Maryland Needs to Use Best Practices To Recruit Foster Parents for Teenagers
Understanding. Using Current Foster Families Critical to Success

Executive Summary
Many communities have far more teenagers in foster care than foster families willing to care for these youth. This can result in the unnecessary placement of teenagers in institutions, which is expensive and harmful. There are proven strategies for recruiting foster families willing to care for teenagers. However, Baltimore City and Prince George’s County are not using these strategies. Maryland jurisdictions should adopt these targeted recruitment strategies to ensure sufficient placements for this hard-to-place group.

Background
As part of its Place Matters initiative, Maryland launched a statewide campaign to recruit more foster families for abused and neglected children. Foster families are often eager to care for younger children, so it is more difficult to find families for older youth and teenagers. For example, Baltimore City needs 60 more foster families for 13 to 16 year olds and 127 foster families for 17 to 21 year olds. Targeted recruitment strategies are needed to find homes for these harder-to-place youth. This brief reviews best practices for recruiting foster families for teenagers and compares the existing strategies to the practices.

Best Practices
Identify the characteristics of families most likely to take in teenagers: Experts recommend closely analyzing current foster parents of teenagers to identify common characteristics. Do these families live in certain neighborhoods, have certain family compositions or participate in certain activities? How were these families recruited and why were they motivated to become foster parents for teenagers? These questions can be answered through data analysis, interviews and/or focus groups.

Determine where families with the desired characteristics can be located: Based on the review described above, recruiters should target the places where these foster families live, work and play. Where do the families identified above eat out, go to church, get their news or buy their groceries and

clothes? Recruiters should also identify workplaces with adults used to working with teenagers, who might be interested in a more personal relationship, such as sports programs, libraries or hospitals.

Agencies should capitalize on positive portrayals of youth in foster care. For example, one expert recommended that an agency should host a showing of the movie The Blind Side or having a table set up at the movie theater to engage potential foster families just after they have seen the impact a foster family can have on a youth.

Create specialized materials reflecting the focus on families for teenagers, including a tagline and logo: Recruiters should ensure that recruitment materials include pictures of teenagers and language focusing on this target group. Materials should also try to determine the values and principles of target families and the message that will be most successful in catching their attention. Materials must address the likely questions potential families for teenagers will have – before they have a chance to worry about the answers. Potential foster parents should know that they would receive money to help pay for clothes and activities for foster youth, have access to a team of experts to help with any behavioral problems, etc.

Hold events with youth serving organizations and other organizations with people who like teens: Adults who work with and like teens can help recruit foster parents and may be placement resources themselves. For example, one national expert cited an event held at a church with a strong youth program. The event asked church members to help the foster care agency recruit possible foster families from among their friends and families. In addition to help recruiting, many of the church members signed up to become foster parents themselves. Events with probation officers and sports programs can be opportunities to engage possible volunteers.

Use teens or foster care alumni as event speakers, with the media and to recruit families: Teens and alumni can speak at events for potential foster families, explaining how important a family is and how difficult it can be without a family. Teens can also play a significant role in directly recruiting foster families. Teenagers who have been successfully

1 See Appendix for sources.
placed may be able to identify the key features of
good foster parents or recommend people they know.
Recruitment bonuses can help encourage teens to
participate in this process.

*Draw on the pool of existing resource families*: Twenty states surveyed in a federal report said that
existing foster parents were one of the most
successful methods of recruiting new foster families.
One state said that over half of their successful
recruits were referred by other foster parents. Many
jurisdictions hold “fosterware” parties where current
foster parents are asked to invite friends and
neighbors to an event where they can learn more
about joys and challenges of foster care and speak
with agency staff members. Foster parents can bring
families who are potentially interested in teens.

The existing pool of resource families should also be
explored as a placement resource. Many of these
families may be waiting for a child to foster or adopt
that fits their desired profile, typically a younger
child. Many states have held “while you are waiting”
parties for these families and asked them to care for
older youth in the meantime. Once families had
experience with an older youth and were less scared,
they became more open to providing ongoing care for
this population.

Current foster families for teens can also be part of
trainings for incoming foster families to infuse new
foster parents with enthusiasm for caring for teens.
Successful teen foster parents can speak at training
events and be part of the orientation process.

*Help youth build connections with caring adults*: Another way to help teenagers find foster families is
to help them develop relationships with adult mentors
through programs like Big Brother / Big Sister. In
many cases, these mentors may eventually become
care giving resources.

*Engage youth in identifying placement resources and
reconnect them with people they have had
relationships with or distant relatives*: Several
jurisdictions have worked with teenagers to create
ecomaps or genograms of all relatives and other
extended kin (broadly defined). They found that if
teens identified these key connections early in their
placement, connections could often be rekindled and
foster families found. The Extreme Recruitment
approach in St. Louis is the best example of this
approach, using a private investigator to track down
any possible resource families for youth.

### Analysis of Recruitment Plans

Both Baltimore City and Prince George’s County
identified foster homes for teenagers as a key issue in
their recruitment plans. The following chart shows
that Baltimore City is using none of the best
practices, and Prince George’s County is using one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Practice</th>
<th>Baltimore City</th>
<th>Prince George’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify the characteristics of families most likely to take in teenagers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine where families with the desired characteristics can be located</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create specialized materials reflecting the focus on families for teenagers, including a tagline and logo</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold events with youth serving organizations and other organizations with people who like teens</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use teens or foster care alumni as event speakers, with the media and to recruit families</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw on the pool of existing resource families</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help youth build connections with caring adults</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage youth in identifying placement resources and reconnect them with people they have had relationships with or distant relatives</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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The plans also do not have specific action steps,
explain the anticipated scope of a proposed activity or
how much staff will be devoted to it or indicate prior
success or how future success will be measured.

### Recommendations

1. Require each local jurisdiction to develop foster
care recruitment plans that use best practices.
2. Monitor implementation and impact of the plans.

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2 See Appendix for details.
Appendix A: Sources


Department of Health and Human Services, *Recruiting Foster Parents*, (May 2002)


Dr. Denise A. Goodman, *Step by Step: Developing a Targeted Recruitment Campaign* (Feb. 28, 2010)

Interview with Dr. Denise Goodman (Mar. 18, 2010)
## Appendix B: Detailed Best Practices Review

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><em>Identify the characteristics of families most likely to take in teenagers</em></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X Plan to do focus group to engage foster parents of teens, youth in care, CASA and agency staff in developing recruitment strategies. A good idea, but this was needed prior to setting forth the rest of the plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Determine where families with the desired characteristics can be located</em></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Create specialized materials reflecting the focus on families for teenagers, including a tagline and logo</em></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hold events with youth serving organizations and other organizations with people who like teens</em></td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Ongoing “individual and group presentations as allowed by the organization during meetings and social events. Recruitment table to inform participants of our need for homes for this population....” Partners: recreational centers; churches, correctional/probation employees; mentor groups; health and mental health agencies; and group home workers. Quarterly “recruitment event in region in partnership with community agency to bring together resources in the community. Recruitment efforts will target coaches, police officers, teachers and other professionals who routinely interact with teenagers.” Partners: middle and high school PTAs; schools; police department; Department of Corrections; recreation centers; coaches associations; teen parent associations and local health department. This seems like a laundry list of interesting possibilities, but it is not clear which ones are most likely to be effective or which ones will actually take place. How many meetings will take place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Use teens or foster care alumni as event speakers, with the media and to recruit families</em></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>? Independent living “youth develop a skit focused on the need for foster homes for teens. Utilize the energy and power of youth in recruitment effort for teen homes.” Throughout the year. How will the skit be used? Other than skit, this is vague. Why use independent living youth as opposed to foster youth available for adoption?</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Draw on the pool of existing resource families</strong></td>
<td>Monthly “fosterware parties, recruitment presentations, meet with current foster parents to enlist their assistance in recruiting others as well as being available with recruiter at events to talk about foster parenting.” Yearly “Foster Parent Month appreciation – invite foster parents and children to annual foster parent picnic. This event serves as a recruitment activity as each attendee will be asked to bring one potential foster parent.” Ongoing referral bonuses of $500. <strong>Will these focus on foster parents who have teens or who are likely to take teens?</strong> Seems like the department has already done these activities before and should know whether they are effective. Has the referral bonus worked?</td>
<td>**Fosterware parties. Two per quarter. “Utilize friend and relative network of existing foster parents in recruiting efforts.” Work with foster parent association. Ongoing referral bonuses. **Unclear if these are targeted at teens. Seems likely that the department has already done fosterware parties and should know whether they are effective. How big is the referral bonus, and is it effective? Is it targeted at teens?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help youth build connections with caring adults</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Engage youth in identifying placement resources and reconnect them with people they have had relationships with or distant relatives</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
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Several strategies in the Prince George’s County plan are not included above because they did not seem to fit into any best practice category or contradicted best practices.

- Bulletin board displays (untargeted)
- Tagline notices on paychecks (untargeted)
- Promotional items (untargeted)
- Movie theater and sporting event advertising spots to attract families for teens (without analysis of characteristics and locations of likely families, hard to know if this is targeted)
- Advertising on pizza boxes during football, basketball and baseball seasons (without analysis of characteristics and locations of likely families, hard to know if this is targeted)
- Fashion show (audience and purpose unclear)
- Age specific info meetings to target families willing to parent teens (does not specify how families for meetings will be found, what the purpose of the meetings is, who will speak at meetings, etc. Also, role of library and bookmarks unclear.)

The Baltimore City plan includes $15,000 for public service announcements on local television and radio stations throughout the year at key times, i.e., May for foster parent appreciation and Mother’s Day, June for Father’s Day, etc. Putting aside why the department is spending money on a PSA, it is not clear how this is targeted, either in terms of the message or the audience.