

## **Moving the Child Welfare Reform Train Faster** *Improving Maryland's Plan to Address the Foster Home Shortage*

### **Executive Summary**

The Maryland Department of Human Resources has set a bold goal to increase substantially the number foster homes, by 1000 by 2010. The Department has some good ideas, including increasing foster care rates, restoring childcare for children in foster care and offering referral bonuses. However, overall, the Department has failed to produce a plan with enough specific strategies to address the need. In addition to identifying more evidence-based recruitment and retention strategies, the Department needs to implement Family Team Decision Making so that it can avoid unneeded or unnecessarily lengthy placements in foster care, thereby freeing up family foster homes for other children.

### **Introduction**

The Maryland Department of Human Resources has issued a report, *1000 by 10*, calling for an overall increase of 1,000 foster homes by 2010, with specific goals set for each jurisdiction. The primary purposes of the initiative are to reduce the number of children in group homes and to place children closer to their homes.

These purposes are extremely important, and the Department's attention to them is in and of itself a step in the right direction. This issue brief examines the extent to which the Department has established reasonable targets and identified clear, evidence-based strategies that are likely to enable Maryland to achieve these goals.

### **The Targets**

Targets are important because effective recruitment of foster homes is based on a precise determination of scope and nature of the need.<sup>1</sup>

There are several issues with the Department's methodology.

First, the plan does not distinguish between the needs for different types of foster families, including restricted or relative homes, unrestricted or non-relative homes, and therapeutic or treatment foster homes. The plan also does not consider the different potential capacity gaps by age or race of the children.

<sup>1</sup> Lorrie Lutz, National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning, *Recruitment and Retention of Resource Families* (Oct. 2002).

Second, the plan implies the need for new foster homes for all foster children placed outside of their home jurisdictions. Yet, some children are placed just over a jurisdictional border. Other children in foster care may be placed with relatives in another jurisdiction, which may be the best placement.

Finally, the plan does not appear to take into account the impact of effective casework practice interventions such as Family Team Decision Making, which can help keep many more children safely in their homes or placed with relatives, thereby significantly reducing the need for certain types of foster homes, particularly non-relative.

### **Recruitment Strategies**

The plan says that, "word of mouth" is the most powerful method for recruiting foster parents and that the Department will, starting in January, offer foster parents \$500 for recruiting another family. This idea is interesting, but the plan provides no information about the effectiveness of these types of incentives at all or at this particular amount. With so few foster parents left, it is also not clear that this will yield significant results in the areas of greatest need.

Given the negative experiences that many current and previous foster parents have had in some jurisdictions, only a third party provider may be able to provide a credible offer of ongoing support to prospective foster parents to persuade them to become foster parents.

The plan also says that there will be statewide and local media campaigns starting November 15, 2007. There is no indication of how much they will cost, whether they will differ from past efforts or how cost-effectiveness will be determined. It seems likely that a targeted effort would yield significantly better results. As the campaigns are already underway based on the timeline in the report, the Department may have some preliminary data on the cost and effectiveness of the campaign.

Beyond these two ideas, the plan describes a laundry list of possible strategies, without indicating which ones will be selected or whether the Department has conducted any research to narrow down the list. Instead, local departments will develop plans. However, without significant technical assistance and stringent review, it is unlikely these local plans will be successfully implemented. Some departments already have staff engaged in recruitment activity; it is not clear how the Department will determine the



effectiveness and sufficiency of these current efforts or any proposed new ones.

To generate additional ideas, the Department will track for 60 days respondents to the recruitment line. However, there is no information provided about what will be measured. Following prospects for 60 days may not be long enough to consider whether the foster home licensing process is deterring effective recruitment.

### **Retention Strategies**

The report says that the Department will address several reasons for foster home attrition identified by the Maryland Foster Parent Association, including lack of day care, mental health treatment and crisis response.

With regard to day care, the Department previously indicated that it would restore this service January 2008. It is not clear whether this is actually happening or whether the funds needed to implement this are in the proposed FY 2009 budget. The overall impact will depend on how effectively the funding for day care is accessed by families. The Department has said it does not plan to use the State's existing child care reimbursements program, Purchase of Care, run through the Maryland State Department of Education. It is not clear why. The fact that the current program is administered by another state agency is not a compelling reason to create an alternative process; particularly given the difficulty the Department has had making payments to third parties historically.

Regarding mental health, the action plan says that the Department will partner with the Mental Hygiene Administration. The plan provides no indication of what specific activities the partnership will undertake. However the Governor's proposed budget includes \$1.2 million to fund 24-hour Mobile Crisis Teams, in partnership with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, to stabilize family foster care placements and improve mental health outcomes.

The plan also says that the Department will apply for and receive a federal Systems of Care grant through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), again without any specificity about how much money is expected and how the money will be used.

For respite care, the plan indicates that the program will be revised. However, the plan provides no specificity about whether and how respite will expand, for how many families and at what cost. The

Department has said that initial efforts will be made to more fully utilize the existing program.<sup>2</sup>

While day care, mental health and respite are relevant to foster home retention, it is not clear how they rate relative to each other or to other possibilities, in terms of cost-effectiveness. The Maryland Foster Parent Association is an important source for ideas, but it would be helpful to know the extent to which its views are based on research and cost comparisons, supported by foster parents in each jurisdiction and reflect the different issues that may exist in one area of the State in comparison to another.

To address concerns about lack of caseworker support for foster parents, the plan calls for an ombudsperson, and the Department has advertised to fill this position. This person may help address some issues for a few families; however, one person will not have the capacity to address the needs of thousands of foster parents or the broader failure to support foster families.

In this regard, the plans says that the Department will "communicate expectations with local departments that foster parents will be treated as part of a team of child welfare professionals" and issue policy guidelines which advise foster parents of their rights. A departmental statement is unlikely to address to any meaningful extent the insufficient support of foster parents by caseworkers.

The Governor's proposed budget for FY 2009 says that it includes funding to increase foster care reimbursement rates by "approximately" \$100 per month.<sup>3</sup> This comes on top of other recent reimbursement rate increases and will hopefully help more recruitment and retention. The impact of these increases needs to be examined, and it is possible that rates need to be increased still further, for all foster homes or particular types, either statewide or in certain jurisdictions experiencing severe shortages in foster homes. It is also worth examining the extent to which foster parents are experiencing delays or disruptions in payments, since lengthy delays have historically been a major source of concern to foster parents.

Finally, there is the issue of regular foster parents becoming therapeutic or treatment foster homes because of higher reimbursement rates offered for these types of foster homes. This issue is of particular relevance in Prince George's County, and a strategy is needed to address it.

The plan calls for exit surveys for foster parents who leave the system. This seems worthwhile; however,

---

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Secretary Donald to Advocates for Children and Youth (Jan. 8, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> It is not clear what "approximately" means.

details are needed about what will be measured and when the results will be available.

### **General Assessment**

The Department's plan does not provide cost estimates, and the Governor's proposed FY 2009 budget only provides a few highlights. The lack of fiscal data makes it difficult to determine the proposed scope of some ideas and to assess likely cost-effectiveness.

An overall cost calculation could include the substantial savings from reduced group home use. Indeed, one would expect the Department to make significant investments to avoid the current over-reliance on high-cost group care. For example, reducing the number of children in group homes by 900 children, as suggested in the plan, can free as much as \$50 million annually which can be invested into other child welfare reform efforts.

Overall, *1000 by 10* contains a bold goal and several ideas with potential. However, the plan lacks enough specific strategies to address the need. This is a disappointment given the importance of the issue and the amount of time, which the Department has had to consider the issue. The weaknesses in the plan suggest gaps in the plan development process and a lack of sufficient focus on the issue. By making this a priority and partnering with additional external resources, we hope that the Department can identify and implement additional evidence-based practices as quickly as possible.

### **Family Team Decision Making**

It is unclear whether any combination of retention and recruitment strategies will generate the scope of increase in foster homes that the Department says it needs. As such, it is critical to free up space in existing foster homes by reducing out-of-placements and reducing the length of stay in foster care.

Indeed, Baltimore City has an out-of-home placement rate three times the urban average, suggesting strongly that many more children can remain at home.<sup>4</sup>

Family Team Decision Making is an evidence-based way to do this safely. Indiana is implementing this practice, and jurisdictions in the state using it have quickly seen a 16 percent drop in out-of-home placements, while other jurisdictions have seen a 14 percent increase during the same period. This practice has also worked in Alabama and Utah.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Casey Strategic Consulting Group, *Maryland Child Welfare Assessment* (Dec. 21, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

Implementing FTDM requires the following: reasonable caseloads; rigorous quality assurance; performance evaluations of both caseworkers and supervisors; and an effective information technology system.

The Department says it plans to role out a family-centered case practice statewide.<sup>6</sup> This is a huge undertaking, and it requires significant resources and planning.

### **Recommendations**

1. As the Department develops additional plans to address critical needs, it can do so in a more transparent and inclusive manner, identify and rely on evidence-based practice and set forth specific solutions with cost estimates.
2. Given that foster parents have identified lack of responsiveness of caseworkers as a major reason for leaving the system, the Department can clarify reasonable expectations for the caseworkers responsible for supporting foster families and a system for ensuring that caseworkers are held accountable for fulfilling these reasonable expectations.
3. As soon as possible, the Department can develop a specific plan to implement Family Team Decision Making fully and effectively in order to reduce the need for unrestricted foster homes by safely keeping more children in homes or with relatives and keeping children in foster homes for shorter periods of time.
4. The Department can focus retention and recruitment efforts on non-relative or unrestricted foster homes and provide consistent reports on the numbers of these homes.
5. The Department can identify best practices in recruitment and retention within Maryland and elsewhere and focus on practices that have proven most cost-effective.
6. The Department can provide or arrange for effective technical assistance for the local departments in development of their recruitment and retention plans, with an emphasis on Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Prince George's County.
7. In determining the overall cost of its efforts, the Department can consider the cost savings from reduced reliance on group homes.

---

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Secretary Donald to Advocates for Children and Youth (Jan. 8, 2008).