From Players to Partners

States are looking for ways to attract and keep more foster parents as caseloads increase.

BY NINA WILLIAMS-MBENGUE

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SENATOR A.J. GRIFFIN, OKLAHOMA

On any given day, 437,000 children are in foster care in the United States. Nearly half are living with a foster family. Although the overall number of children in the system is down 25 percent from a decade ago, it’s up since last year.

Since 2012, the devastating impact of the opioid crisis on families has created an urgent need for foster parents in communities across America. The added strain comes at a time when many foster families are already chafing at policies and restrictions they say can sometimes make a tough job even tougher.

Vital but Undervalued

Foster parents are key players in the child welfare system, but they rarely feel like true partners. Among their many responsibilities, they must be prepared to address kids’ physical, social and emotional needs after what, for some, may be a traumatic removal from their home; enroll them in school; provide them a safe and healthy environment; navigate their visits with biological parents and siblings; get them to and from counseling sessions; and manage their normal daily activities.

Yet, foster parents often say they have too little input in the decisions made for the kids in their care. They criticize agencies for providing little or no information on the physical, social and emotional status of their children. They are often left out of planning sessions or are not asked for their opinions. They worry that their training is inadequate to handle severe cases. Promised respites and mentors are often not provided, nor are caseworkers available to answer questions or offer guidance when needed.

For some, it gets to be too much, and in fact nearly half of parents quit in their first year of fostering. As a result, most child welfare agencies struggle to find and keep a steady number of qualified parents.

What can legislators do? To attract and retain more willing foster parents, child welfare experts recommend that states develop better ways to support them.

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Giving Parents a Voice

For many years, foster parents have advocated for their needs, and lawmakers in 18 states and the District of Columbia have responded with “bill of rights” laws. They vary by state, but the measures typically ensure that, among other things, foster parents are treated with respect; receive complete information on children’s social, emotional and educational needs; receive fair payment; can refuse a placement; have access to respite care and adequate training; can contact a child welfare agency 24/7; receive priority in adoptions; and can file grievances, if needed.

In recent years, experts have suggested that policymakers take steps to enforce these rights by requiring annual reporting on the laws and developing a process for handling and investigating violations.

There are many ways to empower parents. Laws in 39 states and D.C. require that foster parents either receive notice of court hearings or be allowed to attend proceedings for children in their care.

In Oklahoma, legislators created the Foster Voices hotline. “The best advocates for change in the foster care system are foster care families,” says Oklahoma Senator A.J. Griffin (R), a former foster parent herself. The hotline is open to all sorts of questions, and parents call about caseworkers not returning phone messages, for example, or vouchers not arriving on time, Griffin says. Sometimes, a parent simply needs to talk to another foster parent. Other times they need advice on more serious matters, like filing a complaint about a decision regarding a child’s care.

“The hotline has been a major step forward,” Griffin says.

The federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 requires states to enact laws that set “reasonable and prudent” parenting standards. Thirty-nine states have done so.

The standards eliminate the requirement that parents get approval from caseworkers before making decisions about their foster kids’ extracurricular, enrichment,
cultural, social and sporting activities. This means that foster parents no longer must get permission for children to join sports teams or after-school clubs or to participate in activities that would help them feel “normal” and, ultimately, have a more successful transition into adulthood.

**Practical Support Wanted**

Excellent training is essential to making and retaining good foster parents. A growing body of research is helping experts understand what “quality” training is. For starters, it should focus on helping children overcome trauma.

Thirty-six states require both pre-licensing and ongoing training that includes handling trauma and caring for special-needs children and babies. Training must be offered to all foster families, including caregivers who are elderly or disabled.

Programs pairing more experienced foster parents with new recruits can ensure critical support and guidance. Adding a respite program to the mix can give foster parents much-needed breaks.

The federal Family Medical Leave Act requires up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave during a 12-month period to care for a newborn, an adopted or a foster child. Four states require that certain private employers offer paid medical leave to care for a foster child.

Approximately 25 states offer liability insurance to foster families. Oklahoma legislators, for example, enacted legislation that protects foster parents, acting in good faith, from liability for property damages or injuries caused or suffered by a child participating in “reasonable and prudent” activities.

In addition, some states reimburse parents for all or part of the cost of driver’s education and auto insurance for their foster teens or allow foster parents to sign driver’s license applications.

**Start With Great Parents**

The best way to keep good foster families, of course, is to recruit people who are already great parents.

States, for example, can train foster parents to work specifically with older children or those who have been in care the longest. Child welfare officials can work with community- and faith-based organizations. Policymakers can review licensing requirements and standards for foster families and foster homes.

To help with recruitment and retention, and to ensure the best matches between foster parents and children, lawmakers in at least two states—North Carolina and Oklahoma—have passed laws requiring officials to do inventories so they know how many foster parents are licensed and available and what their qualifications are.

Oklahoma’s inventory requires an annual report to the legislature on the numbers of kids in the system, the types of settings used for placements and the duration of children’s stays in those placements, a census of approved foster homes, and a comparison of foster room-and-board rates.

What Griffin envisions for foster families in her state may be a model for others. She sees “a system of full support—a network of local support services, with collaborative, joint decision making between the agency, birth family and foster family, always with the child at the center, remembering that foster families are acting as family.”