NEW YORK STATE | Office of Children and Family Services

Taking Action

A blueprint for targeted recruitment and retention of foster, adoptive, and kinship parents

www.recruit4fostercare.org

Innovations in Family Recruitment

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Revitalizing Recruitment: Taking Action

This is a how-to guide for foster care programs that want to put targeted, diligent recruitment into action. It is based on the research and real-life experiences of local Social Services Districts in New York State that are participating in the Innovations in Family Recruitment Project (IFR). Come back to this guide often as you engage in your recruitment and retention work.

Why is this work important?

Even the most robust foster care programs can face challenges in recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive families. Find out how data-driven recruitment can benefit your agency.

Your Recruitment & Retention Team

Building an active, creative team to revitalize recruitment and retention can involve agency staff, foster parents, older youth in care, and other key stakeholders. This resource describes how to organize and maintain your team.

> The process of putting diligent recruitment to work involves five key phases that are continuously reviewed, revised, and renewed. In the real world, the process is often not as neat and clear-cut as it appears here. Adapt this guide to your own real world, and expect success!

Collect data

Your agency already has much of the data it needs to begin to examine recruitment and retention. The key is to pull it all together so it can be analyzed and trends can be identified.

Analyze data

Analysis is the first step in making sense of the data you've collected, and helps to identify strengths and gaps in your agency's approach to recruitment and retention.

Make a plan

The Action Plan is a roadmap that captures the essential objectives revealed by your data. It should be a "live" document that can be revised and refined as needed.

Take action

Implementing the Action Plan (or getting the work done) should start as soon as possible to test your strategies and build on the interest and good will generated during the planning process.

Measure progress

Measuring the success of your efforts is a continuous, ongoing process. The recruitment team will regularly review the status of tasks and assess the impact of chosen strategies.

Why is this work important?

Even the most robust foster care programs can face challenges in recruiting and retaining foster/adoptive families. When your agency finds it does not have enough foster homes to meet the current demand, your first instinct may be to redouble your efforts to do more of the recruitment activities you've always done. But perhaps there is a better way. A careful look at data related to recruitment and retention of foster homes will help you create a roadmap to guide future actions.

Before you work *harder*, **dive into your data** and see if there's a way to work "*smarter.*"

The analysis of recruitment and retention data helps you create a strategy tailored to fit the needs of your agency. You can then base your recruitment decisions on accurate and complete information, reducing "guesswork" and reliance on anecdotes.

It's worth the effort

Some might argue that foster care agencies don't have the time or the staff to devote to data-driven recruitment. But it also can be argued that foster care agencies can't afford not to devote time to data collection and analysis.

In the middle of a routine day, a Child Protective Services worker knocks on the door and says, "We have four siblings coming into care this afternoon and have to find homes for them." Everyone drops everything and heads for the Rolodex, the spreadsheet, or whatever lists of foster parents they have. Which homes can take siblings? Which will take teens? Are there other foster children already in the home? Which homes will keep the children within their neighborhood, school, faith community, and social connections?

For one thing, agencies that know their data are better able to match the children coming into care with appropriate foster parents. For **children in care**, better matching of placements has been connected with improved placement stability. Placement stability is a key factor in increasing the probability that children's educational, physical, and mental health needs are properly addressed. **Foster parents** also benefit from appropriate matching, as it may increase their satisfaction and their willingness to continue as foster care providers.

When information about the characteristics and preferences of foster families are kept up-to-date, the caseworker can search for families by categories such as geographic location, ages of children, or expertise with special needs. This assists in identifying foster homes that are more likely to be a good match for the child in care.

We need more foster families!

An agency needed to certify more foster parents as quickly as possible to meet increasing demand. Staff began planning to double the number of general recruitment sessions to be presented at a local community center. But … staff then decided to take a careful look at their data to see if there might be other, more effective options. They discovered that 50 percent of the prospective families who completed MAPP training did not become certified. They then contacted each of these families over the prior three MAPP cycles to find out why. The staff found that the most common barrier was difficulty in completing the required paperwork. Small group sessions were formed to help the parents complete the paperwork, and in just a couple of months, the agency was able to certify more foster parents than they would have found through additional community presentations. And the foster parents were already trained!

There are other benefits as well. When collected systematically over a period of time, data can also reveal the answers to key questions, such as:

- What are the strengths and gaps of our current recruitment process?
- Are there bottlenecks along the path from inquiry to certification?
- How do the characteristics of available foster homes compare with those of children in need of care? For example, what are the primary languages spoken by current children in care and how does that compare to languages spoken by current foster parents?
- What is the retention rate for our foster parents?

While this approach requires an up-front investment of staff time, it can lead to more efficient deployment of staff, more targeted marketing, and better retention of foster parents. It's a win-win when decisions are based on data rather than "jumping to solutions" before problems are accurately identified.

Finding foster homes that meet current needs

Foster care staff were concerned that although they had open foster homes, they still had trouble placing some of the children coming into care. Before holding their next scheduled event at the local library, they took a step back and looked at the data. A review of placement records showed that a significant percentage of the children needing homes were part of sibling groups of three or four children. Half of these sibling groups included teens.

Based on this data, the agency changed its strategy. First, staff held "coffee and dessert" events for current foster parents to explain the need for homes for sibling groups. Foster parents were asked to consider accepting these groups, perhaps starting as weekend respite providers. Agency staff and selected foster parents also made a presentation at a high school Parent Teacher Organization meeting, with the goal of recruiting foster parents who were familiar with teens.

Forming a Recruitment & Retention Team

Local Social Services districts are encouraged to set up teams to plan and implement revitalized recruitment programs in their jurisdictions. While an outside facilitator is helpful to this process, such a person is not necessary as long as agency staff with the needed skills are available.

Commitment to change is essential, and this commitment must come from the top. The local commissioner of social services or agency director has to be on board with devoting staff time to this effort and with achieving a more systematic approach to recruitment. Ideally, this person is an active member of the team, especially at the onset. If this person is not a regular, ongoing member of the team, s/he should be informed of its progress, provide feedback to the team as needed, and attend meetings when possible.

What will the team do?

The Recruitment & Retention Team is responsible for guiding the agency through the process of revitalizing its recruitment efforts.

The team will:

- Determine the types of data related to recruitment and retention that are currently available
- Identify sources for additional data and obtain it, if needed
- Collect data in a way that facilitates review and analysis
- Use data to reveal strengths and gaps in current recruitment/retention efforts, and any underlying factors
- Develop strategies and actions to implement/recommend for the agency
- Carry out or assign tasks identified in an Action Plan
- Conduct an ongoing review of how the plan is progressing

Your first team meeting: jump start the conversation

- Who needs to be involved from our agency in the ongoing review and analysis of our recruitment and retention data?
- What is our overall process and approach for recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive parents?
- What is the current process for responding to and referring inquiries from prospective foster and adoptive parents?

Several of these activities may occur simultaneously at any given time.

Ideally, the team should be an ongoing part of the agency structure. The frequency of meetings will vary, but is recommended that the team meet at least every 4-6 weeks to check in, monitor progress, and make new assignments. Regularly scheduled team meetings, with written agendas, focused facilitation, and clear next steps are an important part of implementing an Action Plan.

Who should be on the team?

In addition to individuals involved in home finding, the ideal team includes staff members from all agency departments that interact with current and prospective foster/adoptive parents. Foster parents, older youth, and community stakeholders also should contribute to the team's work.

Team Leader/Facilitator: The team leader, who typically would be chosen by the agency director, should have the skills required to make meetings productive and monitor progress on assigned tasks. The leader does not make decisions *for* the group, but has the skills to encourage team members to contribute to decisions that are made *by* the group.

The team leader must be able to envision the desired outcomes for the project and one or more paths that could be used to reach those goals. He/she should be familiar with resources such as those provided by the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment (www.nrcdr.org) and *Revitalizing Recruitment*, the guide to recruitment strategies published by OFCS (www.recruit4fostercare.org).

The team leader also should have experience with and knowledge of the agency's current recruitment and retention practices.

Team Members: The ideal team involves staff members from all agency departments that interact with current and prospective foster/adoptive parents. In addition to **workers involved in homefinding**, team members might include:

- Administrative staff, such as Director of Services and Commissioner or CEO
- Foster care director and/or caseworker
- CPS supervisor and/or caseworker
- Preventive Services supervisor/caseworker
- Information technology and/or communications staff
- Foster/adoptive parent

Meaningful input from **foster parents** and **older youth in foster care** is likely to be valuable to the team. These individuals have first-hand knowledge about the foster care experience. Their regular participation in team meetings may not be feasible, however, due to work, school, and other commitments. Think about other ways to get their input, such as interacting with foster parent groups, developing an e-mail list, or forming a focus group. More than one youth should be involved with the team so they have peer support. **Community stakeholders** may be invited to attend meetings as needed for specific initiatives.

MAPP for all agency staff

In the course of its discussions, the recruitment team at a foster care agency realized that other caseworkers in the office were not fully aware of what is involved in becoming a foster parent. The team members presented an abbreviated version of the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) training to their fellow workers in protective and preventive services, and also offered it to new employees. This training provided common language and information to help engage caseworkers throughout the agency in supporting recruitment and retention work.

New ways to connect with the community

Building partnerships in the community also plays a role in diligent recruitment. At one local agency, the home finding group reached out to all agency staff, described the current recruitment needs, and asked fellow staff members for assistance. Communication was done in various ways, such as agency-wide meetings and email blasts. As a result, agency staff who were not in the home finding unit identified personal contacts in the community within faith-based and service organizations, who were then contacted by home finders. This generated previously untapped community partnerships for recruitment.

Getting "buy-in" from the agency and community

The presence of the team has an added benefit: an increased awareness of the value and priority of recruiting and retaining quality foster homes.

Within the agency, there is recognition that identifying and certifying foster homes is not just the responsibility of the home finders. The team members, and all agency staff, come to understand that recruitment and retention are everyone's responsibility.

Although the team and its activities are led by the agency, finding and keeping quality foster parents is important to the community as a whole. A strong foster care program promotes the safety and success of children in the community, which strengthens the entire community. When considering possible strategies for an Action Plan, the team may wish to involve community stakeholders, such as businesses and major employers, educational institutions, and faith-based organizations. The team's efforts will be most effective when the community is aware of and is engaged in this work.

What's the data … and where do you find it?

The first thing to remember about the data used to analyze recruitment and retention is that some of it is already in your hands. Much of the information has been captured by your agency in a variety of ways. The key is to pull it all together and find out what it reveals about strengths and gaps in your recruitment and retention process.

We have identified three types of data that can be explored in this way.

Tracking the process from inquiry to certification*:* data captured during the solicitation, engagement, and certification of prospective foster families.

Defining the characteristics of current and needed homes*:* data that provides a profile of the current foster homes and the characteristics of the children they are able to care for, compared to the needs of children coming into care.

Identifying retention successes and challenges*:* data that is collected about both current and former foster/adoptive homes.

These three types of data are central to review while developing a robust diligent recruitment process. Analyzing this type of information can illuminate trends, provide perspective, and help strategically address recruitment and retention needs.

Using data to reveal strengths and gaps

Data alone won't provide you with the steps to take toward a more effective recruitment plan. The key, of course, is how that data is used by your team. Analysis is the first step in making sense of the data you've collected, and in identifying strengths and gaps in your agency's approach, and the underlying conditions contributing to those strengths and gaps. This information helps you address current recruitment needs and plan for future recruitment challenges.

Part of this process is to use data to identify root causes and underlying factors. For example, the data shows a sudden increase in the numbers of infants coming into foster care. Is this a result of a heroin "epidemic" in the area? The number of Spanish-speaking teens has risen dramatically. Has there been a change in employment patterns in the community? Is this trend likely to continue?

Similarly, the data may show a shift in the ethnic backgrounds or primary language of children coming into care. Your team may find that changing immigration patterns in your area are the root cause of this shift. Identifying root causes of changing data trends helps agencies to be prepared to respond appropriately.

Tracking from inquiry to certification: review the data from records related to the solicitation, engagement, and certification of prospective foster families.

Characteristics of current and needed homes: analyze the data that describes the characteristics of current foster homes and children in care.

Retention successes and challenges: use your retention and survey results to get an accurate picture of how well your retention efforts are working.

Tracking the process from inquiry to certification

How many people contacted your agency last year to inquire about becoming foster/adoptive parents? Of those who made that initial contact, how many attended an orientation session? How many of those who completed MAPP training became certified foster parents?

To answer these questions, you need to determine the number of inquiries received from potential foster parents, the number who were certified, and the demographic characteristics of the families that completed the process. Agencies already collect this information in a variety of ways, however, many agencies have not assembled and analyzed the data in ways that help them address their recruitment and retention challenges.

If that is the case in your agency, the good news is that you probably already have much of the data you need. For example, most agencies keep a record of **inquiries** from members of the public who are interested in becoming foster parents. These inquiries can come in to the agency via phone, in person, e-mail, or an online form. On the initial form used by staff who receive these inquiries, the following types of data are usually collected:

- Date of the inquiry
- Name of inquirer
- Primary language of the inquirer
- Race/ethnicity of the inquirer
- ZIP code of the inquirer

Some agencies also ask how the inquirer learned about the need for foster parents (public service announcement, website, informational event, word of mouth, etc.).

Consider these key questions:

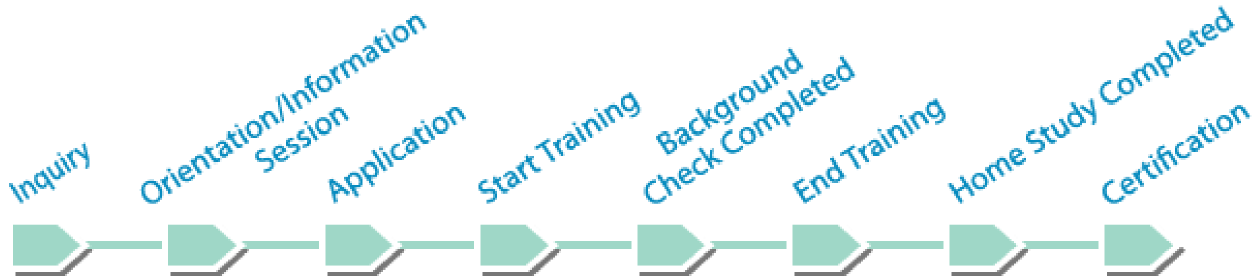
- What types of data does your agency collect at inquiry?
- Where is this information stored?
- Would it be helpful to collect additional data?
- If so, what?

The importance of following up

After collecting its data, one agency found that a large percentage of individuals who inquired about becoming foster parents were never heard from again. The agency's practice in responding to an inquiry was to send a package of information in the mail and waiting for a response. In the majority of cases, no response was received and the inquiry was abandoned. Based on its review of the data, the agency initiated a practice that required a personal follow-up, either by phone or in person, with every potential foster parent who contacted the agency. The agency staff person who made the follow-up contact was prepared to answer questions about foster parenting and provide information about the next orientation session. Within six months, the agency saw a significant increase in the number of inquirers who attended orientation and began the certification process.

Map your agency's certification process

Draw a simple diagram of the major milestones prospective foster families must complete on the path from inquiry to certification.



The number and sequence of these milestones will vary from one agency to another. For most, individuals who inquire about becoming foster parents are invited to attend an **orientation or information session**. The session roster usually includes the date of the session, names of attendees, and perhaps additional contact information.

MAPP training is typically the next step on the timeline to certification. These records include the names of those who attended trainings, the dates, and when they successfully completed the training.

Other steps on the path to certification include **background checks** for criminal history and **home studies.** Data is collected at each of these points. The final information to be recorded is the **certification date** for the foster home.

Small data sets can yield big results in tracking certification trends, training completion rates, etc. Below are some of the data elements your agency may already collect.

Data Elements	Possible Sources
Date of inquiry	Log from phone and/or email
Referral source	Inquiry form
Race/ethnicity of inquirer	Inquiry form
Primary and secondary language	Inquiry form
Location of inquirer	Inquiry form
Orientation date	Orientation sign-in sheets
Date application received	Postmark or email record
Dates MAPP training started & completed	Training sign-in sheets
Date fingerprinting results received	Fingerprint report
Date home study completed	Applicant file or CONNECTIONS
Certification date	Applicant file or CONNECTIONS

Organize your data

While most agencies have this information, it often is kept in ways that make it difficult to analyze it and draw conclusions.

Agencies tend to have paper copies of inquiries stored in one area, while records of attendance at orientations or trainings are kept in another. Some agencies may not have found easy ways to keep records that follow each inquiry throughout the process and track the time it takes for each step.

Agencies recognize that organizing their data is essential before it can be used to drive recruitment strategies. When data elements are entered into a spreadsheet or database, it's possible to track the percentage of applicants who made it all the way through the process and how long it took for them to complete the process.

An increasing number of agencies have begun to use the **Family Intake Tracking Tool (FITT)** developed by AdoptUsKids. This online database is available free of charge to child welfare professionals, and is designed to make it easier for them to track foster/adoptive families throughout the certification process. For more information, see this fact sheet or email info@welfareresearch.org.

If you plan to use a **spreadsheet** to collect this information, it is crucial to group your data in a way that will simplify further analysis. In database terms, these groups are called "fields." Make sure each field is limited so the information is as specific as possible. Here's an example.

Follow these steps to organize your data.

STEP 1: Decide on a timeframe to review; one year is recommended.

STEP 2: Assemble information on inquiries that have come in during the last 12 months. Enter the name of the family that inquired and date of inquiry. If possible, enter the referral source for each inquiry. Use one entry for each home represented by the inquiry (e.g., Jones, John & Jane), rather than making an entry for each individual in the home.

STEP 3: Enter names and dates from the sign-in sheets used at orientation sessions held during the time period. Some names may correspond with inquirers and some may not already be in the chart. For example, some people may attend orientation because they were invited by someone or were told about the session through other means. How many inquirers attended an orientation session within 12 months?

STEP 4: Enter names and dates from the sign-in sheets for each MAPP/GPS training held during the time period. How many of those who attended orientation also attended the first MAPP class? On average, how long did it take to get from inquiry to the first MAPP training class?

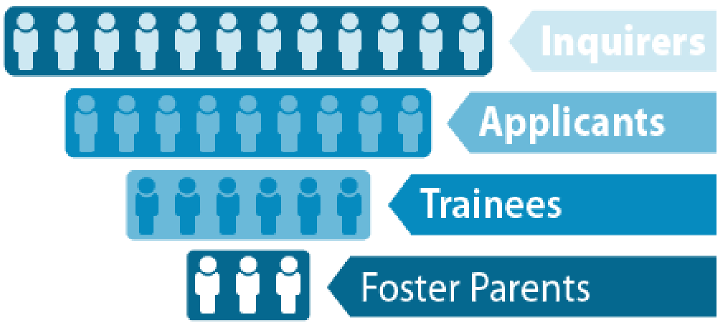
As you continue to track participants over the course of the MAPP trainings, you will be able to determine how many people completed the training. How many families stopped attending classes? Is there a session where most people stop coming? Is the "drop out" rate consistent from course to course and trainer to trainer?

STEP 5: Enter information from other milestones in the certification process, such as completion of the home study and final certification.

How to use inquiry-to-certification data

Recruiters know that not all of the individuals who make initial contacts with the agency will complete the process of being certified as foster parents. There is a gradual reduction in the number of people who inquire about foster parenting to the number who attend information sessions, and a similar drop in the number who submit applications and the number that begins MAPP training. This gradual reduction can be illustrated as a "funnel."

One goal of effective recruitment is to widen the bottom of the funnel. Families coming into the funnel should be those who are most likely to stay with the certification process and successfully foster a child. Keep in mind that there may be healthy self-selection out of the process; some prospective families may decide that becoming a foster parent is not for them. Also, your agency may not certify all applicants due to factors such as a problematic background check. The funnel gives an agency a lens for evaluating the numbers and characteristics of families that completed the certification process.



The entire Recruitment & Retention Team should be involved in analyzing the data. The analysis will naturally lead the team to ask some key questions, such as:

- How many inquiries did we receive over the past year? How did most of the inquirers learn about the need for foster parents?
- What were the demographics of the families that completed the entire process and were certified?
- From what neighborhoods did most of the inquiries and MAPP trainees come?

Often, these questions will reveal a need for more data or will help the agency target its recruitment efforts.

This worksheet is designed to help agencies organize and assess this data.

More user-friendly paperwork

One agency was happy to see that most of the prospective foster parents who started MAPP successfully completed the training. They were puzzled to learn, however, that only half of these families were eventually certified. A closer look at the data revealed that certification paperwork wasn't being submitted. This was partly due to unclear deadlines and complicated instructions. The agency developed a user-friendly Foster Parent Paperwork Checklist that was welcomed by applicants.

Earlier face-to-face home visits

Another agency also determined that a significant number of families completed MAPP training but did not become certified. A case review showed that, after training was complete, the agency conducted a home visit and found that applicants' homes were not safe or appropriate for children in foster care. In response, the county scheduled home visits at an earlier point in the overall process. These face-to-face meetings allowed staff to start to build a working relationship with the prospective foster parent, communicate the agency's expectations, see whether the home met physical and safety requirements, and discuss other sensitive issues that might prevent the family from being certified.

Locating bottlenecks in the process

Collecting data on the individuals who have contacted the foster care agency and then tracking it over time can reveal bottlenecks in the system.

Bottlenecks in the system are indicated when it takes an unreasonable period of time to complete a particular step. For example, you may find that it takes 18 months for the majority of applicants to be certified as foster parents. By tabulating the time required for each step of the process for all applicants, you discover that it takes an average of five months for a person to start MAPP training after they have submitted an application.

- What does this tell you?
- Does this have an impact on whether applicants complete the process?
- What can be done to reduce the time it takes to be certified?

Involve key agency personnel to address the more challenging bottlenecks. Who needs to be around the table to discuss the current challenges and opportunities that may exist? Share the findings revealed by the data and suggest a meeting to discuss the issues.

Click here for suggested strategies for keeping prospective foster parents engaged in the process.

Describing current foster homes and children in care

Targeted recruitment directs an agency's resources and efforts where they are mostly likely to yield results. As a data- driven technique, it requires agencies to have an accurate picture of the types of foster homes that are needed in your area. To get this picture, you will need information about the current foster homes and the children receiving foster care. This will allow you to determine the gaps between available homes and homes that will meet the needs of children coming into care.

Characteristics of children in care

Data on the characteristics of children in foster care can be obtained from agency records and reports available from OCFS.

Obtain data on children who were placed in foster care through your agency over the previous 12 months, including as many key demographics as possible. In New York State, a list of placements may be created from reports compiled by the OCFS Data Warehouse, such as the "Foster Care Roster by District" or "Admissions to Foster Care Summary" report. Your county's Data Warehouse liaison can help you access these reports. If your county has no liaison, contact the OCFS Regional Office in your area.

OCFS publishes Monitoring and Analysis Profiles (MAPS) each year that provide county- and state-level data related to foster care, adoption, and child protective services. MAPS for each county, New York City, upstate New York, and the state as a whole are available online.

MAPS data includes an annual summary of the numbers and percentages of:

- Children who were admitted to foster care during past 12 months and each of the previous four years
- Children who were discharged from foster care during past 12 months and each of the previous four years
- Children who were in care at the end of the 12-month period and each of the previous four years
- Age/race/ethnicity of children in care
- Sibling groups of two, three, or more than four
- Where children were discharged (birth family, relatives, etc.)
- Percent of children in care placed in kinship homes

Depending on the size of your agency, you may want to use local data systems or review a sample of case files to supplement what is available from other sources. This information might include:

- Sibling group (including size of sibling group)
- School district or community district where child resided at time of placement
- Special needs (medical, physical, cognitive, emotional)

This worksheet developed by the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment can be used as a model for organizing your data.

Foster care agencies in New York State are required to submit Recruitment and Retention Plans to OCFS every three years. Your agency's report may provide data projections and the basis for its current recruitment focus.

Characteristics of foster homes

The characteristics of the agency's pool of foster homes can be obtained from agency records, from data such as demographic information, location, and placement preferences.

Information should be gathered on the current pool of foster/adoptive and kinship homes, including:

- The number of foster/adoptive and kinship homes
- The demographic characteristics of the current pool of foster families.
- Placement preferences of the current families (age and gender of children, special needs, etc.)
- Locations of current foster homes in each neighborhood area.
- The number of foster families that have not had a placement within the past six months

It is worthwhile to track kinship homes. By determining the proportion of your certified homes that are kinship foster homes, you can more accurately establish the number of available homes for children in non-kinship settings.

OCFS Data Warehouse reports that can be used to access this data include the "Facility Detail Report" and the "Facility Summary List Report." This worksheet developed by the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment can be used as a model for organizing your data.

Making sense of the data

Data alone won't provide you with the steps to take toward a more effective recruitment plan. Analysis is the first step in making sense of the data you've collected, and helps you identify strengths and gaps in your agency's approach. The next step is to address current recruitment needs and plan for the future.

What do the numbers tell you?

As your team reviews the data it has collected about the characteristics of foster homes and of children in care, several significant bits of information may jump out at you.

For example, what does this table of data reveal about the sibling groups admitted into care over the previous three years? Trends can be illustrated by entering the numbers into a chart format. What do these numbers and trends tell you about the needs of children coming into care?

	2013 130 total children		**2014** 146 total children		**2015** 149 total children	
Size of Sibling Groups	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
2	16	18	14	14	19	19
3	4	4	7	7	9	9
4	2	2	5	5	6	6
5 or more	2	2	1	1	1	1
1 child only	68	74	72	73	65	65
Total # of Groups	92	100	99	100	100	100

- About two thirds of the placements over the three-year period involved one child
- The need for homes for sibling groups of three has increased from four to nine homes
- The need for homes for sibling groups of four has increased from two to six homes
- The need for homes for sibling groups of two has remained somewhat constant
- Relative to the other types of sibling groups, the need for homes for five or more is less frequent

These observations help build a picture of the types of homes that are likely to be needed for children coming into care. In this example, the data showed a trend in the need for homes for 3- or 4-child sibling groups, growing from six homes in 2013 to 15 homes in 2015. Alongside this trend, the predominant need, as seen in the most recent year, continues to be homes for sibling groups of two (19 percent of all homes) and homes for one child (65 percent of all homes).

Compare needs with current foster homes

Compare your current recruitment needs with your current pool of certified foster homes. What demographics or characteristics are your current homes able to serve? Would increasing the use of kinship homes help meet the needs of children in care?

Are there critical needs that are not being met by the current pool? Are there homes that could be re-recruited to meet your current needs? This information helps shape your targeted recruitment plan, including the Recruitment and Retention Plan your agency submits to OCFS every three years.

If there are gaps between needs and services, these areas may be "hard-to-find homes." As a team, discuss questions such as: Which homes were easy to find? Which were more difficult, and why? This should help shift thinking from "hard-to-place children" to "hard-to-find homes."

Zero in on the homes that are most difficult to find, and identify the characteristics that are the most common (e.g., homes for teens, homes for children who are medically fragile). Based on your review of your data, what do you consider the key characteristics of your most-needed homes?

For more information about targeted recruitment strategies and hard-to-find homes, see the Revitalizing Recruitment resource. The National Diligent Recruitment Resource Center recently released this toolkit to assist in the development of recruitment plans.

Meeting current needs by re-recruiting existing foster homes

One county agency saw a surge in the number of infants entering foster care who were born with an opioid addiction or had tested positive for drugs. The agency developed a profile of the foster home that could meet this need. For example, a stay-at-home parent was required because of the unique medical and social-emotional needs of an infant who is drug-addicted.

Upon reviewing their current data, the agency found that few of the families in its current foster parent pool were certified to take infants and even fewer included stay-at-home parents. The team went on to identify current foster parents who were certified for other age groups and did not have a child placed in their home. These foster parents were invited to a meeting where they learned about the need and met other foster parents that had cared for these infants. Within a few months, several families had chosen to change their certification to accommodate infants.

Foster parents as recruiters

One agency determined that it needed to increase the number of certified homes for children of Hispanic heritage. Based on the long-recognized principle that foster parents are the best recruiters, the team contracted with a foster parent who had connections in the Latino community. Using the Foster Parents as Recruiters Program, the agency compensated the foster parent to help them develop a plan for recruiting Latino homes, and then to take on a direct role in recruitment. The foster parent identified a half dozen contacts in the community and invited this group to a personalized, bilingual information session at the local Hispanic community center. Three families applied to become foster parents.

Keeping foster homes open – what works best?

On average, how long do foster parents stay with your agency? Is this period of time getting longer or shorter in recent years? What is the most common reason a foster parent closes their home? Data related to the retention of your agency's foster homes can help shape your strategies for meeting the needs of children in care.

Agencies often set goals for retention, such as, "We'd like to have a retention rate of 85 percent." But what exactly is meant by "retention" and how do we measure it? To take a first look at retention, consider your open homes and your closed homes.

Analyzing your **open homes** helps you understand which homes you are keeping in your pool and what those homes offer your agency. Assessing your **closed homes** helps you understand which homes have left your agency and why. At face value, open homes appear to be those that your agency has retained, and closed homes are those not retained. However, this is not entirely the case – retention involves multiple factors, such whether homes are both open and active.

Open homes can be inactive homes

*Your pool of open foster homes consists of homes that are "active and "inactive." **Active homes** are regularly used for placements and inactive homes are rarely or never used for placements.*

Nationwide, an average of 20 percent of foster families provide 60-80 percent of placements (Gibbs, 2005). Approximately one third of available homes do not have placements at any given time. Underutilization of certified foster homes is not healthy for a foster care program, and creates additional strain on an agency that is striving to recruit families (Rhodes et al., 2006). Families that are rarely utilized still require precious staff time, for example, during the re-certification process. And underutilized families may become disengaged with the foster care agency, lessening their willingness to accept placements. This, in turn, decreases the agency's ability to meet the needs of children in care.

One way to determine which of your homes are active versus inactive is to do a **utilization study**. Utilization studies shed light on how many homes are under-utilized, the reasons why, and importantly, what would it take to increase usage of inactive homes? Breaking down your pool of foster homes into "active" and "inactive" helps you understand your retention successes and challenges.

For example, if 80 percent of your homes remained open during the last year, but only half of those were active, your actual percentage of available homes is 40 percent. This means that 40 percent of your certified homes are inactive.

How well are you recruiting kinship homes?

Developing kinship homes is a critical strategy for finding homes that best meet children's needs. A kinship home can be ideal in that it provides continuity with the child's culture and creates permanency with family members.

Kinship data can help you determine how your agency's performance compares with state and national averages. For example, if 18 percent of your children in care have been placed in **kinship foster homes,** this compares well with the average for upstate New York, where 9.5 percent of children were placed in approved relative homes in 2015. In New York City, however, 30.7 percent of children in care were placed in approved relative homes (Source: New York State Monitoring and Assessment Profiles). A review of national data shows that the top 10 percent of agencies had 36 to 48 percent of children in kinship placements. Median performance was 23 percent. So, an 18 percent level is below the national average, and your team may want to assess this for possible action.

Undertaking a utilization study requires some time and effort by caseworkers, but should produce valuable information for recruitment planning. This utilization study template was created by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Calculating retention rate

The trend in an agency's retention rate can indicate whether some practices need to change.

Using numbers of open and closed homes, there are various methods for calculating a measure of retention. No matter what method you use, the important thing is to be able compare a numerical measure of retention over time to understand trends. Agency data and/or the "Facility Detail Report" provided by the New York State OCFS Data Warehouse will tell you the number of open foster homes you have.

Here is one way to calculate a rate of retention. For the previous 12 month period, determine the number of open homes at the start of the period, and the number of open homes at the end of the period, then factor in newly recruited homes.

Number of open foster homes on Jan 1	120
Number of foster homes that were certified between Jan 1 and Dec 31	34
Number of open foster homes on Dec 31	110

Sample Formula:

[(# open homes at end of the year) **-** (# new homes certified during the year)] ÷ (# open homes at the start of the year) = (% of retained homes) or rate of retention

110 - 34 = 76
76 ÷ 120 = .633 or **63.3 percent retention rate**

Enter your agency's data in this table, then use the formula below to calculate a retention rate:

Number of open foster homes on Jan 1	
Number of foster homes that were certified between Jan 1 and Dec 31	
Number of open foster homes on Dec 31	

Apply Formula:

[(# open homes at end of the year) **-** (# new homes certified during the year)] ÷ (# open homes at the start of the year) = **Retention Rate**

Drilling down to the “why?”

After identifying retention trends in their data, agencies will want to explore what those trends mean. Specifically, they need to determine why families stopped providing foster care.

Agency staff who interact with foster families may know their individual reasons, but may not be in a position to see the big picture. Are there reasons that are much more common than others? Do these reasons occur often enough to indicate a systemic problem?

The number of foster homes that have closed during the previous three months can be run from the OCFS Data Warehouse “Closed Facility Report.” Almost half of foster parents quit within a year of their first placement (Rhodes et al., 2006). Some reasons are positive, such as the adoption of a child from foster care and subsequent closing of the home. Other reasons involve changes in the foster parents’ circumstances, such as a move out of the area or a health problem.

In a survey conducted by OCFS, the second most commonly cited reason that foster parents closed their homes voluntarily was dissatisfaction with the agency. This reason is *preventable*, indicating that a change in agency policies and procedures could have a positive effect on retention. More in-depth information about “why” can be obtained through a survey, a questionnaire, case reviews, or an “exit interview” when a foster home is closed.

Taking the pulse of your foster parents

It is recommended that agencies conduct annual surveys of foster parents. Satisfaction surveys can be distributed to all, or to a sample of, current foster parents.

Some agencies have used an online survey tool such as Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) or SurveyGizmo (www.surveygizmo.com), both of which allow users to conduct simple surveys at no charge. “Customer Satisfaction” survey templates can be used as starting points for foster parent satisfaction surveys.

This survey was developed by Child Trends, and has been used in the pilot counties. The survey instrument could be completed online or on paper. Other examples of surveys can be found by visiting www.nrdcr.org and searching the term “survey.”

Be sure to inform participants *before* the survey is distributed, and send several reminders during the survey to encourage participation. Your announcement and reminders should explain the purpose of the survey, the importance of foster parents’ participation, and how the results will be shared. An acceptable response rate for an online survey is about 30 percent.

Child welfare agencies have improved response rates by placing laptops in visitation areas so foster parents can complete a survey while children are visiting with their birth parents. The survey can be publicized through the agency’s foster parent Facebook page or newsletter, foster parent meetings, and email lists. Giving participants an option to complete a paper version of the survey also can increase the response rate.

It may be helpful to partner with a local university to create the architecture of the survey, provide distribution advice, and analyze results. Usually this can be at little to no cost, as students may be able to help design the survey and analyze the results.

With appropriate review and analysis, surveys can become an integral part of obtaining foster parent feedback. Surveys can be utilized at various phases of programming: during the certification process to follow up with families who do not complete the entire process, after training, upon first placement, at regular intervals (e.g., annually), or when a home is closed. Surveys also can spark dialogue between foster parents and staff around issues that matter to both the foster parents and the agency.

With any survey, it is important that the results are analyzed, and that findings are shared with staff and foster parents. Here are some other ways to gather information on foster parents' needs and opinions:

1. Make scheduled phone calls to current foster parents to "check-in" and gather input on their experiences and needs. These phone calls should follow a common script or group of standard questions, with the feedback carefully documented and compiled.
2. Distribute a survey or questionnaire to foster parents who have decided to close their homes. It should ask questions that encourage honest responses and solicit concrete and innovative suggestions for improvement. Responses can be anonymous, unless the parents want to identify themselves. This survey was created by the New Mexico Step Up! Diligent Recruitment Project.

Using data to build an effective retention plan

You have collected data about the number and characteristics of active, inactive, and closed foster homes. When paired with a survey tool that asks the “why?” question, you’re in a good position to develop a plan to both recruit and retain foster homes.

For example, your utilization study has identified homes that have not received placements for six months or more. While these homes are technically open, they are inactive. Perhaps some of these homes need to be closed, if they are unsuitable for placements.

On the other hand, you may want to re-recruit from this inactive pool, based on your newly acquired data that describes the current needs of children coming into care. Steps could be taken to reactivate inactive homes so they will take placements again. For example, a foster family that had expressed a preference for young children might be given information about the needs of teens. With additional support, that family might agree to take a 14-year-old into their care.

Open But Inactive = Opportunity

Can some of your dormant foster homes be reactivated? It’s worth the time and effort to contact qualified foster parents about emerging needs that they could fill.

What’s your retention trend?

Your current retention rate should be viewed in the context of previous years as your team begins to discuss what this number means.

In the previous example, an agency calculated a 63 percent retention rate for the current year. To establish the meaning of that number, the team calculated the rate for two previous years and compared the results:

Year 1	**Year 2**	**Year 3**
72%	70%	63%

The agency’s retention rate decreased steadily over the past three years. What does this mean? What additional information do you need to understand this trend? Bring this information to your team and discuss this question. A review of “closed home reasons” in CONNECTIONS or case files may show that most of the homes closed for non-preventable reasons, such as an increase in adoptions or the agency’s effort to close long-inactive homes. It is also possible that the declining retention of foster homes is due to a preventable reason, such as inadequate support for foster parents. Case file reviews or the results of “exit interviews” would help to support or remove this possibility.

Analyzing survey results

During the survey design process, your team should discuss how the responses will be analyzed and interpreted. Survey data will only be useful if it is tabulated and analyzed.

One agency noted that a survey of foster parents had been done several years before. When asked about the results of the survey, however, staff explained that the data had never been tabulated or analyzed for trends. This can be discouraging both to staff and the foster parents that completed the survey.

If you have partnered with a university or third party, or if you have conducted the survey with an online application such as Survey Monkey, data tabulation will be part of the package. Websites such as these offer a wealth of tools that can help you understand the data, as well as to share the data in useful terms.

If you have created an interview form or simple questionnaire, these analysis tips might be helpful:

- **Tabulate the results**. For instance, if foster parents checked boxes or circled numbers to indicate their level of satisfaction, you just need to count the answers. In this example, foster parents were asked their agreement or disagreement with a statement. Count the number of responses for each category and enter them in a table, and the results are clear.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I receive adequate information about children at placement	8 12%	18 26%	34 50%	8 12%	68

- **Review written answers.** It can be more complicated to analyze responses to open-ended questions that require individual, written answers. Look for patterns in the responses: are there some topics that appear more often than others? If so, how many participants mentioned this topic?
- **Identify trends.** If surveys are done on a regular basis (each year, for example), be sure to compare the results to previous surveys to see if there has been significant change. This is especially important in areas where the agency has made an effort to improve practices.

Write up a brief report – one page is sufficient – summarizing the results of the survey. Distribute the report to all foster parents. Share the findings with the Recruitment & Retention Team and brainstorm the results. Are there opportunities for greater transparency? What are you doing well that can be replicated or built upon? Are there recommendations for short- and long-term improvements?

Mentoring new foster parents

An agency is concerned that many newly certified foster homes are closing within one year. An exit surveys show that a large percentage of parents are quitting due to a perceived lack of agency support or services, especially during crises. After researching various evidence-based approaches, the agency decides to implement a mentoring program based on the Foster Parents as Champions model. Under this new program, experienced foster parents contact recently certified foster parents at the start of every new placement to see if they have all the resources they need. They also provide ongoing support when caregivers have a question or need information.

The Action Plan: A roadmap to the future

The Action Plan serves as a strategic map that captures the essential aims of the recruitment plan. It should be a "live" document that can be revised and refined as needed. It also can be used as a vehicle for moving projects forward and evaluating levels of success.

All members of the Recruitment & Retention Team should be involved in developing the plan. Start your work by asking several key questions:

- Does the data analysis reveal strengths and gaps in our recruitment and retention practices?
- What underlying factors contribute to recruitment or retention problems?
- Are there ways to make our current practices more efficient?
- Do we need to gather more information on best practices that might be helpful to our agency?

The team should also consider their goals in a realistic light, taking into account agency resources and staff time. For example, consider whether a goal of certifying ten more foster families that meet the needs of children in care is reasonable in terms of the staff time and expense required to carry out the plan.

Follow these steps in developing an Action Plan:

Recruitment & Retention Action Plan

Step 1: Identify "big picture" aims

Each aim should address a need identified by data collection and analysis. It should be a general statement, and yet specific enough to be achievable within a reasonable period of time. Action Plans typically have three to five aims.

AIM #1: Have a pool of foster/adoptive homes that is sufficient to meet the demand for homes that will care for sibling groups.				
OBJECTIVE:				
STRATEGY	**TASKS**	**WHO**	**WHEN**	**OUTCOME**

Step 2: Develop specific objectives

Specific objectives should be practical, reachable goals that are measurable. In this case, the team will be able to determine whether the objective was reached completely or partially during a 12-month period.

AIM #1: Have a pool of foster/adoptive homes that is sufficient to meet the demand for homes that will care for sibling groups.				
OBJECTIVE: Add ten certified foster homes for large sibling groups within the next 12 months.				
STRATEGY	**TASKS**	**WHO**	**WHEN**	**OUTCOME**

Step 3: Propose strategies that are likely to lead to achievement of the objective.

Research multiple options – Best practice suggests that you use evidenced-informed strategies. Is there a new tool or technology that can be helpful with your current aim?

Revisit past ideas as possibilities – What have you learned as part of your overall experience in the field?

Build on existing information, knowledge, and momentum such as:

- Your agency's mission, core values, and practices for children and families
- Relevant agency-wide efforts (e.g., practice model, special initiatives)
- Prior successes and lessons learned, including insights from Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs)
- Existing partnerships and community relationships
- Any current requirements related to recruitment, development, or support of families

AIM #1: Have a pool of foster/adoptive homes that is sufficient to meet the demand for homes that will care for sibling groups.				
OBJECTIVE: Add ten certified foster homes for large sibling groups within the next 12 months.				
STRATEGY	**TASKS**	**WHO**	**WHEN**	**OUTCOME**
Engage current foster parents of sibling groups in targeted recruitment and retention efforts				

Step 4: Determine the specific tasks required

Tasks are the "actions" of the Action Plan. Tasks define the actual work that will be done in order to accomplish the larger objectives and aims. Tasks should be as specific as possible.

AIM #1: Have a pool of foster/adoptive homes that is sufficient to meet the demand for homes that will care for sibling groups.				
OBJECTIVE: Add ten certified foster homes for large sibling groups within the next 12 months.				
STRATEGY	**TASKS**	**WHO**	**WHEN**	**OUTCOME**
Engage current foster parents of sibling groups in targeted recruitment and retention efforts	Sign up 5 foster parents to host information sessions in their homes.			
	Enlist the foster parent of a sibling group to speak at the next foster parent recognition event.			

Step 5: Who, what, and when

Decide who will execute each task. To encourage buy-in, all relevant team members should be involved in carrying out different parts of the plan.

Timelines help to move the work forward. As each task is added, include a realistic timeline for the completion of that specific task. The timeline is an estimate, and this information can be shifted as needed, but the Action Plan should capture the *intended completion date of each task*.

Step 6: Outcome

Document results or progress towards major objectives of the plan.

AIM #1: Have a pool of foster/adoptive homes that is sufficient to meet the demand for homes that will care for sibling groups.				
OBJECTIVE: Add ten certified foster homes for large sibling groups within the next 12 months.				
STRATEGY	**TASKS**	**WHO**	**WHEN**	**OUTCOME**
Engage current foster parents of sibling groups in targeted recruitment and retention efforts	Sign up 5 foster parents to host information sessions in their homes.	Homefinder	3/15 4/1 4/25 5/1 5/5	TBD
	Enlist the foster parent of a sibling group to speak at the next foster parent recognition event.	Unit Supervisor	5/5	TBD

How to find proven strategies

Numerous evidence-based programs and strategies have been developed for meeting a variety of identified needs in the recruitment and retention of foster parents.

Some of the most successful strategies are summarized in an earlier resource, Revitalizing Recruitment.

The National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment website (www.nrcdr.org) has ideas from the field for working with diverse populations, recruiting for tribes, and strategies to improve placement stability and permanency. The site describes the work done by Diligent Recruitment Grantees, and provides documents that can be replicated or adapted for your work (e.g., surveys, tracking tools, recruitment brochures).

The Child Welfare Information Gateway has posted a synthesis of the programs that have received funding for Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System.

Tips for working as a team

What to do when your team gets stuck?

Creating an Action Plan is one of the more difficult stages in the diligent recruitment process. At this stage, it's not unusual for team members to say:

> "We don't have enough time for this."
>
> "We've already tried that."
>
> "This is impractical."
>
> "The rest of the agency won't support this."
>
> … or there is silence around the table.

These responses are a natural reaction to change and the discomfort that accompanies change. In fact, these reactions may indicate that your discussions are tapping into something important. This kind of tension may arise from a fear of the unknown. At the root, it may be a real concern that the planned actions will fail, with possible consequences for the team members.

Try to get the team members to describe what they are experiencing. Encourage them to fully express their underlying concerns. The team leader must be authentic during this process and talk about what is being experienced. Once the real issues are brought forward and strong emotions can be diminished, the team can refocus on the tasks at hand.

Try this exercise

Ask your team: What do you want to create together? Either go around the table for everyone's response to the question, or break into small groups of two or three. Give your team a few minutes to reflect and think about their ideas. Then, using sticky notes, ask everyone to put their ideas on a wall for all to consider. This disclosure provides the team with an opportunity to see how the ideas align with the Action Plan, or not. If needed, the team can take steps to revise the Action Plan. It is important that the team takes responsibility and ownership for the success of recommended changes, or move forward with the existing Action Plan.

Source: *Flawless consulting: A guide to getting your expertise used*

Implementation: getting the work done

Once an Action Plan has been written, work should begin as soon as possible. This allows your team to maximize the interest and good will generated during the planning process. Also, the sooner you start trying new strategies, the sooner your recruitment challenges will be addressed.

Review the membership of the Recruitment & Retention Team; getting the work done depends on having the right people assigned to the planned tasks. Carrying out the plan touches on roles and responsibilities across the agency, not just the homefinding unit.

It also is essential that agency leadership supports and approves the Action Plan. Ideally, the agency director and supervisory staff have been part of the data review and Action Plan development. If not, they should have been regularly informed of and asked for their feedback on the team's deliberations and the data behind the Action Plan.

Avoid the barriers to progress

Change can be difficult; it's normal to run into snags. Here are some tips on avoiding the usual pitfalls:

Don't tackle everything at once. Try to change only two or three things at one time. First, focus on tasks that will require the least amount of change. These will be the least disruptive to the current system and can be authorized quickly. Consider which tasks can be authorized by the Recruitment & Retention Team and which will require further review and approval. After the first project is underway, determine the steps that will be necessary to take on bigger challenges. Completing one step at a time will make a complicated objective easier to manage.

Keep the long-term goal in mind. When day-to-day pressures creep in, deal with the matters at hand, but continue to focus on your longer-term recruitment and retention strategies. For example, once you've found a home to meet an immediate need to provide care for a large sibling group, remember to come back to your longer-term goals for meeting the needs of *all* children coming into care.

Be willing to let go of old ideas. For example, your agency has held a "foster parent appreciation" event every year. A survey finds, however, that foster parents rank "more flexible respite care" as most important, with the annual event ranking fourth. It makes sense to focus staff time and effort on creatively meeting respite needs, rather than on holding an event just because "we do this every year."

Keep communication lines open

Achieving your recruitment and retention goals requires coordination and communication among team members.

Ongoing communication is supported by:

Updating the Action Plan. The Action Plan is a vehicle for communication among members of the team, and with others at your agency. Updating the Action Plan regularly and sharing this roadmap with your team and other stakeholders keeps everyone in the loop and builds investment in shared goals. It also builds accountability, reminding everyone who is responsible for which task, and when it has to be done.

Holding regular team meetings. Meeting regularly to share updates and plan next steps is important for coordination, but it also "holds the space" outside the usual day-to-day pressures for your team to strategize long term goals for recruitment. Taking time to meet as a team sends a message about the value your agency places on recruitment and retention.

Celebrating successes. This is challenging work, and every accomplishment is worthwhile. Perhaps your agency has created a new community partnership to help get out the message about the need for foster homes for older youth. This is a triumph! Or perhaps your agency has certified ten more homes this year than it did last year. Pause and celebrate this success.

Measuring progress: What's working … and what's not?

So you've collected and analyzed your data, used it to understand your recruitment program's strengths and gaps, put together an Action Plan to address your challenges, and implemented new approaches. Trying new strategies takes a lot of energy, and you need to know that your efforts are producing hoped-for results. How do you know whether your new strategies are working?

Measuring progress is a continuous process. A portion of every recruitment team meeting should be devoted to reviewing the results of the strategies and tasks outlined in the Action Plan (listed in the Outcomes column below). What tasks have been completed? What were the outcomes of the completed tasks, and did they meet the objectives? Some tasks may have not been completed within the expected time frame. Should they be revised or discarded?

Review and update the Action Plan

Regularly assess the impact of the recruitment and retention efforts on major objectives outlined in the plan – quarterly or at least twice a year.

In the sample Action Plan below, the agency's objective was to have ten additional certified foster homes for large sibling groups within a 12-month period. The outcome: At the end of the 12-month period, **eight homes were certified and one was in the home study phase.**

AIM #1: Have a pool of foster/adoptive homes that is sufficient to meet the demand for homes that will care for sibling groups.				
OBJECTIVE: Add ten certified foster homes for large sibling groups within the next 12 months.				
STRATEGY	**TASKS**	**WHO**	**WHEN**	**OUTCOME**
1. Engage current foster parents of sibling groups in targeted recruitment and retention efforts	Sign up 5 foster parents to host information sessions in their homes.	Homefinder	3/15 4/1 4/25 5/1 5/30	38 attendees 6 applications **4 homes certified** **1 in home study**
	Enlist a foster parent of a sibling group to speak at the next foster parent recognition event.	Unit Supervisor	5/5	Foster parent could not be scheduled **Task not accomplished**
2. Staff will speak to community groups in targeted neighborhoods.	Ask all staff to identify appropriate community groups	Agency director	4/5	12 groups suggested
	Schedule presentations	Homefinder unit-Secretary	5/15	6 presentations scheduled
	Make 6 presentations	Homefinders Caseworkers	6/1 6/3 6/28 7/12 8/1	5 presentations (1 cancelled) 124 participants 5 applications **4 homes certified**

The overall progress toward the objective was good. The agency came close to meeting its objective within the desired time frame.

The team then asked the question, “Which strategy was the most effective?” Because the agency was tracking the inquiry-to-certification process, it was able to determine that six applications were submitted in response to the foster parents’ home meetings. Five applications were received following the staff presentations. In terms of homes certified or in the home study stage, the foster parent-based meetings were the most successful, with a 13 percent success rate (5 out of 38 participants). Four certified homes resulted from presentations to 124 people at community group meetings (a 3 percent success rate).

With this evidence that foster parents were indeed the best recruiters, the agency proposed ways to strengthen its efforts in this area. In addition to continuing the information sessions in the homes of foster parents, the agency decided to actively promote New York State’s Finder’s Fee program* and added this strategy to the Action Plan for the coming year.

After a debriefing with the staff who made the presentations before community groups, the team decided to rework the content to be more focused on the sibling groups in foster care and to arrange for a foster parent to speak about the experience. Participants would be asked to provide their names and email addresses to allow the agency to do follow-up contact with individuals to ask if they would like more information.

*In New York State, policy allows local districts and agencies to offer experienced foster parents a $200 “finder’s fee” for recruiting new foster families. The payment is made to foster parents and local districts are reimbursed by the state after the new foster home is certified and receives the first child (*Standards of Payment for Foster Care of Children Program Manual,* 2006).

Continue to collect data and watch for new trends

At least once a year, review and analyze the data your agency is continuing to collect. This new information may require your team to return to an earlier stage in the process.

A review of the new data may show that your previous needs have changed, and that new needs have emerged that need attention. This requires going back to earlier steps in the process: collecting and analyzing new data, making a plan, and putting the plan into action.

For example, one agency’s previous data identified a pressing need for homes for infants. After some time had passed, and the agency had strategically recruited homes for infants, the updated data showed that this need was now adequately met by the pool of foster homes. However, more recent data revealed another gap: homes for large sibling groups. The agency revised its Action Plan to include two new objectives: find homes for sibling groups and provide ongoing support for foster parents caring for infants.

Things to consider:

Compare the most recent inquiry-to-certification **funnel** with the previous year. Has there been an increase in the number of inquiries? Has there been a change in the percentage of inquirers who attend orientation sessions? Has the bottom of the funnel gotten wider?

Continue to track the time between **milestones** in the certification process. Is the average time between inquiry and certification longer or shorter? If there were bottlenecks in the process, have they been alleviated?

Compare the **characteristics of children** coming into care with the previous time period. Have there been changes in the proportion of children with specific racial/ethnic backgrounds? Has the average size of sibling groups changed? Has there been a sharp increase in a particular age group or in children with special needs?

Consider **the characteristics of current foster homes** and how they match up with the needs of the children entering care. Are more homes needed for a particular age group, sibling groups, or children who are medically fragile? How many homes are needed for each category?

Review your **retention data**. Compare the percentage of homes that closed during the current time period with previous periods. Have past trends continued, changed direction, or stayed the same? As you continue to conduct and analyze satisfaction surveys, questionnaires, and exit interviews, are there new patterns in the opinions and comments?

Keep on keeping on

As you find new ways to strengthen your recruitment and retention, sustain your success by building new strategies into your agency's policies and procedures. This will help to maintain the improvements you've worked hard to achieve.

For example, if you have found that it is preferable to conduct home visits early in the certification process, add a scheduling box for a home visit to your initial inquiry form. Building this step into your recruitment practices makes it more likely that the practice will be continued.

Remember to communicate your team's findings to others at your agency, including administrators, supervisors, foster parents, and caseworkers. For example, if extra support for foster parents during their first placement makes a difference in retention, share this at an all-staff meeting and at the next foster parent event.

Share your insights and the team's activities with the community as well. E-mail updates to community partners you have contacted during the implementation of the Action Plan. Post items on your agency's website and Facebook page. Talk to a local reporter about doing a story related to your goals, such as a feature during Foster Care Month on sibling groups in foster care.

It is crucial to maintain the Recruitment and Retention Team as a part of your agency's structure. Recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents will always require a healthy dose of persistence and creativity, but a team that uses data to tackle recruitment challenges is more likely to find – and keep – homes that meet the needs of children in foster car