

Status Report on Group Home Reduction Efforts *Strategies to Increase Family Foster Homes*

Executive Summary

During the past year, Maryland has made very modest progress in increasing the number of foster homes, a critical element of the strategy to reduce the percentage of children in non-family or group placements. Several recruitment efforts are just getting underway. More targeted recruitment is needed, and a much stronger retention strategy is imperative.

Introduction

The Maryland Department of Human Resources has set as a priority reducing the significant number of abused or neglected children who are unnecessarily placed in non-family or group care settings. Group care placements have risen sharply, and the cost to the State has increased by 50 percent over the past four years.¹

An important part of the State's group home reduction strategy is to increase the total number of family foster homes. The Department issued a foster home plan, called *1000 by 10* in November 2007. Advocates for Children and Youth expressed concerns that the plan lacked enough specific strategies to achieve a significant increase in foster homes.²

This is a status report on the progress the State has made so far in reducing group home use, increasing the number of foster plans, implementing its recruitment and retention strategies and identifying new strategies.

¹ Advocates for Children and Youth, *The Growing Toll* (Mar. 2008).

² Advocates for Children and Youth, *Moving the Child Welfare Reform Train Faster* (Jan. 2008).

By The Numbers

Non-Family Placements

The percentage of children in non-family placements has moved from 23.9 percent in October 2007 to 22.6 percent in March 2008, with 197 fewer children.³

Change in Placement: Oct 2007 to March 2008

Placement Type	Number of Children		
	Oct. 2007	Mar. 2008	Change
<i>Family Care</i>			
Family Foster Homes	7,116	6,969	-147
Independent Living	194	227	33
Trial Home Visits	422	380	-42
<i>Non-Family Care</i>			
Group Homes	1,682	1,485	-197
Residential Treatment Centers	324	329	5
Other placements	421	396	-25
Total	10,159	9,786	-373
% Group Care	23.9%	22.6%	-1.3%

Foster Homes

Since June 2007--the Department's baseline, the number of foster homes has increased by only 89 out of the 1,000-home goal.⁴ This includes 42 new unrestricted family homes, meaning that the foster parents are not relatives of the children. Unrestricted homes are particularly important

³ October 2007 was used as a baseline because it follows an intensive effort by the Department to correct inaccuracies in the data previously reported on placements. All of the data reported by the Department is based on hand counts, since its information technology system, called CHESSE, is still not fully functional. Hand counts are enormously time consuming and particularly prone to error.

⁴ The June 2007 count reflects 34 foster homes in Prince George's County originally excluded; the March 2008 count does not include homes in excess of the number the Department says is needed in each jurisdiction.



because these foster parents are much more likely to take other children after one child leaves.⁵

Foster Homes June 2007 v. March 2008

Jurisdiction	June 2007	March 2008	Change
Allegany	49	51	2
Anne Arundel	98	100	2
Baltimore City	1,394	1399	5
Baltimore Co.	180	195	15
Calvert	28	28	0
Caroline	33	36	3
Carroll	27	21	-6
Cecil	44	50	6
Charles	53	54	1
Dorchester	16	20	4
Frederick	83	88	5
Garrett	39	40	1
Harford	88	101	13
Howard	45	45	0
Kent	4	8	4
Montgomery	281	293	12
Prince George's	127	133	6
Queen Anne's	18	19	1
Saint Mary's	27	29	2
Somerset	17	16	-1
Talbot	19	16	-3
Washington	136	150	14
Wicomico	50	55	5
Worcester	12	10	-2
Total	2,868	2,957	89

Progress: By Actions

Monthly Payments

The Department is increasing monthly foster care payments by \$100 effective July 1, 2008. Payments in Prince George’s and Charles Counties will be \$40 per month higher than in other parts of the State to address competition with the District of Columbia, which places many children in Maryland. These are important and excellent steps. However, as shown below, the

⁵ The Department started reported figures for unrestricted foster homes in December 2007. This is a helpful change.

District of Columbia is still paying \$50 more each month for children 16 years or older.

Foster Care Payments Per Month

	Age 2	Age 9	Age 16
Maryland 7/1/08	\$835	\$835	\$850
Prince George’s and Charles Counties 3/1/08	875	875	890
District of Columbia	869	869	940
D.C. Comparison	+\$6	+\$6	-\$50

Child Care

The Department has also restored provisions for childcare for 0-5 years. There is no financial support for before school or after school care services for school age children. Childcare for school-aged children is currently restricted to summer only. Given the greater difficulty of recruiting families for older children, this limitation may not make sense. It will also be important to monitor how many foster parents access the new support and how long they have to wait for reimbursement. The Department chose not to use the State’s existing Purchase of Care program for childcare payments; this places an extra burden on caseworkers and a payment system that has experienced significant difficulties in the past.

Referral Bonuses

The Department has instituted \$500 bonuses for foster parents to recruit new foster parents, half of which is paid after a referred family receives a foster child and the other half a year later if the referred family is still an active foster home. It is not clear that the amount or structure of bonuses will increase recruitment significantly. Given how long it takes for a prospective family to get through the approval process, foster parents who make referrals will have to wait a long time for a relatively small amount of money. The effectiveness of this idea should be tracked, starting with a monthly report on how many applications are received based on referrals.

Communicating with Prospective Foster Parents

It is not at all clear how prospective foster parents are supposed to find out about the increases in payments and or the restoration of childcare and bonuses. The changes are not posted on any website. Instead, they are found in memos sent from the Department to local departments. Obviously, recruitment incentives are much more effective if prospects know about them.

Targeted Recruitment

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has recommended that the State direct 60 percent of recruitment efforts to targeted efforts, e.g., “specific high-need child populations” and “by holding recruitment functions centered around a single high-need neighborhood.” So far, the State has focused on general recruitment, which Casey says is not that effective and should only take 15 percent of time and budget. Training on targeted recruitment will occur in June. Jurisdictions will then prepare new local plans with greater support and more feedback from the Department.

Foster Home Approval

The Department is tracking a cohort of families who identified themselves as prospective foster parents during November or December 2007. This study has not yet produced findings, but it is likely to show that the process from initial contact to final approval is too long and needs to change.

Exit Interviews

The Department indicated that it would start conducting exit interviews November 2007 for families who voluntarily leave the foster home system. This has not occurred but will be an important source of information about retention issues.

Basic Support

The lack of responsiveness of caseworkers is a major complaint of foster parents and may be more important to retaining foster homes than monthly payments and childcare.

The Department has created an ombudsman position, but not yet filled it. Regardless, one

person for the entire State is not a substitute for ensuring that all foster parents have timely access to a caseworker or a frontline supervisor as a back up. As long as many foster parents are disgruntled, they are less likely to remain in the system, much less recruit new families. As such, basic support is critical for both retention and recruitment.

Therapeutic Foster Homes

There are indications that some of the loss of family foster homes is taking place because foster parents are becoming therapeutic foster homes, which receive higher monthly payments and receive more support from a private caseworker. For children who do not need extra services, therapeutic foster homes are far less desirable because there is little or no prospect that they will become adoptive homes. The Department needs to develop specific steps to address this issue.

Family Team Decision Making

In addition to identifying more evidence-based recruitment and retention strategies, the Department needs to implement Family Team Decision Making so that it can avoid unneeded or unnecessarily lengthy placements in foster care, thereby freeing up spots for other children.

Family Team Decision Making is an evidence-based way to do this safely. Indiana is implementing this practice, and jurisdictions in the state using it have quickly seen a 16 percent drop in out-of-home placements, while other jurisdictions have seen a 14 percent increase during the same period. This practice has also worked in Alabama and Utah.

The Department is stepping up efforts to expand FTDM, particularly in Baltimore City.

Policies Relating to Group Home Placements

The Department has not yet put in place new policies or processes to stop unnecessary group home placements or to remove children who no longer need these placements.

Discussion

According to the Casey Foundation, it is possible for a state to achieve significant reductions in group home use within 18 months. It is highly unlikely that Maryland will achieve this. Despite implementation of some good strategies with more set for the near future, the State is still largely in a planning mode after more than one year. One likely reason for the slowness is an attempt by the Department to move on too many fronts at once. If group home reduction is a priority, it can only be one of a few priorities, and it needs to receive the attention and resources for short, intense planning followed by effective implementation.

The slowness of progress is particularly disappointing given the opportunity created by a drop in the number of children coming into out-of-home care by 10 percent.⁶

Nonetheless, the planning efforts appear to be picking up speed, with trainings on recruitment strategies scheduled in June and the increased involvement of the Casey Foundation.

Recommendations

1. Identify new processes to ensure that group home placements are necessary and to vigorously pursue step down plans for every child in group homes, including financial incentives for group home providers;
2. Advised by the Casey Strategic Consulting Group as best practices in recruitment, devote 60 percent of recruitment time and money for targeted recruitment, 25 percent for child-specific recruitment and 15 percent for general recruitment;
3. Provide more intensive technical assistance for the local departments in development of their recruitment and retention plans;
4. Increase monthly payments for children 16 and older in Prince George's County by \$50

so that it is equal to that offered by the District of Columbia.

5. Provide monthly reports on the number of applications received based on referrals from foster parents seeking bonuses and make adjustments to the amount and timing of payments if there are too few referrals;
6. Identify specific steps that can make the foster home approval process faster and friendlier;
7. Clarify reasonable expectations for caseworkers in their support of foster families and ensure that caseworkers are held accountable;
8. Conduct independent satisfaction interviews with existing foster parents to identify strategies that can prevent loss of foster homes;
9. Conduct exit interviews for all foster parents who voluntarily leave the system, identify the most frequent reasons and develop strategies to address those reasons;
10. Invest significant resources in foster care recruitment and retention, given that these efforts, if successful will more than pay for themselves;
11. Use geomapping to understand where all placement options are available in each jurisdiction, including restricted, unrestricted and therapeutic foster care placements;
12. Examine the funding for and need for therapeutic foster homes in order to reduce the unnecessary placement of children in these homes and the movement of regular foster homes to therapeutic;
13. Develop specific plans to implement Family Team Decision Making;
14. Encourage independent advocacy by foster parent and foster youth groups;

⁶ In 2006, 3,619 children came into care, according to figures provided by the Maryland Citizens Review Board. The Department reported 3,321 new cases during the 12 months of April 2007 through March 2008.