

**Focus Group Results from
Foster Parents in Milwaukee County**

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Prepared for:

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About the Report

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation's Bright Futures Milwaukee Fund commissioned a study on what keeps children safe in foster care in Milwaukee County in memory of long-time child advocate James. R. Ryan. In May 2009, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. (Planning Council) released a report titled "A Community Conversation about the Safety of Children in Foster Care" that takes a broad look at issues surrounding safety in foster care in Milwaukee County.

Please visit our website at <http://www.planningcouncil.org> to review this report. The current report is a companion piece of a larger study which examines foster care in Milwaukee County and focuses on the input of foster parents on what keeps children in foster care safe.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Voices United and United Foster Parent Association of Greater Milwaukee for organizing and providing space for the focus groups with foster parents. We would also like to thank the foster parents who participated in the focus groups for sharing their experiences and ideas about how to keep children safe in foster care in Milwaukee County.

About the Planning Council

This report was prepared by the Planning Council, which promotes community planning as a systematic way of viewing community issues and developing planned solutions to address those issues.

The Planning Council is an independent, non-profit research and planning organization that has been operating in Southeastern Wisconsin since 1965. The Planning Council has extensive experience in stakeholder engagement, planning, program evaluation, survey design, data collection, and data analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

For more information about this report or to learn more about our work, please contact Quinton Cotton at (414) 224-3055 or qcotton@planningcouncil.org.

*The Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc.,
is a non-profit organization serving Southeastern Wisconsin.
Its mission is to advance community health and human services through objective
planning, evaluation, and research.*

Background

Purpose of the Focus Groups

The Planning Council conducted several focus groups to gather information from multiple sources concerning the safety of children in foster care in Milwaukee County. This report describes focus group input from a sample of foster parents. The Planning Council gathered input from foster parents on strengths and challenges of the system, and solutions that could help improve the safety of children and the quality of foster care in Milwaukee County.

Methodology

The Planning Council conducted focus groups with a sample of foster parents who were affiliated with Voices United or United Foster Parent Association of Greater Milwaukee. The purpose of the focus groups was to examine foster parents' perspectives on what keeps children safe in foster care in Milwaukee County.

Representatives from Voices United and United Foster Parent Association of Greater Milwaukee organized and hosted the focus groups. The focus groups were convened in February and March of 2009 and each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. One facilitator conducted the focus groups and two recorders documented the conversations.

A set of open-ended questions was designed for the two focus groups to guide foster parents in the discussion (see Appendix A). Specifically, foster parents were asked to talk about:

1. How foster parents were recruited to foster children,
2. The training for foster parents,
3. The positive aspects of foster care,
4. Problems experienced with foster care,
5. Relationships between foster parents and ongoing case managers, and between foster parents and licensing workers,
6. Resources needed to support foster parents, and
7. Suggestions that would help make children safer in foster care in Milwaukee County.

Sample

A total of 11 foster parents participated in the two focus groups. The first focus group consisted of five African-American participants and the second consisted of six White participants. One male and ten females participated in the two focus groups. Participants' years of experience with fostering children ranged from two to 35 years.

The viewpoints described in this report are limited to the thoughts and opinions of a limited number of focus group participants and are not presented as representative of all foster parents involved with the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW). Nonetheless, focus groups are useful in gathering deeper insights and perspectives on topics from people who know the subject well.

Focus Group Results/Themes

1. How Foster Parents Were Recruited to Foster Children

The majority of focus group participants said that they were recruited to be foster parents; however, two participants noted that they sought out the opportunity to foster children. They said:

“I knew innately that I would be a foster parent because I love kids.”

“My parent’s cousin was a foster parent. I knew when I was 11-years-old that I wanted to be a foster parent.”

Two participants expressed feelings of being persuaded into fostering. They said they were “talked into it” or “forced into it.” Two other participants said they began fostering to help out friends or acquaintances. These participants said:

“Someone at our church had a kin placement and they gave notice that they couldn’t do it anymore. I started training to be a foster parent two days later.”

“I got into it because of a fluke. A friend needed a family for some kids.”

Focus group participants noted the importance of recruiting foster parents. At least three of the participants noted that they had done work to recruit additional foster parents.

How Foster Parents Were Recruited to Foster Children

- Foster parents were persuaded to foster children
- Foster parents were recruited by friends or acquaintances
- Foster parents sought out ways to foster children (they were not recruited)

2. The Training for Foster Parents

Focus group participants had mixed opinions about the foster parent training that they received. Half said that they enjoyed the training and learned a lot from it, while the other half of focus group participants said that they disliked the training. Many of the foster parents who cited problems with the training had suggestions for improvement. The suggestion most often cited was to have trainings about behavior-specific issues. The second most common response that participants said would improve the trainings was to provide more information about the child welfare and court systems, the BMCW, and services available to foster parents.

Perception of Training

About half of the focus group participants thought very highly of the foster parent trainings. They said that they learned something from each of the trainings. One participant described the trainings as “enlightening”. Two participants noted that the cultural diversity training was particularly helpful. Another participant noted her appreciation for how the trainings are set up. She said:

“The 12 modules [core training] covered everything and then you could learn more about what you were interested in later.”

The other half of the focus group participants had very different opinions about the trainings. Some of the reactions about the trainings were as follows:

“The training stunk.”

“It was a waste of our time.”

“We were given false information.”

“The training had nothing to do with the kids.”

Though two participants said that the cultural diversity portion of the training was particularly useful, two others disagreed. One felt that the cultural diversity training did not provide foster parents with useful information, and the other participant said that the trainers were condescending to White foster parents. Their comments are as follows:

“The training was all stereotypes and no suggestions.”

“One trainer said that all the White Christians that thought they were saving poor souls should find the door because they wouldn’t last. We had another trainer tell us that us White suburbanites wouldn’t know what to tell our black kids who get pulled over by the cops for no reason. The trainer made a good point, but she shouldn’t have put us down to tell us that.”

Suggested Improvements for the Training

The focus group participants who had negative things to say about the foster parent trainings often had suggestions for improvement. Focus group participants most often cited the need for foster parent trainings to address behavior-specific needs of children. Participants said that they would have liked to have received information about autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, and attachment disorder in the trainings. One participant noted wanting the trainings to give general information about what foster children are like.

Additionally, focus group participants said that the trainings would be better if they would inform foster parents about the child welfare system, the BMCW, and services available to foster parents. Participants had the following to say on the subject:

“It would have been nice to have a class to figure out the system. Thank God I knew [a foster parent] and was able to get information that way.”

“There was no information given about the Bureau...”

“To make foster care better for the kids, the training should teach us about the available services like day care, WIC [Women, Infants and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program], etc. There was nothing in the training about benefits. Because of the economic trouble, foster parents need to know this information now more than ever.”

"I don't wait for Birth to Three to call me to do an assessment. I call them and have them come to me. That should be discussed at the training."

"I would have wanted a directory of who's who and a resource list. I wasted so much time trying to get help when I first started fostering. No one knew anything."

The Training for Foster Parents

- Opinions about the usefulness of the training are mixed
- Suggestions to improve the training include providing information on how to address the behavior-specific needs of foster children
- Other suggestions include requests for information about the child welfare system, the BMCW, and services available to foster parents

3. The Positive Aspects of Foster Care

When focus group participants were asked to describe the positive aspects of foster care in Milwaukee County, the most common response was having a good worker. Other positive aspects noted several times included (listed in order of frequency mentioned): the foster parent appreciation dinner, support services in the community, and giving foster parents some say in which children will be placed in their care. The following were also mentioned by at least one focus group participant as being positive aspects of foster care: seeing children succeed, support groups for foster parents, knowing that the system will verify complaints of abuse, the Coordinated Service Team meetings (CSTs), and the treatment and inclusion of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community.

Workers

Focus group participants most often mentioned workers as being a positive aspect of foster care in Milwaukee County. Primarily, participants were speaking of caseworkers, but in two cases Birth to Three workers were also noted as being exceptionally good workers. Caseworkers were described by focus group participants as supportive, helpful, and "awesome". Two examples of that were shared by focus group participants are as follows:

"I have a worker that gets me all of that information [medical information about the foster child]. My worker sets up my child's therapy session and I take her to them. We work as a team."

"I got a summons from the State saying they overpaid me \$3,000 in 2001. My caseworker helped me get that thrown out. She was a good caseworker."

Appreciation Efforts

Focus group participants noted their gratitude for being recognized and appreciated for fostering children. The appreciation effort most often cited was the dinner held for foster parents. Three participants described their enjoyment and satisfaction with the dinner. Two of the participants said:

"It's adults only and they treat us like kings and queens."

“There is wonderful entertainment. It’s beautiful.”

Supportive Services

Supportive services in the community were considered by several focus group participants to be a positive aspect of foster care. Resources mentioned were the Office of the Milwaukee Ombudsman for Child Welfare (OMOCW), the BMCW, Birth to Three, and medical insurance. Though these resources were valued, focus group participants expressed concern that new foster parents are not aware of these services.

Choices of Children

A couple of the focus group participants noted that they appreciated having the ability to have some say in the age and gender of the children that they foster.

The Positive Aspects of Foster Care

- Caseworkers and Birth to Three workers who are supportive and helpful
- Appreciation efforts, including the appreciation dinner
- Supportive services in the community (OMOCW, BMCW, Birth to Three, medical insurance, etc.)
- Ability to have some say in the children that are placed in foster parents’ care (age, gender, etc.)

4. Problems Experienced with Foster Care

Focus group comments included both positive aspects of foster care, as well as a number of challenges with foster care in Milwaukee County. Challenges discussed tended to fall into one of three categories (listed in order of frequency mentioned): system issues, challenges of being a foster parent, or problems with caseworkers.

System Issues

The system-level concern most often mentioned by focus group participants was a lack of clear information and standard protocols for foster parents. Participants noted that basic information (e.g. putting a car seat in a car) to more system-level information (e.g. how to get a new caseworker) was lacking. One participant noted the following:

“If you want people to be foster parents, you have to make things black and white. There can’t be any grey area.”

Termination of parental rights (TPR) was noted as an issue by some participants who thought it should have been a standard protocol, but was not a standardized process at all. Instead, it was referred to as a “joke” and a “farce”. One participant had this to say:

“The law that parental rights can be terminated if kids are not living with them for 15 out of 22 consecutive months is a joke. The law is not being followed even though terminating parental rights is a Federal mandate. They say that every case is different, but the law should not be different for different cases.”

A few others mentioned that some foster parents were receiving foster children before they had completed their trainings, while other foster parents were told that they could not have children placed with them because their training was not complete. Participants said that there should be a standard process, which is the same for all prospective foster parents.

Another system-level problem that was mentioned by participants was the need for additional foster homes. One participant noted that she had fostered 16 children at one time. Participants also expressed some concern about the inappropriate placement of foster children. For instance, participants said that some children who are placed in foster homes have more significant needs and should be placed in treatment foster homes, and, conversely, some children in treatment foster homes do not need that level of care. A comment was made that there should be a better effort to match foster children and foster parents. One participant said:

“They don’t match foster parents and kids very well. They put asthmatic kids with smokers and kids with disabilities in houses with no ramps. They say it’s not possible, but I don’t understand why.”

The reluctance on the part of some caseworkers to place African-American children with White foster families was discussed by some, even though the participants said that they welcomed the opportunity to foster children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The BMCW policy of placing children with kinship care providers was addressed by some participants. One participant noted:

“I love my brother, but I don’t want him to raise my kids. No one should get kids because of their relationship to the parents.”

The multiple foster home placements experienced by some foster children was also noted to be a concern by a few participants in the focus groups. Participants felt that it is difficult for children to adjust to being moved from one home to the next, and said that this kind of displacement should be avoided whenever possible.

System fragmentation and lack of leadership was also mentioned by many participants as a major challenge. A few participants stated that the whole system is a problem and needs to be improved. One participant noted that there needs to be a strong leader at the top who will make and enforce decisions.

Challenges of Being a Foster Parent

In addition to system-level problems, focus group participants noted that it is difficult to be a foster parent for various reasons. The challenge cited most often was that fostering is inconvenient and there is little or no flexibility for foster parents. One participant shared a personal experience about the inflexibility of the system:

“The day I buried my sister I was told that an allegation needed to be investigated that day. I was told it couldn’t wait.”

When participants referred to fostering as inconvenient, they often mentioned the many meetings that they have with workers and biological parents. In addition to the foster parents’ worker, it was noted that each foster child in the home may have a different worker. One participant described fostering as “very demanding” and expressed feeling “like a number”. Another participant said:

"I have to be home for visits. I am told that there will be two visits a week, but I've only had three visits in three months. Even so, I had to be off of work. There needs to be some consistency. Biological parents set up visits and then they don't show up. This wastes time and resources."

The challenge of receiving stipends for day care services was mentioned a few times. Focus group participants spoke of the inconvenience in setting up appointments to sign up for these benefits, and difficult interactions with the County workers who make errors and who are rude.

A few comments were made that fostering children can be stressful because it can put a strain on relationships, finances, and employment. Additionally, a few comments described the challenge of having caseworkers empower foster children. A few participants shared their experiences:

"Some social workers tell the kids that if foster parents put their hands on them, they have rights. Kids say 'You can't touch me.' Or they say 'you're not my mom.' We have no control. When children are empowered, it backfires for the foster parent."

"Social workers inform kids of their rights and this sometimes creates backlash. For example, the child will threaten to call the worker, tell the foster parent that he or she is not their mother or father and cannot tell them what to do."

A couple of comments were made that the perception of foster parents in the community is negative, particularly when a child in foster care or kinship care dies. One participant said:

"I feel like I've been branded as a murderer after the death of Christopher Thomas."

Focus group participants noted that negative perceptions of foster care makes foster parents feel bad about the work that they do, and also makes it challenging to recruit new foster families.

Problems with Caseworkers

The most often mentioned problem by focus group participants in regards to caseworkers was a feeling of disrespect towards foster parents and a lack of communication. One participant commented:

"Social workers don't believe what you say about kids. They call you a liar because they don't see what we are saying."

Some comments suggested that caseworkers feel threatened by foster parent involvement, and, as a result, caseworkers do not seek out foster parents' input on issues concerning their foster children. Another comment indicated the perception that caseworkers are not always honest and up-front with new foster parents. One participant said:

"We're seasoned foster parents, but having young foster parents and young caseworkers is a bad mix. Foster parents don't know that they can ask for diapers and caseworkers don't know they're available. Caseworkers aren't honest with the younger foster parents, but they can't fool us. They would be able to keep a lot more foster parents if the workers didn't shut them out."

The majority of comments suggested that while participants themselves have good caseworkers, there are a lot of foster parents who do not have good workers.

In regards to lack of communication between foster parents and caseworkers, one comment indicated that workers sometimes make visits to their homes when the children are not even there. Other comments suggested that there needs to be better communication between workers and foster parents.

Mentioned just as often as the lack of communication and poor treatment of foster parents, was the poor treatment of children by caseworkers. A few focus group participants noted that some caseworkers did not visit the children as frequently as they should. One participant said:

“We had a baby placed with us and didn’t have a worker visit for three months. We had no contact at all; not from the OCM [ongoing case manager], the attorney, or the Guardian ad Litem. Just think about how many more families that happens to.”

Other comments centered around workers who did not have a good working relationship with the children. Participants described instances when workers gave children false hope of reuniting with their birth parents; disappointed children by telling them that no relatives would take care of them; and called the police when a child was unruly rather than trying to calm the child down.

Another problem mentioned was the high turnover rate among caseworkers. Comments indicated that good caseworkers and young caseworkers will almost definitely leave the job, which is challenging for foster parents because of the relationships that they have developed with these workers. One participant stated that “one of my boys had four caseworkers.”

Problems Experienced with Foster Care

- Foster parents do not receive clear information, nor are there standard protocols
- There are too few foster homes in the community
- Children are not necessarily placed with the foster parents who can best meet their needs, and some children experience multiple placements
- The system is fragmented and there is a lack of leadership
- Foster parents have little-or-no flexibility
- Foster parents are inconvenienced by the many visits they receive from workers and biological parents, and in setting up services for their foster children (particularly day care services)
- Foster parents and their families can experience strains on their relationships, finances, and employment
- The community has a negative perception of foster care and foster parents
- Caseworkers who do not respect foster parents and have do not effectively communicate with them (this is particularly true for new foster parents)
- Caseworkers who treat foster children poorly
- The high rate of caseworker turnover

5. Relationships Between Foster Parents and Ongoing Case Managers, and Between Foster Parents and Licensing Workers

Overall, focus group participants described having good working relationships with ongoing case managers and licensing workers. A few comments made by participants are as follows:

“My OCM [ongoing case manager], who is now on maternity leave, and I have a wonderful relationship. I get what I need. I’ve had three OCMs. They have the children’s best interest at heart. The child’s worker has the birth parent’s best interests at heart.”

“I have a good team.”

However, as previously mentioned, focus group participants said that even though they have good workers, a lot of new foster parents, especially new and inexperienced foster parents, do not.

Three focus group participants noted that caseworkers sometimes ask foster parents for advice, or ask them to take in more children. These focus group participants welcomed this kind of interaction.

Relationships Between Foster Parents and Ongoing Case Managers, and Between Foster Parents and Licensing Workers

- Foster parents’ relationships with workers were considered to be positive
- Foster parents appreciate caseworkers who involve them and seek out their advice

6. Resources Needed to Support Foster Parents

Information was noted most often as the resource that foster parents need to keep children safe in foster care. The need for financial support and the need for support from their peers, families, and other community members were also noted.

Information

Focus group participants noted the need for many different kinds of information, including information about: resources available to foster parents, the foster care system, and the children that are placed in their care.

As previously mentioned, focus group participants appreciated the services available to them, but they did not feel as though foster parents are informed of these services. Participants also said that they would like information about what their obligations are as foster parents and who to contact if they have questions or problems. Participants had the following to say:

“You need to have knowledge to cover your own self. You need to know what to do, when, [and you need to know] who you need to answer to and who you don’t. [You also need to know] what you should get and when.”

“I would like there to be a foster parent liaison staff position added. This person would know the system and who foster parents need to contact in various

situations. We would be able to call them with any questions and they would call us to see how we're doing."

Many comments were made about the need for foster parents to have information about the children in their care, particularly in regards to medical information. One participant said:

"We need to know exactly what is wrong with the kids when they come into the house. Are they sick? Do they have AIDS, diabetes, TB [tuberculosis]?"

The discussion indicated that participants are often unaware of their foster children's immediate medical needs, medical history, and existing medical conditions. Focus group participants noted that not knowing this information puts the children, as well as others in the household, in unsafe situations. Two focus group members said:

"I had two kids and found out six months later that their parents both died of AIDS."

"I had a kid and I had no idea if he had his shots, so the doctor started all over."

Comments were made that sometimes foster parents are able to get medical information about their foster children through caseworkers, former foster parents, the schools, or doctors. However, sometimes the information is simply not available. A few foster parents noted:

"If the family is angry, they may not give any information, especially if the cops came in and took the kids. Some kids come to our homes with no medical history and no clothes."

"There was no info to be had for my child. He hadn't seen a doctor since his birth in Arkansas. The only medical records for him were his date and time of birth."

Financial Support/Supplies

Many comments were made by focus group participants about the financial resources required to care for foster children. One participant put it this way:

"There are a lot of out-of-pocket expenses. The support we receive is less than what we spend on the kids."

The expense of formula, particularly for babies who require special formulas due to allergies, was mentioned a few times.

One participant noted that assessment foster home providers receive much more support in terms of supplies and funding than regular foster parents. Another noted how much more day care providers make compared to foster parents, even though foster parents are ultimately responsible for the well-being and care of the children. Two comments were made by focus group participants that they could not take in any additional children because they could not afford it financially.

Peer, Family, and Community Support

Focus group participants talked about the need for various types of support, including support groups made up of their peers, family support, and support from other community members,

including medical professionals and school personnel. A few described the support that they receive:

“Our family is supportive. I also receive support from [a woman in our foster parent support group] and other foster parents.”

“Doctors give safety tips and they give us praise. They help more than the caseworkers. Teachers, nurses, and therapists help too. Principals are supportive; the principal at my kids’ school gives each of them presents at Christmas and I get a gift card for Pick ‘n Save.”

Resources Needed to Support Foster Parents

- Foster parents need information (including information about resources, the foster care system, and the children that are placed in their care)
- Foster parents require financial support to provide for foster children
- Foster parents need support from peers, families, and other community members

7. Suggestions that Would Help Make Children Safer in Foster Care in Milwaukee County

A range of suggestions that would improve the safety of children in foster care in Milwaukee County were discussed. The suggestion most often cited was providing support to foster parents. This included: respite care so that foster parents can have a break from fostering; information about services, the system, and foster children; peer mentoring and support groups; additional financial support; and appreciation for the work done by foster parents.

Other suggestions were as follows (listed in order of frequency mentioned): employing competent BMCW staff and leaders, and breaking down barriers between caseworkers and foster parents; better recruitment and retention of foster parents, and giving children stability to help them achieve their goals; better screening of foster parents, making training for kinship care providers mandatory, and making safety a priority in Milwaukee County.

A few comments indicated that efforts should be made to prevent children from entering foster care. Comments suggested that this would mean providing birth control and sex education; putting services in place before Safety Services is called; and addressing alcohol and other drug abuse, mental health, and other issues that may cause birth parents to have their children removed from their care.

Suggestions that Would Help Make Children Safer in Foster Care in Milwaukee County

- Children would have the stability and structure needed to achieve their goals and finish school
- Kinship caregivers would be required to receive training
- Foster parents would have support (including information about the system, services, and foster children; peer mentoring and support groups; respite; financial assistance; appreciation; etc.)
- Foster parents would receive better screening prior to being licensed
- Current foster parents would be retained and additional foster parents would be recruited
- Caseworkers and foster parents would have better cooperation and would learn from each other (they would work as a team without hierarchy; caseworkers would take in foster children for a limited time and be trained by foster parents; caseworkers would respect and listen to foster parents)
- All BMCW staff (including leaders, caseworkers, receptionists, etc.) would be competent, enthusiastic, and non-partisan
- Safety in foster care in Milwaukee County would be a priority

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for Foster Parents

1. Please introduce yourself. Tell us how long you have been a foster parent, and how many foster children you have.
2. By a show of hands, how many of you were recruited to be a foster parent?
3. Did you participate in any training to become a foster parent? How was the training?
4. What positive things do you see in Milwaukee's foster care system?
5. What problems have you experienced with the foster care system?
6. Describe your relationship with your ongoing case manager and licensing worker.
7. What resources do you need to support you as a foster parent?
8. What ideas do you have to prevent children from being harmed in the foster care system?*
9. Name one thing you would like to see happen in Milwaukee's foster care system that would keep children safer.

*Because this question was similar to question #9, responses were combined and themes were identified across the two questions.