

DATA BRIEF: Understanding the Foster Parent Training Experience

BACKGROUND

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services contracts with 13 foster care provider agencies to train, certify, support and supervise foster parents (also known as resource parents). Foster parents are required to receive 12 hours of training every year to maintain their certification. To support foster parents in obtaining their training hours, 11 of the foster care provider agencies have formed a training cooperative in which any foster parent can attend training provided by any participating agency. The training cooperative has increased the number of trainings available (from one per month to as many as five per month) while also providing a wider range of training topics and locations to better meet foster parents' needs. The cooperative requested feedback on its trainings to inform improvements. Telephone surveys were conducted with foster parents in order to increase understanding of their training experience, identify barriers to training, and highlight recommendations for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

Phone interviews were conducted with 67 foster parents.¹ Interviews lasted from five to 25 minutes and addressed topics related to the overall training experience: satisfaction with the training; perceived barriers to attending training; features of training reported to be most vs. least helpful; and familiarity with training standards and the training cooperative. Interviews were summarized to describe foster parents' perceived facilitators (i.e., elements that encourage participation), perceived barriers to participation, and suggestions for improvement.

¹ Four of 11 provider agencies (Three Rivers Youth, Project STAR, Wesley Spectrum and Pressley Ridge) provided contact information for a total of 121 foster parents. Of the 121 foster parents contacted, 67 agreed to participate in the survey.

Barriers to Training

- Child care
- Limited training selections
- Location
- Time
- Transportation
- Weather

“I would get off work at 4:00 pm and the training would be at 6:00pm. After a full day at work, I wouldn’t feel like catching the bus to and from training, because I don’t drive.”

“If the training is from 6 to 8pm, and the kids need to be in bed by 8pm, then that’s hard to accomplish.”

Facilitators

- Peer interaction and information/ experience sharing
- Increased understanding about youth experiences; hearing from the youth themselves
- Increased ability to help manage youth behaviors, including emotional and behavioral challenges
- Information about the child welfare system and foster parenting logistics
- Format and quality of the training
- Specific training topics

² Only three of the cooperative providers offer any child care services.

KEY FINDINGS

- **A majority of parents (90%) indicated they were aware of the county’s training requirement.** The 10 percent of parents who were not aware of training requirements were provided relevant information at the end of the interview.
- **A majority of those surveyed (82%) said they were not familiar with the training cooperative.** Parents who reported that they were not familiar with the training cooperative were given information at the end of the interview.

What are the barriers to attending training?

More than three-quarters of foster parents interviewed (78%) referenced at least one barrier to attending training. The most often-cited barrier was time, including lack of free time, conflicting schedules and inconvenient training times. Specifically, working foster parents reported difficulty managing training attendance around their work schedule; foster parents found it difficult to schedule training around children’s activities and evening routines, appointments and other scheduled activities (e.g., therapy); and, in general, training times were inconvenient. Other barriers cited included a lack of available child care,² inconvenient meeting location (especially for those who had to travel a long distance, such as from Washington or Westmoreland counties), limited selection of trainings, and weather. Many of these barriers were described as interrelated or compounded by one another. “I would get off work at 4:00 pm and the training would be at 6:00pm. After a full day at work, I wouldn’t feel like catching the bus to and from training, because I don’t drive.” “If the training is from 6 to 8pm, and the kids need to be in bed by 8pm, then that’s hard to accomplish.”

What encourages participation and engages foster parents in training?

Facilitators are defined as those elements that increase the likelihood that foster parents will attend and benefit from training. The primary reported facilitator was the usefulness and relevance of the information. The top three themes were 1) being able to hear from other foster parents; 2) gaining a deeper understanding about youth history and their experiences in the child welfare system; and 3) increasing their knowledge and skills related to helping youth manage their behaviors and emotional/behavioral challenges. Other facilitators included learning about the child welfare system and foster parent process, the format of the training, and specific training topics.

What opportunities exist for improving the training experience?

Although foster parents were not specifically asked to provide recommendations or suggestions for improvement, a number of opportunities for improvement were included in or emerged from their responses. These responses were framed as “How Might We” questions³ to encourage brainstorming of creative and client-centered opportunities by the training cooperative.

³ [The Secret Phrase Top Innovators Use](#) (2012); [How Might We Questions](#) (Stanford Design Thinking); [How Might We](#) (Design Kit)

How might we...

- ... Make the training experience more engaging for participants?
- ... Offer more relevant training topics?
- ... Increase opportunities for peer support among foster parents?
- ... Utilize alternative training formats (e.g., webinars)?
- ... Provide more training times and options?
- ... Make quality child care available during training?

The findings were shared with the cooperative partners at their February meeting. DHS staff will be meeting individually with cooperative members to discuss the “How Might We?” questions and brainstorm opportunities for impact.

SURVEY DESIGN, ADMINISTRATION AND ANALYSIS
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