is designed to help children in foster care achieve permanency
 - The upcoming brunch to show appreciation to community organizations that have assisted with recruitment efforts
 - An upcoming recruitment event that would take place at a hair salon where youth recruiters would speak
- Successful Recruitment Story – An agency case worker, community organization worker, and family finding worker shared a story of a recruitment function that resulted in a kinship provider being identified for a pair of brothers who were in foster care. A relative who was unaware that they had been removed from their parents saw the digital story of the two boys and recognized them as her relatives. She then made an inquiry with CCDCFS to determine if she could be considered as a possible placement option. Staff from Partners for Forever Families worked together to ensure that the relative met all of the agency's requirements so that the siblings could live with their relative.

Lessons Learned

Unique and Innovative Features

- **Original Theatrical Presentation** – Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) has developed an original stage play, *Sometimes Hope is Enough*, to use as a recruitment and informational tool. The play is about the journey of three siblings who grew up in different foster homes. Over 1,000 people have seen the play, which premiered at the Karamu Theatre, a smaller venue owned by one of the community partner organizations. Most recently the play has shown at the larger Schubert Center for Child Studies, which is part of Case Western Reserve. Following the play, a panel of experts discuss some of the themes depicted in the play, as well as the realities of the children and youth who are currently in foster care.
- **Digital Me** – Digital Me is a video recording of individual children who are in foster care. This recruitment tool allows children to share, in their own words, what they like, what they are proud of, and the unique aspects of their personalities. These videos are shown at recruitment events to give prospective foster parents an opportunity to get a sense of the children and how they view themselves.
- **Community Collaborative Partnerships** – There is an extensive network of community organizations in Cuyahoga County. CCDCFS has developed relationships with a number of these organizations in order to recruit resource parents and inform communities of the needs of children and families in their communities. Connecting with established community organizations has increased CCDCFS's recruitment pool and has enabled the diligent recruitment activities to be more visible throughout communities where CCDCFS has not traditionally had positive relationships.

Challenges

- **Enacting New Citywide Contracting Procedures** – At approximately the same time CCDCFS was awarded grant funds for the implementation of Partners for Forever Families, there was a corruption scandal involving Cuyahoga County government officials. The scandal resulted in government officials and a subsequent overhaul of the county's business practices with contractors to prevent further corruption. These new practices have slowed the contracting process and prevented contracted agencies from effectively maximizing their funds. This is a countywide issue that all agencies, not just CCDCFS and its contractors, must navigate. Therefore, this situation is one that can only improve over time, as county agencies and contracted agencies become more accustomed to the county's procedures and faith is restored in the county's contracting practices.
- **Slow Economic Recovery** – Cuyahoga County was hit hard by and has been slower than some other areas in recovering from the country's most recent recession. This slow recovery has made it difficult to engage prospective resource parents who will proceed to licensure. CCDCFS's partnership with the community collaboratives allowed the agency to maintain a presence and, when appropriate, offer support services in the communities that have been hit hardest.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

- **Supportive Agency Leadership and Strategic Planning** – In 2008, a new director was named to CCDCFS. Permanency was named one of the priorities when the new agency leadership was put into place. The result of making permanency a priority is that the grant program was able to make permanency for all children regardless of their age or their range of needs a priority for all staff and community partners. The new agency director invited Partnership for Permanent Families staff to participate in the strategic planning process, which allowed Partnership for Permanent Families to embed the focus on permanency, family finding, collaboration, and other

systemwide changes into the planning process so that permanency practices would continue even after the end of the grant period.

- **Identifying Family Connections** – In 2010, as part of the Partners for Forever Family initiative, CCDCFS began to emphasize the importance of diligently searching a child's family connections to identify a permanent placement with one of his or her relatives. Several agency staff received specialized training on how to conduct public and other records searches to identify family members who could serve as a potential home for a child who was in foster care. These staff then began to educate the other case-carrying workers on the ways in which family searching could be a useful tool to use when trying to move a child to permanency. Staff who conducted the family searches developed tip sheets that were posted in agency bathrooms, as well as relative identification and notification forms that could assist other case-carrying workers.

Outcomes

Dissemination

- **Newsletters to Staff** – Partners for Forever Families have disseminated the initiatives outcomes, achievements, and challenges internally through newsletters to staff and informational posters throughout the agency.
- **Coordination with the Resource Center** – The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections at Hunter College included Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) as an example in its web-based Placement Stability Toolkit, which can be found on the Resource Center's webpage here: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/pst/index.htm>.

Sustainability

Partnership for Forever Families staff have taken significant steps to ensure that some of the core activities of the grant program are ingrained in practice. New worker training now entails a focus on achieving permanency for children of any age who are in foster care. Worker training on family finding has also been made more accessible through the agency's Intranet. These steps in addition to the support from CCDCFS leadership are intended to ensure that permanency is a priority for county agency staff and community collaboratives even after the end of the grant period.

Evaluation

Partners for Forever Families staff are concentrating on aligning both policy and practices so that efforts toward establishing permanency for children and youth in foster care will continue to be a primary goal when seeking placements. The evaluation serves as a feedback loop to the agency to determine if the practices and policy changes that continue to be implemented are having the desired impact. The evaluation is a qualitative design using content analysis and participant observation. The outcome evaluation is a quasi-experimental design using neighborhoods as comparison groups (aligned with community collaborator agencies). Some findings from the evaluation report for year 4 activities follow:

- In 2011, examining the family data only, 45 percent completed training, and in 2012, only 23 percent completed training. This is a dramatic decrease and led to an evaluation of the home study process.
- Adoption workers are currently serving 26 families and have served a total of 56 families during the first 4 years of the grant.
- There was an increase in community knowledge about the need for adoption, kinship care, foster care, and permanency.

- Neighborhood Collaboratives identified 10 families who have now completed foster/adoptive parent licensures and are willing to adopt.
- Of the applications for fostering or adopting in 2012, 40 percent were child specific (relatives), compared to 21 percent in the previous year.



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