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Reimagining the Foster Parent Journey

A journey of learning,
leadership and lasting impact

Executive Summary

Across the country, child welfare agencies face mounting pressure to recruit, onboard, and retain foster parents who are equipped to provide safe, nurturing homes for children in need. Yet, the traditional foster parent journey is often fragmented, slow, and discouraging, leading to high attrition and missed opportunities for positive outcomes. Understanding these challenges, bringing a human-centered approach, and reimagining the foster parent experience from first contact through long-term engagement can drive an effective recruitment strategy that better serves foster parents and the children they care for, and supports public child welfare agencies in advancing the federal goal of A Home for Every Child.

Empowering state agencies with an efficient, end-to-end digital strategy enables targeted, data-driven outreach to increase the recruitment of qualified prospective foster parents. Leveraging analytics to tailor messaging can maximize engagement. Automated application and training steps reduce administrative burden and accelerate applicant progress. Personalized navigation and multi-channel support provide applicants with timely, relevant guidance and assistance. By streamlining and automating steps in the foster parent journey, agencies can significantly ease the administrative workload on child welfare staff.

Rather than spending hours coordinating with, and following up on, prospective foster parents, staff can rely on efficient digital tools and automated communications to keep applicants informed and moving forward. This not only helps staff reclaim valuable time for other tasks to support families and improve outcomes for children, but also boosts team morale by reducing repetitive, time-consuming tasks.

Beyond just onboarding, a full recruitment strategy supports and retains a vibrant community of foster parents through ongoing learning, peer support, and professional development opportunities. Continuous feedback loops help agencies understand the experiences of prospective and licensed foster parents and gather real-time analytics, empowering agencies to monitor progress, identify barriers, and adapt quickly to evolving needs.

There is no one-size-fits-all remedy; every state begins with a different policy, funding, and capacity context. Leveraging demonstrated leading practices that address the unique challenges agencies face can result in effective, sustainable improvements. This enables a supportive foster parent journey that can drive higher retention, reduce time to placement, and improve outcomes for children and families.

Introduction

Modernization Matters

The shortage of foster parents nationwide directly results in negative outcomes for children – limited placement options mean too many young people are left in overcrowded homes or spend extended periods in congregate care facilities instead of supportive family environments. This not only impacts their sense of stability and well-being but also leads to increased emotional distress and hinders their long-term development. Compounding these challenges, the shortage of foster parents is also very expensive, straining agency budgets and resources, and causing child welfare professionals to manage unmanageable caseloads. The federal focus on A Home for Every Child and the ratio of children in care to foster care beds intensifies this need.

These pressures underscore the urgent need for digital solutions that can streamline processes, reduce manual workload, and increase efficiency. In a recent engagement, Deloitte helped a state social services agency modernize its provider portal, saving over 300 hours of staff time each month, reducing providers' monthly payment submission from 250 minutes to just 5 minutes, and eliminating thousands of paper forms. This demonstrates how technology-driven transformation can deliver measurable, real-world results for complex social service programs.

Additionally, the current foster parent recruitment process is often cumbersome and lacks transparency, deterring potential foster parents from completing the application process. Across many jurisdictions, agencies report significant drop-off during the early stages of the licensing pipeline, as lengthy timelines, complex paperwork, and limited visibility into next steps discourage otherwise willing families from moving forward. This indicates that traditional recruitment methods are no longer effective in meeting the increasing demand for foster parents.

Despite agencies' commitment to creating a smoother, more supportive journey for prospective foster parents, recruitment processes remain fragmented and resource intensive. This disconnect limits the number of licensed families and strains staff capacity, which ultimately impacts positive outcomes for children who need stable homes.

Challenges for foster parent recruitment include:



Recruitment Methods

Traditional recruitment methods (e.g., in-person interactions at community events, flyers, posters, and bulletin boards) have historically been the main methods to promote and support foster parent recruitment. However, these methods fail to take advantage of available technology, they require significant resources to implement, and their impact is difficult to measure. Additionally, caseworkers and state agencies often lack expertise in effective marketing strategies.



Application and Onboarding

The foster parent application process is burdensome and complicated. States have unique application requirements that can be cumbersome to manage. Training and required home studies can be lengthy. These process-related bottlenecks can cause suitable families to drop out before licensing and/or placement.



Supporting Foster Parents

Although many families are eligible to foster children, only a small percentage take placement, and those who do often encounter obstacles that reduce retention. The financial strain can be significant, and a lack of resources further challenges foster parents, making the overall experience feel demanding and overwhelming. Additionally, misunderstandings of role expectations, lack of community support, and lack of instruction can lead foster parents to drop out.

By addressing these challenges head-on, agencies can move closer to an effective, data-driven, and inclusive experience that attracts more families, accelerates licensing, and sustains foster parents for the long term, better positioning agencies to provide suitable beds for children in their care. The following section outlines several approaches to overcome the known challenges.

Foster Parent Recruitment Strategies

Recruiting, licensing, and retaining foster families are persistent challenges for child welfare agencies nationwide. Addressing these challenges requires a modern, data-driven, and human-centered approach that integrates demonstrated strategies from both child welfare and innovative digital transformation initiatives. Deloitte applies industry-leading analytics, digital platforms, and behavioral insights to help agencies reimagine the foster care journey. Drawing from experience across various public sector modernization efforts, Deloitte's work has streamlined recruitment, improved applicant experience, and reduced administrative barriers.

Foster parent recruitment is grounded in three principles: data-driven targeting, human-centered engagement, and continuous improvement. These principles combine demonstrated child welfare practices with innovative recruitment and marketing strategies to help agencies reach, engage, and retain a broad pool of foster families. Advanced analytics and digital tools support identification of recruitment "hot spots," streamline the inquiry and application process, and personalize support to guide prospective foster parents from initial interest through licensure and beyond. Deloitte's approach is organized into four practical phases:



**Targeted Outreach
& Awareness**



**Streamlined Inquiry &
Application**



**Personalized Navigation
& Support**



**Retention & Community
Building.**

There is no "quick fix" to foster parent recruitment. Every state begins in a different place and faces its own policy, capacity, and funding constraints. Bringing lessons learned from multiple states, adapting them to specific needs, and moving the needle in measurable and sustainable increments allows agencies to develop thoughtful strategies for a deeply complex system.

Whether modernizing legacy processes or launching new recruitment initiatives, measurable improvements can be made at each stage of the foster parent journey and ultimately improve outcomes for children and families.

Approach Phases

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Phase 1: Targeted Outreach & Awareness

Agencies can identify and reach prospective foster parents through data-driven segmentation, geo-targeted campaigns, and behavioral-science-informed messaging. Leveraging advanced analytics, geographic and demographic “hot spots” can be pinpointed enabling recruitment resources to be focused where they will have the greatest impact. Multi-channel outreach—such as digital advertising, social media, and community partnerships—can be tailored to engage a broad range of potential foster parents. Messaging is continuously refined using behavioral insights to maximize engagement and drive action. Outreach activities can be measured in real time, enabling rapid adjustment and continuous improvement for optimal results.

Deloitte has supported multiple public sector agencies in leveraging advanced analytics, geographic

targeting, and behavioral insights to tailor and enhance outreach campaigns. Leveraging tools such as Deloitte’s Children360, agencies have been able to analyze prospective foster family populations by demographic, resource proximity, and neighborhood patterns which enables highly targeted outreach in areas with the highest likelihood of success. This granular, data-driven approach equips recruiters with daily heat-maps of “resource deserts” and predictive household readiness scores, increasing inquiries from underrepresented ZIP codes and boosting inquiry-to-orientation conversions. In addition, Deloitte subject matter specialists help implement real-time measurement frameworks that enable continuous improvement and data-driven decision making.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES	POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO AGENCY
Predictive analytics for targeting	Higher conversion rates, lower spend
Digital and social media campaigns	Broader applicant pool
Behavioral science and nudging	Messaging that can drive action
Multi-channel outreach strategies	Increased awareness and engagement
Real-time performance measurement	Ability to enhance efforts continuously

Approach Phases

02

Phase 2: Streamlined Inquiry & Application

Simplifying the process from the first inquiry through application submission centers on intuitive, user-friendly digital platforms that allow applicants to express interest, receive personalized guidance, and track progress in a streamlined fashion. Self-service portals and mobile-friendly tools that reduce paperwork, automate eligibility checks, and provide real-time status updates help to provide integrated, clear instructions, responsive support, and automated reminders. These types of functionalities help agencies minimize drop-off rates and accelerate the path from inquiry to completed application.

Deloitte engaged with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) to implement a modern, centralized platform for campaign management, recruiter workflow, and automated communications. The new solution digitized the full recruitment and

application cycle, giving prospective foster parents online access to indicate interest, receive automated updates, and connect with recruiters while enabling DCF staff to manage, monitor, and improve thousands of concurrent campaigns from a single system. Since go-live, the platform has supported over 4,000 active campaigns, generated more than 13,000 foster parent leads, and moved 3,000+ applicants into training. Executive dashboards and streamlined reporting also free up DCF caseworkers to focus more deeply on supporting families rather than managing paperwork or disparate systems.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES	POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO AGENCY
User-centered digital portals	Higher completion rates, reduced barriers
Automated eligibility and status tracking	Faster processing, less manual effort
Self-service and mobile access	Greater convenience, broader reach
Personalized guidance and support	Improved applicant experience
Automated reminders and notifications	Reduced drop-off, faster cycle times

Approach Phases

03

Phase 3: Personalized Navigation & Support

Tailored support and proactive communication help guide prospective foster parents through every step of the process. Digital tools and data-driven insights can deliver personalized checklists, reminders, and resource recommendations based on each applicant's unique needs and progress. Dedicated support channels (such as live chat, virtual assistants, and on-demand help) allow questions to be answered quickly and barriers are addressed in real time. By integrating feedback loops and progress tracking, both applicants and agency staff are empowered to stay informed and engaged, resulting in improved completion rates.

Deloitte engaged with the State of Delaware to modernize their Child Care Provider Portal, implementing a mobile-friendly, 24/7 solution for more than 900 child care providers. This portal includes customized self-service features, proactive

alerts on licensing and contract renewals, and real-time data integrations that improve support, transparency, and responsiveness for families and providers. By streamlining communications and empowering users with intuitive digital tools, Delaware improved service consistency for over 28,000 children while reducing administrative burden for both providers and agency staff. The system functionality and processing enabled in Delaware could support applicable resource family home licensing processes and communications to increase licensed homes and system capacity.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES	POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO AGENCY
Personalized digital guidance and checklists	Increased applicant confidence, fewer errors
Proactive reminders and resource suggestions	Reduced drop-off, faster progress
Multi-channel support (chat, help desk)	Timely assistance, higher satisfaction
Real-time progress tracking	Greater transparency, improved engagement
Feedback loops and continuous improvement	Ongoing process enhancements

Approach Phases

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Phase 4: Retention & Community Building

Ongoing support, recognition, and opportunities for connection can help agencies foster long-term engagement and satisfaction among foster parents. Digital platforms and community-building initiatives support the creation of networks where foster parents can share experiences, access resources, and receive peer and professional support. Regular communication, appreciation programs, and tailored learning opportunities can help strengthen relationships and reinforce a sense of belonging. By monitoring engagement and gathering feedback, agencies are enabled to proactively address challenges and continuously enhance the foster parent experience, supporting retention and positive outcomes for families.

Deloitte can help to strengthen foster parent retention and satisfaction by building digital platforms

and support communities that nurture ongoing connection and shared learning. With regular feedback collection and broad analytics, agencies can quickly identify trends, proactively address concerns, and reinforce stability which results in stronger, more resilient foster families and better outcomes for children.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES	POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO AGENCY
Digital communities and peer networks	Stronger support system, reduced isolation
Ongoing communication and appreciation	Higher satisfaction, increased retention
Tailored learning and resource sharing	Continued growth, improved caregiver skills
Engagement monitoring and feedback loops	Early issue identification
Recognition and incentive programs	Enhanced motivation, sense of value

Risks and Challenges

Challenges will come with any transformation effort, especially when introducing new technology and processes, and sustained change requires a strategy that integrates policy alignment, stable funding, ongoing stakeholder engagement, and technology. The table below highlights some challenges to anticipate and strategies to address them:

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES	MITIGATION APPROACH	WHY THIS MATTERS
Resistance to digital adoption	Provide broad training, intuitive interfaces, and ongoing support	Supports the different needs users have to effectively engage with new systems, maximizing ROI and minimizing disruption
Data privacy and security concerns	Implement full security protocols, regular audits, and compliance measures	Protects sensitive information and builds trust
Integration with legacy systems	Use modular, flexible solutions and phased integration strategies	Enables effective transition without disrupting existing operations
Inconsistent engagement from foster parents	Deploy personalized outreach, reminders, and incentives	Maintains applicant momentum, improves retention, and supports effective placements
Accessibility for applicants	Design for accessibility, offer multilingual and alternative support options	Enables access for prospective foster parents



Conclusion

A Path Forward for Children and Families

Through continuous feedback and improvement, agencies can adapt to evolving needs and deliver better outcomes for children and families. By reimagining the foster parent journey, from initial outreach through retention and community building, agencies are empowered to identify, engage, and support foster families more effectively. Integrated, user-centered approaches that leverage digital platforms, automation, and data-driven insights can streamline processes, personalize support, and result in lasting connections.

As spotlighted above in the featured spotlights of the foster parent recruitment strategies, the implementation of a rounded, innovative, data-drive approach across the core areas of foster parent recruitment, (targeted outreach and awareness, streamlined inquiry and application, personalized navigation and support, and retention and community building), not only reduces administrative burden and accelerates applicant progress but also builds a resilient community of foster parents equipped for long-term effectiveness.