

## Site Visit Report: Roots & Wings

**Award #:** 90CO1035

**Cluster:** Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care

**Grantee:** County of Santa Cruz, CA, Human Services Department, Family and Children's Services

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**Project Website:**

<http://santacruzhumanservices.org/FamilyChildren/FosterCareandAdoptions/RootsWings.aspx>

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### SUMMARY

In 2008, the County of Santa Cruz, CA, Human Services Department, Family and Children's Services, recognized deficits in three major areas: finding appropriate homes for children in their own communities, providing substantive supports to foster parents, and a lack of permanent homes for children and youth in care. Realizing the crucial need for improvement in these services, Family and Children's Services (FCS) sought diligent recruitment grant funds.

Using a discretionary grant from the Children's Bureau's Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care cluster, FCS established its Roots & Wings initiative in 2009. The name of the program originates from a Hodding Carter, II, quote, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots, the other is wings." Carter was a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author who wrote about race, religion, and economic intolerance.

The Roots & Wings initiative has the following goals:

- Recruit concurrent foster care and adoptive resource families who reflect the characteristics of the children currently under the county's supervision
- Ensure resource families are satisfied with the variety of services and supports offered by the agency
- Ensure children transition to permanent and stable homes in a timely manner

To meet these goals, project staff focus on leveraging existing relationships in the Santa Cruz community and conducting outreach to establish new relationships with families who have not yet considered being resource families and businesses to provide venues for outreach to prospective resource parents. To support the overall initiative goal to move children to permanency, Roots & Wings developed a permanency field guide for social workers, which outlines the steps of child-specific recruitment. The project's Permanency Consultation Group, composed of Roots & Wings staff and recruitment specialists, brainstorm ways to help identify permanent families for children age 11 and older. The initiative also uses photolistings on national and State websites to find permanent homes for children.

Roots & Wings recruited business supporters, such as FedEx, which donates generously to Project Santa and the local children's store, Childish Santa Cruz. The agency has also been creative in their attempts to educate and recruit families, including partnering with a local coffee shop, Surf City Coffee, which agreed to put Roots & Wings information promoting foster care and adoption on its coffee sleeves. The program created a Facebook page to thank members of the community for their volunteer service, inform potential resource parents about upcoming events, and to reach out to the community for donations to support children. Finally, the project has made substantive efforts to ensure that the staff at the Santa Cruz Department of Human Services are



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aware of the needs of resource families, and that the resource families are satisfied with the services and supports that they receive.

An evaluation team from San Jose State University conducted a survey to measure resource parents' satisfaction with various aspects of their experience with the agency, including respectful treatment and responsiveness by the social worker and resource parents' feelings of being included in the case planning process. Findings show that approximately 90 percent of resource parents indicated that their child's social worker and licensing social worker treated them with respect.

Other project outcomes thus far include the following:

- The number of heads-of-household who attended resource parent orientation increased from 105 in 2009 to 119 in 2011.
- Fewer than 20 heads-of-household completed PRIDE training in 2009, and over 30 completed the training in 2010.
- Fewer than 10 resource families were licensed in 2009, and nearly 20 families were licensed in 2010.
- Less than 60 percent of caregivers indicated they were willing to adopt in 2009. In 2011, more than 80 percent of caregivers were willing to adopt.
- Approximately 45 percent of caregivers were caring for a child's sibling in 2009. In 2011, just over 60 percent of caregivers were caring for a child's sibling.
- More than 17 percent of children ages 13 and older and who had been in care for 24 months or longer achieved permanency within 12 months in 2011. This is the highest percentage of youth achieving permanency in 12 months since the agency began the measurement in 1998.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Roots & Wings in Santa Cruz, CA" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In 2008, the Santa Cruz County, CA, Human Services Department, Family and Children's Services (FCS), was awarded discretionary funds through the Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in Foster Care grants for its Roots & Wings initiative. The first year of the grant, 2009, was dedicated to planning, and in 2010, FCS began implementation activities. The name of the program originates from a Hodding Carter, II, quote, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots, the other is wings." The Roots & Wings initiative has the following goals:

- Recruit concurrent foster care and adoptive resource families who reflect the characteristics of the children who are currently under the county's supervision
- Ensure resource families are satisfied with the variety of services and supports that are offered by the agency
- Ensure children transition to permanent and stable homes in a timely manner

The initiative operates with a combination of staff from Santa Cruz County Human Services Department and contracted staff from community organizations to engage in recruitment activities. The project director, analysts, and key supervisors in the adoption, licensing, and teen units are employed by FCS. Contracted staff include a full-time family specialist who acts as a recruiter, two full-time resource family liaisons, a half-time permanency partner, and evaluators from San Jose State University.

The Roots & Wings initiative is making diligent efforts to find permanent families for children throughout the county who are in foster care. Project staff focus on leveraging existing

relationships in the Santa Cruz community and conducting outreach to establish new relationships with families who have not yet considered being resource families and businesses to support recruitment efforts and provide venues for outreach to prospective resource parents. To support the overall initiative goal to move children to permanency, Roots & Wings developed a permanency field guide for social workers, which outlines the steps of child-specific recruitment. Another innovative practice that Roots & Wings implemented is the Permanency Consultation Group. It is to this group of Roots & Wings staff and recruitment specialists that FCS social workers are able to bring the cases of children who are age 11 and older to brainstorm strategies that may help to move the children into permanent families. The Permanency Workgroup is another component of the program that guides permanency efforts and addresses systems challenges related to achieving permanency for youth. The initiative also uses photolisting on national and State websites for the children who have not yet found a permanent family.

The Roots & Wings initiative has focused on making itself visible throughout the county in order to reach prospective resource parents. Some of the activities that staff and partner agencies have participated in include marching in the city's Gay Pride and holiday parades every year and recruiting business supporters, such as FedEx, which donates generously to Project Santa, and the local children's store, Childish Santa Cruz. Participating in the parade has helped the initiative to highlight the need for permanent homes for children in foster care and has resulted in successful recruitment of foster parents. The businesses, such as Childish Santa Cruz, have displayed recruitment brochures and have made donations of goods to help provide gifts to children under the supervision of the agency. The agency has also been creative in its attempts to educate and recruit families, including partnering with a local coffee shop, Surf City Coffee, which agreed to put Roots & Wings information promoting foster care and adoption on their coffee sleeves. Another partnership that the initiative has cultivated is with the Boys & Girls Club and other local not-for-profit agencies to reach families who participate in their activities. The initiative has also created a digital presence with information situated on the Santa Cruz Human Services Department's website. They also have created a dedicated Facebook page that the project uses to thank members of the community for their volunteer service, inform potential resource parents about upcoming events, and to reach out to the community for donations to support children.

Roots & Wings also sees the importance of resource parents having a visible role in recruitment activities. Existing resource parents are actively engaged in recruitment activities by recording public service announcements that are aired on community television. Youth formerly in foster care are also actively involved in the recruitment activities and have been featured in five videos that have been placed on YouTube, some of which have had over 300 views.

Roots & Wings staff members have made substantive efforts to ensure that the Santa Cruz Department of Human Services staff are aware of the needs of resource families and that the resource families are satisfied with the services and supports that they receive. The evaluation team from San Jose State University conducted a survey to measure resource parents' satisfaction with various aspects of their experience with the agency, including respectful treatment and responsiveness by the social worker and resource parents' feelings of being included in the case planning process. Findings from the survey, which was conducted in the early stages of project implementation, indicated that a large majority (approximately 90 percent) of resource parents indicated that the child's social worker and licensing social worker treated them with respect; a similar percentage of the sample of resource parents also agreed that the child's social worker and licensing social workers responded to phone calls within 2 days. Responses regarding resource parent involvement in the case planning process indicated that approximately 60 percent of caregivers felt that they were adequately involved while the other 40 percent did not. These data were used to inform recruitment training for social workers and other staff who interacted with resource families. This training was designed to enhance workers' ability to engage resources parents with the intended outcome of moving more children to permanent families.

## Need for This Service

The County of Santa Cruz, CA, Human Services Department, Family and Child Services, sought out diligent recruitment grant funds because they recognized deficits in three major areas. First, the county agency realized that there were demographic and economic challenges that prevented the agency from finding appropriate families for children in their own communities. Second, providing more substantive and effective supports to foster parents was identified as an area in which the agency desired to improve practice. Third, and what the agency describes as the paramount concern, was a need to increase the number of permanent families for foster children in the following targeted populations: very young Latino children, African-American youth, older youth, and children in foster care from specific areas of the county where there was a lack of permanent homes. Some of the challenges that had frustrated the county's attempts to locate and secure appropriate foster and adoption placements for children under its care were the diverse county population that varies greatly with respect to ethnicity, class, immigration status; rural/urban culture in different neighborhoods and regions of the county; an extremely high cost of living; and the diversity in unemployment rates across the county. While these challenges are not unique to Santa Cruz County, they have contributed to the problem of finding appropriate, adequate, and permanent families for children in foster care.

## SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred on June 27, 2012. Highlights from this site visit included:

- Visiting the Live Oak Family Resource Center that provides direct support to resource families and youth in foster care through its Resource Family Liaisons
- Delivering welcome baskets to new resource parents who had just recently had a child placed in their home
- Viewing of recruitment videos where resource parents and former foster youth spoke of the needs of youth in care and described the benefits of fostering and adopting

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Unique and Innovative Features

- **Strong ties to the business community** – Roots & Wings has established a collaborative relationship with many of the businesses and developers in the county to assist in recruitment activities. Theatres have held movie nights for resource parents with their children. Empty store fronts have been used to publicize the need for resource parents and the benefits of fostering or adopting a child. Businesses in Santa Cruz have also donated food, goods, and money to support resource parents.
- **Recruitment cards** – Resource parents who are engaged in recruitment activities distribute "business cards" that describe the benefits of fostering, dates of orientations, and recruiter contact information. These cards serve as a convenient reminder of the Roots & Wings program and the need for more families for children.
- **Sustained support for resource families** – Resource Family Liaisons make monthly calls to resource families to offer support. They help families feel connected to services and supports such as child care, support groups, resource parent mentors, and cultural organizations as well as services for the children in their care such as educational services and extracurricular activities.

### Challenges

- **Agency staff losses** – As with other human service organizations, Santa Cruz Family and Children's Services (FCS) has lost a significant amount of staff. These losses have resulted

in additional responsibilities being placed on Roots & Wings staff. These losses and the resulting changes in assignments are outside of the control of the Roots & Wings staff. When significant, department-wide changes are happening at the same time as an initiative such as Roots & Wings, continuing to engage staff is difficult. To overcome this challenge, Roots & Wings partners have taken steps to "institutionalize" the collaborative recruitment activities in order to ensure that the staff working with children identified as the target population for grant activities do not feel as though recruitment activities are "add on" responsibilities but are part of their regular day-to-day workload.

- **Lack of follow through to complete resource parent licensure** – One of the outcomes that the evaluation team noted was that a significant number of those who attended the resource parent orientation did not always go on to complete the licensing process. To determine the reasons why, the evaluators conducted brief phone interviews with 13 people who participated in all or some of the licensing process to hear their impressions and get feedback. Respondents indicated that many of the reasons why they did not follow through were personal or circumstantial such as uncertainty and/or fear about becoming a resource parent, problems with their own housing situation, and being concerned about the effect on their own children. Although the agency is not able to address all of the barriers to continuing with the licensing process, the agency now provides email updates, postcards, or newsletters as a way to remain in contact with these potential resource parents. The belief is that these reminders might encourage people to return to the process when they are ready.
- **Dual licensure timelines and need for resource families** – The licensing process for both foster care and adoption can be an intimidating and time-consuming process for families. In order to make the process smoother for families, the Adoptions and Licensing units coordinate efforts to reduce duplication in licensing and adoption home studies. They continue to target families that desire to become both foster and adoptive homes, especially those who wish to foster and adopt children who are age 11 and older. The licensing coordinator provides the necessary forms to resource families and directs families to their follow-up appointments as necessary. If the family feels they need assistance filling out the necessary adoption paperwork, they are connected to a Family Resource Liaison. The home studies for these families are also prioritized in order to reduce the length of time to finalized licensure.

### **Successful Strategies and Keys to Success**

- **Building effective partnerships** – The Roots & Wings initiative is creative and strategic in the way relationships are established and nurtured. FCS has reached out to businesses and organizations that may have not previously had foster care and adoption within their purview. The Roots & Wings staff have found unique ways to engage the business community to offer support in the form of meeting space for foster care and adoption recruitment and orientation activities, donating goods to children and families, and hosting family-friendly events. Each business is given a plaque from Roots & Wings to display as a token of their assistance and partnership with the program.
- **Incorporating resource parents and former foster youth** – Root & Wings has empowered the resource parents to serve as recruiters. With tools such as the recruitment cards and video presentations that have been crafted by the project, as well as with their own experiences from fostering and/or adopting, resource parents are able to connect with the potential resource parents with whom they come into contact. Additionally, the voices of former foster youth who are able to share their experiences are always powerful and are able to reach potential resource parents on a level that other methods of engagement are not.

## OUTCOMES

### Evaluation

The evaluation team based at San Jose State University has conducted ongoing evaluation activities for the duration of the grant. Roots & Wings is a county-wide initiative, which evaluators felt prevented the use of a control or comparison group. Therefore, the evaluators used a quasi-experimental design. The primary aim of the evaluation was to track outcomes following the implementation of Roots & Wings core activities. The core activities of the initiative as well as the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes of the program follow:

#### Core Activities:

- General recruitment (public awareness/marketing campaign)
- Targeted recruitment activities for high-removal communities
- Child-specific recruitment activities and services
- Systems change to promote permanency
- Enhanced resource family support, training, and services

#### Short-Term Outcomes:

- Increased recruitment of resource families
- Shift in staff members' philosophy regarding permanency
- Improvement in staff members' knowledge and skills around permanency
- Improved community and agency support of families

#### Intermediate Outcomes:

- Increased number of approved families willing to participate in concurrent planning
- Increased number of licensed families reflective of the child welfare population
- Improved morale, coping skills, and satisfaction among resource families

#### Long-Term Outcomes:

- Reduced time to permanency for youth in care
- Increased exits of older children to permanent families
- More siblings placed together
- Fewer placement disruptions
- Increased retention of resource families

The data sources that were made available to the evaluation team specific to the recruitment outcomes are internal to the county Department of Human Services. They reflect foster parent orientation attendance, foster parent training (PRIDE) completion, licensure, as well as long-term data on permanency from the Center for Social Services Research. The data source related to systems change to promote permanency outcomes was the Annual Staff Permanency Survey that was conducted by the Department of Human Services. Finally, data regarding resource parent support outcomes were gathered through the Annual Caregiver Satisfaction Survey.

The evaluation team and Roots & Wing staff work closely and have frequent interactions in monthly meetings, by phone, and via email to ensure that data are correct, measures and data collection processes are adapted as needed, and the results of the evaluation are used to inform practice.

## **Summary of Accomplishments**

### **Recruitment Outcomes**

The core activities related to recruitment were broken into three categories: general recruitment, targeted recruitment in communities where large numbers of children have been removed from their families, and child-specific recruitment.

Activities in the general recruitment category include developing relationships with businesses, a general media campaign, foster parent orientations occurring in the community, and following up with people who attended orientation and did not complete an application.

Targeted recruitment activities for areas where large numbers of children have been removed from their families include hosting events at family resource centers in these communities, conducting outreach at existing community events, and engaging in a media campaign for older youth and siblings.

Finally, the child-specific recruitment activities are finding and securing a permanent plan for older youth and convening a consultation/review group to assist social workers move children toward permanency.

As a result of the core activities in the three categories above, evaluation results indicated the following:

- The number of heads-of-household who attended resource parent orientation increased from 105 in 2009 to 119 in 2011.
- Over 30 heads-of-household completed PRIDE training in 2010, which showed an increase from 2009 when fewer than 20 completed the training.
- Nearly 20 families were licensed in 2010; an improvement from 2009 when fewer than 10 families were licensed in 2009.
- In 2011, more than 80 percent of caregivers were willing to adopt as opposed to 60 percent who were willing in 2009.
- Approximately 45 percent of caregivers were caring for a child's sibling in 2009. In 2011, just over 60 percent of caregivers were caring for a child's sibling.
- More than 17 percent of children ages 13 and older and who had been in care for 24 months or longer achieved permanency within 12 months in 2011. This is the highest percentage of youth achieving permanency in 12 months since the agency began the measurement in 1998.

Additionally, the Customer Satisfaction Survey showed improvements in items measuring caregivers' willingness to adopt the most recent child in their care.

### **System Change Outcomes**

The core activities intended to have a positive impact on systems change follow:

- Revision of policy and procedures
- Behaviorally based case plan training
- Development and distribution of permanency guiding principles
- Training on permanency guiding principles
- Values discussions
- Adoption presentation at unit meetings
- Systems work groups to solve system issues creating barriers to permanency

The following are the results that evaluators found in relation to these systems change activities:

- There was a shift in staff members' philosophy regarding permanency as measured by the score on the Permanency Attitudes Scale, which is part of the Staff Survey. The 2011 pretest to posttest scores on the Attitudes Scale showed improvement in this area.
- There was improvement in staff members' knowledge and skills around permanency as measured by the scores on the Permanency Knowledge and Permanency Skills Scale, which are part of the Staff Survey.

These findings suggest that efforts to promote system change around attitudes toward permanency were successful. These scores will be compared to those from 2012 to determine if improvements continue over time.

### **Resource Parent Support and Satisfaction**

Evaluators also examined the relationship between core activities designed to increase resource parent support and satisfaction and related outcomes areas. The core activities are:

- Designating staff to serve as resource parent liaisons to provide one-on-one support to resource families
- Increasing the number of events designed to acknowledge and support resource families
- Allocating permanency funds to support placements
- Identifying community volunteer supports

Some of the findings from the Customer Satisfaction Survey completed by resource parents suggest that resource parents feel supported by county and Roots & Wings staff and, for most measures, improvements were found over time from 2009 to 2011. Additionally, qualitative comments were largely positive, and there were fewer negative comments when compared to previous years. Findings suggest that resource parent liaisons and other support services are valuable sources of support for resource parents. The following specific findings were cited:

- Increase in the percent of caregivers referred to community resources, including cultural organizations, counseling, support groups, and resource parent meetings from a total of approximately 100 referrals in 2009 to approximately 150 in 2011.
- Increase in percentage of children referred to community resources, such as education services, counseling, and extracurricular activities from approximately 65 in 2009 to approximately 90 in 2011.
- Increase in the percent of caregivers who were able to find child care from approximately 60 percent in 2009 to approximately 80 percent in 2011.

### **Dissemination**

At the time of the visit, the Roots & Wings staff and evaluators planned to present findings at either the Society for Social Work Research Conference or the National Child Welfare Evaluation Summit. They were preparing articles on the Roots & Wings initiative and findings from surveys of kin and non-kin family caregivers, which they were planning to submit to peer-reviewed journals.