

## Site Visit Report: Permanent Families Recruitment Project

**Award #:** 90CO1041

**Cluster:** Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System

**Grantee:** Ramsey County (Minnesota) Community Human Services Department

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**Project Website:** <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/hs/index.htm>

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### SUMMARY

In 2008, the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded eight 5-year demonstration grants for the diligent recruitment of families for children in foster care. One of those grants was provided to the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) to develop, implement, and evaluate a multifaceted recruitment plan and systems change project to increase the number of foster and adoptive homes, with a particular focus on African-American and Hispanic children and youth ages 12 and older. To achieve this, the project, titled the Permanent Families Recruitment Project (PFRP), used the following strategies:

- **Involving stakeholders.** The project included input from foster and adoptive parents, youth in foster care, adopted youth, RCCHSD staff, and community members, to identify barriers to permanency and how to improve permanency outcomes for youth. Early in the project, it formed a Youth Advisory Group to assist with various facets of the project.
- **Enhancing recruitment.** Using a system assessment and onsite technical assistance from AdoptUSKids, PFRP was able to make several changes to improve its recruitment process, including developing a customer service practice model and establishing a Permanency Recruitment Specialist position.
- **Developing a customized training curriculum.** The project developed six new training modules to support existing and prospective foster and adoptive parents. Topics included appropriate discipline, educational success, reactive attachment disorder, and others.
- **Implementing concurrent permanency planning practice.** Through policy development, implementation planning, and training, the project instituted concurrent permanency planning practice within the agency. The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections assisted the project with this effort.
- **Collecting and utilizing data.** The project was in the midst of designing and developing a stand-alone pre-licensure data collection and reporting system to examine key management and evaluation issues.

Preliminary evaluation data show promising results. The total number of inquiries about becoming a foster or adoptive parent increased from 191 in 2009 to 258 in 2012, and from October 2009 to October 2012, 78 African-American families have become licensed. Additionally, customer satisfaction surveys indicated improvement on several indicators, such as staff returning calls promptly, staff encouragement to become a foster parent, and staff assistance through the process.

For more information about the project, visit

<http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/hs/adoption/permanentfamilies.htm> or

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/about-us/diligent-recruitment-grantees/permanent-families-recruitment-project>.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Abstract

In 2008, the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded eight 5-year demonstration grants for the diligent recruitment of families for children in foster care. One of those grants was provided to the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) to develop, implement, and evaluate a multifaceted recruitment plan and systems change project to increase the number of foster and adoptive homes. The project, titled the Permanent Families Recruitment Project (PFRP) aimed to increase the number of children reaching permanency through adoption, with a particular focus on African-American and Hispanic children and youth ages 12 and older.

RCCHSD believed that the diligent recruitment efforts would help improve in areas in which they had recently observed declining performance. In 2007, the agency noted that 67 percent of children awaiting adoption were ages 11 and older and that 54 percent of children awaiting adoption were African-American. Unfortunately, as the agency was noticing these data, the county needed to decrease recruitment activities and staff due to budget cuts. The grant offered an opportunity for RCCHSD to retool its efforts.

The following are the primary objectives of the project:

- Increase the pool of foster, adoptive, and concurrent permanency planning homes, including relative and kinship homes, and ensure they are more reflective of the race and ethnicity of the children awaiting adoption
- Review and revise RCCHSD practices and policies that create barriers to the licensing of potential foster and adoptive homes (e.g., make the process clearer and more welcoming to applicants)
- Develop RCCHSD structures and practices to maximize available resources for the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive homes
- Identify and implement evidence-based practice strategies and share lessons learned with other stakeholders

To achieve these objectives, PFRP used the following strategies:

- Involving stakeholders
- Enhancing recruitment
- Developing a customized training curriculum
- Implementing concurrent permanency planning practice
- Collecting and utilizing data

### Involving Stakeholders

Throughout the project, RCCHSD has reached out to key stakeholders, including foster and adoptive parents, youth in foster care, adopted youth, foster care and adoption/guardianship unit staff, community members, and community leaders, to identify barriers to permanency and gather ideas for improving permanency outcomes for youth. Stakeholder input has helped guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of the recruitment plan. RCCHSD asked stakeholders about five topics: barriers to participation; incentives for participation; training, support, and services needed; communication; and organizational practices and policies. Stakeholders suggested that the agency should do the following:

- Provide information to prospective foster parents on specific topics of interest, such as attachment
- Thoroughly explain the investment of time and finances that are needed to complete the foster parent licensing process
- Provide an accurate description of the child to foster parents
- Reduce the amount of agency jargon in the paperwork
- Provide additional training to staff in specific areas, such as cultural sensitivity
- Build positive relationships with public and private agencies
- Improve customer service

Early in the process, the project formed its Youth Advisory Group (YAG), which includes young people who had been in the foster care system. Some members had been adopted while they were a youth and others had aged out of the system. YAG members help educate prospective adoptive families about what to expect when a new child enters their home. YAG members also participate and present during training sessions for Public Private Adoption Initiative (PPAI) agencies that recruit prospective foster and adoptive parents.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, YAG members and project staff planned an event to commemorate the beginning of the grant's activities. More than 40 Ramsey County youth and young adults who had been or were currently under the supervision of the county attended.

### **Enhancing Recruitment**

To determine what changes needed to be made to better recruit prospective African-American foster and adoptive parents, RCCHSD conducted a system assessment and requested onsite technical assistance from [AdoptUSKids](#). Based on this assessment, project staff designed and implemented an initial customer satisfaction survey to collect feedback about the foster care licensing process and undertook an in-depth, structured review of required licensing forms. The survey results helped the agency develop a customer service practice model, which included improvements such as returning all calls within 24 hours. The agency trained staff on this new way of working with customers. RCCHSD also improved points of first contact with anyone with whom agency staff came into contact, such as improving the project website and including a Spanish-language option on its adoption phone line.

The project also established a Permanency Recruitment Specialist (PRS) position. The PRS takes on many tasks, including the following:

- Engaging businesses to urge them to distribute information to their employees
- Utilizing mass media, including commercials, radio, and newspaper articles,
- Coordinating home-based recruitment parties through which existing foster/adoptive families have invited their friends and family to their homes to hear about foster and adoption recruitment efforts
- Engaging organizations such as churches, fraternities, and sororities who may have a desire to help and serve the community

### **Developing a Customized Training Curriculum**

As a result of stakeholder comments during focus groups, RCCHSD developed the following six new training modules to better prepare and support existing and prospective foster and adoptive parents and to improve placement stability for children:

- Healthy Sexual Development
- Using Discipline Appropriately

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<sup>1</sup> PPAI agencies are private adoption agencies contracted to work with county and tribal social service agencies to help place children under State guardianship or Tribal jurisdiction in adoptive homes.

- Educational Success
- Common Mental Health Disorders in Foster Children
- Reactive Attachment Disorder
- Preparing a Child for a Permanent Family

At the time of the site visit, project staff were developing a concurrent permanency planning module.

The training modules were shaped by the input of a workgroup made up of foster and adoptive parents and from focus groups with foster and adoptive parents that were conducted during the planning phase of the project.

### **Implementing Concurrent Permanency Planning Practice**

Prior to the implementation of PFRP, the agency did not have policies or infrastructure to support concurrent planning. There was a lack of coordinated effort to ensure that each person involved with a child's case worked together on concurrent planning efforts. To remedy this, project staff focused on developing policies and then implementing concurrent permanency planning in case practice. This process included working with a consultant to conduct a series of interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including foster and adoptive parents and the legal community. Project staff also worked with a consultant from the [National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections](#) (NRCPFC) to develop a comprehensive implementation plan for concurrent permanency planning. In March 2012, the project held a 2-day training session to roll-out its concurrent permanency planning initiative for stakeholder groups, including resource parents, judges, guardians ad litem, and agency staff. The event was facilitated by the NRCPFC consultant and two foster and adoptive parents. The Minnesota Department of Human Services partnered with the project to co-sponsor the event and viewed RCCHSD's work as a model for other agencies. More than 200 participants attended the training, including representatives from county agencies across the state.

### **Collecting and Utilizing Data**

As a result of the grant requirement to submit performance data to the Children's Bureau, the project team recognized the need to update the data collection process in the Child Foster Care (CFC) Unit. They realized that CFC licensing intake staff were not systematically tracking inquiries and outcomes from its recruitment efforts. The project spearheaded an effort to garner the support of senior administrators for an automated electronic system. RCCHSD is now designing and developing a stand-alone pre-licensure data collection and reporting system—the Licensing Application Reporting System (LARS)—that will allow CFC staff to examine key management and evaluation issues, such as the number of families in the various stages of the recruitment process, the demographics of families who inquire about foster care and adoption, the length of time for families to complete the process, and the extent to which families who complete the process reflect the race and ethnicity of children in foster care.

## **SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

At the time of the site visit on May 8, 2012, the grant was midway through its fourth year. The visit occurred at the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department and at the offices of two agency partners, the Northwest Area Foundation and the Wilder Foundation. The author attended one of the project's regularly scheduled meetings to discuss project activities, updates, and next steps. Project staff at the meeting included lead staff from the Ramsey County child welfare agency and partners such as a representative from the Minnesota Office of the Ombudsperson for Families, Rainbow Research (the program evaluators), and the Minnesota Office of the Ombudsperson for Spanish Speaking Families .

The visit also included:

- A 30-minute discussion with three members of the Youth Advisory Group
- A meeting with current and prospective foster parents
- A discussion about the project's focus on recruiting Hispanic families
- A presentation about community recruitment activities intended to engage the target population

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Challenges

- **Multiple sets of competing system changes.** The project has competed with other Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) projects, such as initiatives focusing on antiracism, service quality assurance, and comprehensive family assessment, for limited staff and leadership time, attention, and resources. The project also has faced the normal staff resistance that often accompanies systems change efforts. Passionate involvement and support from key staff members, administrative leaders, the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners, and community members, however, has helped the project move forward.
- **Concurrent permanency planning initiative.** Implementing two permanency plans simultaneously for children in out-of-home placement is a challenging concept for many workers. It can be equally challenging to convey the importance of concurrent permanency planning to prospective adoptive and foster parents. To help gain stakeholder buy-in and address issues that may arise, RCCHSD held a 2-day training session for stakeholders. (See the Project Description section for additional information.)
- **Turnover among placement resources.** Because foster parents often become adoptive resource families, there is constant turnover in the pool of foster families. For example, a foster family may adopt a child and then feel that it has reached its capacity for caring for children. Although kin and relative placements help offset the loss to some degree, replenishing the supply of resource families is challenging and requires ongoing and innovative diligent recruitment efforts.
- **Staff engagement and commitment to systems change.** Although some of the positive outcomes of the project have not been easily observable, project staff have worked hard to help agency staff focus on the long term, positive outcomes that result of this type of recruitment campaign. Project staff have been working to demonstrate to RCCHSD staff that integrating new practice models will ultimately benefit the children and families served by the agency. The project staff continue to strategize different and innovative ways to engage agency staff so that they do not equate the targeted recruitment strategies and concurrent planning work as merely "one more thing to do." Rather, project staff are emphasizing how these new practices are a more integrated and efficient way of working.

### Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

- **Collecting and integrating provider feedback.** RCCHSD has used consumer satisfaction surveys to improve its practices. It conducted a survey in 2010 to serve as the baseline and then collected data again in 2011 to determine if customer satisfaction had improved. Staff can use the feedback to determine if

prospective parents found their training to be useful and identify areas in which improvements can be made. Examples of consumer feedback data collection include telephone surveys with a sample of families who had been through varying stages of the recruitment and retention processes and a focus group conducted in partnership with the Dedicated Foster Parents of Color support group regarding areas needing improvement in the licensing and placement processes. Dedicated Foster Parents of Color is made up of resource parents who have fostered and adopted children who were in the care of RCCHSD. At the time of the site visit, the project staff planned to conduct a similar process, including a focus group, with youth and with Hispanic resource parents and community members.

- **Using a variety of diligent recruitment efforts.** The Permanency Recruitment Specialist (PRS) position has served as a key in building community based relationships to get the word out and inform prospective parents and others about the need for foster and adoptive families. The PRS places an emphasis on providing data to RCCHSD about the needs and characteristics of the children who need permanent homes and about the assistance that the department can offer to support foster and adoptive families. The PRS also uses a variety of strategies to increase the pool of prospective resource families, including communicating through mass media, engaging community organizations and businesses, and coordinating home-based recruitment events.
- **Giving former and current foster and adoptive children a voice.** Holding discussions between youth and prospective resource families allows an honest exchange of expectations from both sides. Youth are able to share what a child is looking for in a home and provide tips about how to effectively interact with a new child in the home. The prospective parents are able to ask questions of the youth to get a richer understanding of what to expect after the initial honeymoon period of the new placement wears off.
- **Speeding the path to licensure.** The following steps helped the project move families through the licensure process more efficiently:
  - Identifying barriers to licensing
  - Developing an action plan
  - Streamlining application materials
  - Improving training
  - Developing new customer service strategies
  - Locating a computer in the agency specifically for completing criminal background checks

## OUTCOMES

### Overview

The Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) partnered with Rainbow Research to conduct a process, summative, and formative evaluation of the Permanent Families Recruitment Project (PFRP) activities. The process evaluation focused on the recruitment outcomes, while the summative portion of the evaluation focused on milestones indicating whether the target population, African-American and older youth in care, moved to permanency. The formative evaluation activities were designed to provide a feedback loop from the consumers of services to the agency so that results could be used to inform practice and change the way in which the agency engaged children and families. The project is collecting evaluation data on the following areas:

- Recruitment outcomes: trends in the volume of inquiries, the sources of referral, the demographics of relative and non-relative foster and adoption inquiries
- Pre-licensing process outcomes: trends in the volume of families reaching key points in the process (e.g., recruitment, attendance at trainings, completion of home study)

- Customer satisfaction: satisfaction at each stage of the pre-licensing and the placement process, including barriers to permanency and suggestions for improvement (based on telephone surveys and focus groups with key stakeholders)
- Systems changes: changes made by the agency, such as improving foster parent training, streamlining and simplifying applications, and incorporating customer service standards
- Concurrent permanency planning: information regarding resource parents' willingness to serve as concurrent families, clarifying workers' roles in the concurrent planning process, and identifying systemic barriers that prevent workers from planning effectively
- Training outcomes: attendees' satisfaction with training and additional training needs
- Permanency outcomes: progress toward achieving the following key permanency outcomes: an increased number of permanent homes for African-American and Hispanic children, an increase in the number of older youth who exit foster care through adoption, and an increase in the total number of relative adoptions

The project creates an annual Milestones report to track and assess the project's recruitment efforts and its progress toward improving permanency outcomes for the target population. The project evaluation has been used heavily to guide project implementation, with project staff using the evaluation data to drive their recruitment strategies.

## Results

### Inquiries and Sources of Referrals

- The total number of inquiries about becoming a foster or adoptive parent increased from 191 in 2009 to 258 in 2012.
- Between April 2009 and December 2011, 332 African-Americans have inquired about being a foster or adoptive family. The number of inquiries during a 6-month period has fluctuated from a low of 62 between April and September 2009 to a high of 110 between April and September 2010. An average of 10 African-Americans inquire about being a resource family each month. Not all individuals who inquire are willing to share their racial or ethnic background, so the actual numbers may be greater.
- The majority of foster parent applicants hear about the opportunity by word of mouth from current foster care or adoptive parents or their own friends and relatives. Applicants also report work site settings, county staff, agencies, and the PFRP page on the Ramsey County website as significant referral sources.

### Systems Change

- The proportion of foster care calls returned within 24 business hours increased from 83 percent in 2009 to 100 percent in 2011.
- The proportion of adoption inquiry calls returned in a timely fashion increased from 61 percent in 2009 to 90 percent in 2011.
- During each fiscal year (FY) from October 2009 to September 2012, there were increases in the number of families attending their first training (from 172 in FY 2010 to 265 in FY 2012), completing an application (from 134 in FY 2010 to 231 in FY 2012), and completing the training (from 60 in FY 2010 to 111 in FY 2012).
- A higher proportion of relative-kin families progressed through the pre-licensing process compared to non-relative families who have no previous history with a child in foster care.
- There have been improvements in the time to licensure for relative-kin families but not for non-relative families.

## Customer Satisfaction

Between 2010 and 2011, the project implemented a customer service model. Comparing 2010 and 2011 data, there were improvements in several customer satisfaction indicators:

- “Staff called me back in 24 hours” (from 64 percent to 80 percent)
- “Staff encouraged me to apply” (from 68 percent to 89 percent)
- “Staff encouraged me to become a foster/adoptive parent” (from 70 percent to 88 percent)
- “Staff helped me through the process” (from 71 percent to 86 percent)
- “Staff helped me complete the paperwork” (from 77 percent to 89 percent)

Although customer satisfaction has improved, families pointed out the need for improvements in the home study (e.g., reducing the personal nature of home study questions, the length of time required to participate in home study, the preparation required for the home study), the quantity and quality of training, reducing costs associated with licensing, and making the process more transparent for applicants.

## Concurrent Permanency Planning

Two pilot studies, one with resource families and the other with staff, were conducted to better understand concurrent permanency planning (CPP) as a tool for achieving permanency.

- **Resource family pilot study.** Results showed that resource families are interested in becoming concurrent families but need more information and training about the roles and responsibilities of CPP providers, the role of birth parents in CPP, and a clearer idea of the steps in the process. The evaluation team recommended that RCCHSD staff need additional training to better support potential resource families. The training should focus on developing a shared understanding of the definition of CPP, defining RCCHSD staff roles and responsibilities in supporting and nurturing a pool of concurrent families, clarifying how staff can support and manage expectations of CPP families, and foster/adoptive providers can effectively work with birth parents.
- **Staff pilot study.** This study was conducted with staff from the Child Protection and Permanent Connections (adoption) units. The primary goal was to identify a clear definition of roles and job expectations. The project evaluator kept detailed notes to help track areas needing role clarification and the problems experienced by Child Protection workers and Permanent Connections workers. The pilot also identified several barriers faced by these workers:
  - The Social Service Information System social and medical history form is very long (more than 70 pages) and is not consistently completed early in a case.
  - The caseload sizes in Child Protection are too high, which negatively affects the timely completion of the workers’ duties.
  - It is difficult to obtain the required paperwork, including the recognition of parentage, birth certificates, and the child’s social security cards.

Since the completion of this pilot study, staff and supervisors are working to address these issues and identify ways both units can support the CPP process.

## Training Curriculum for Providers

- In 2012, 133 foster and adoptive parents participated in the new training curriculum, with Educational Success being the most-attended training.

- Nearly all of the participants who participated in the training stated that the information the instructor presented was helpful and easy to understand (99 percent) and that the individual and group activities helped them to understand the information better (92 percent).

#### **Project Outcomes**

- Between October 2009 and October 2012, 78 African-American families have become licensed.
- The proportion of adoptions of African-American children has increased over time, from 39 percent in 2008 to an average of 58 percent from 2009 through 2011.
- The percent of African-American children waiting for adoption (i.e., 0 to 17 years old and both parents' rights have been terminated) has increased from 18 percent in 2008 to 41 percent in 2010.