

Recruiting Foster Parents and Strengthening Child Welfare in Oklahoma

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



August 2019

Introduction

In 2008, Oklahoma came to terms with the dismal track record of its child welfare system when the advocacy organization [Children's Rights](#) filed a federal [lawsuit](#), *D.G. v. Yarbrough*, against the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OK DHS). Plagued with the routine placement of children in overcrowded, understaffed emergency shelters, excessive caseloads and high worker turnover rates, Oklahoma was regarded as having one of the worst¹ foster care systems in the country.

To settle the lawsuit and begin an urgently needed overhaul, the governor's office and OK DHS developed what became known as the [Pinnacle Plan](#).² Spanning five years and addressing 15 performance areas that needed vast improvements, the plan required the state to close its shelters, add and support more foster homes and undertake an aggressive recruitment process to sharply increase the number of foster parents.

The state sought help from a wide array of partners, consultants, funders and providers to retool its system. In 2014, OK DHS partnered with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Strategy Group (CWSG). Together they implemented a four-pronged approach to close shelters and ensure that children grew up in families, not group homes and residential facilities that are not appropriate for their development. Three years later, Oklahoma had fewer institutional beds and had become the national leader³ in increasing the number of foster families. Four strategies made these results possible:

- installing new practices at the agency's front door to make better decisions about which children need to enter foster care;
- placing significantly more children in families by decreasing use of short-term child welfare shelters;
- boosting the number of relatives and foster parents available to care for children, using updated foster parent recruitment, support and retention approaches; and
- building relationships among the state agency, child and family advocates and legislators to ensure critical improvements are embedded in agency practices for the long term.

In concert with these strategies, CWSG developed what they called the "inside-outside" strategy — an approach that creates and fosters long-term connections between agencies and advocates to better sustain impending reforms.

"Many of the lessons we learned in Oklahoma will be useful to systems looking to implement the new federal [Family First Prevention Services Act](#),"⁴ said Tracey Feild, CWSG's director. "The lessons are simple — care for kids at home whenever possible. And make caring for kids a community effort, not the work of one agency. But it's not an easy task to take on. Oklahoma managed to bring tremendous energy to a high-stress situation and focus on long-term solutions, not temporary fixes."

A New Approach to Keep Kids at Home: Team Decision Making

2012	2014	2015	2017	2018
Pinnacle Plan implementation begins.	Partnership between the Casey Foundation and the state begins. Statewide foster parent recruitment efforts accelerate. Team Decision Making (TDM) begins in Oklahoma City.	Shelters are closed in Oklahoma City. The “inside-outside” strategy is implemented that fostered advocate-agency partnerships.	TDM continues statewide rollout.	Tulsa shelter closes. Improvement efforts continue based on the partnership with the Casey Foundation.

The way children entered Oklahoma’s child welfare system was part of the problem. After a referral to the child welfare agency, OK DHS’s gatekeeping was not effectively determining which children could safely remain with their parents and which needed to be placed in foster care.

According to OK DHS administrators, the majority of children were placed in foster care as a result of neglect. A recent study of this issue revealed that many of these children could have safely stayed in their homes had more intensive, home-based services been available to their families. Casey recommended implementing Team Decision Making (TDM)⁵ to improve the quality and consistency of those early decisions.

TDM is a departure from traditional child welfare practice in which a single caseworker and a supervisor determine the response to a child in a crisis. TDM brings together parents, youth, relatives, community members and others to assess the situation and recommend how best to keep the child safe.

TDM enables those closest to the child to participate in problem solving, ideally resulting in the child being kept at home, if safe and appropriate, while the family receives the tools they need to parent. The strategy can be helpful, for example, in cases where there is no evidence of abuse but there is evidence of overwhelmed parents who lack the proper resources to raise their child — particularly if that child has special needs. Research⁶ shows that when delivered with high quality, TDM leads to:

- increased likelihood that a child who enters care will live with relatives or foster parents from the start;
- increased likelihood that a child will be returned to live with a parent or family member within a year;
- decreased the need for therapeutic foster placements for kids who experienced significant trauma;
- decreased inequities in how systems respond to children of color; and
- decreased chances that a child will experience maltreatment again.

Casey Foundation teams found that when agencies use TDM practices to analyze child safety and family strengths, and when communities have the right mix of services to meet struggling families’ needs, the number of entries into child welfare can be safely reduced.

In addition to implementing TDM, CWSG team members worked with the state to review the mix of services and family-strengthening options offered. They identified ways that the state could

encourage providers to do more to support families and examined when the trauma of short-term stays in foster care could be avoided safely. Of the 2,500 children who entered group placements in 2012, nearly 44 percent of them left within seven days — often an indication that removing them from their home was unnecessary.

Looking for New Families: Recruitment, Development and Support

To keep babies, children and teens out of shelters and other institutional settings, many more quality relatives and foster families were needed. The Casey Foundation has successfully used new approaches for recruiting and retaining foster parents that:

- use data to identify the characteristics and needs of children in care and understand how they experience life in foster care;
- look first to kin when a child is removed from home, creating a kin-first⁷ culture;
- learn from children's home communities, using community-based, targeted and child-specific recruiting tactics, and build relationships there;
- use new communications channels such as social media and messages targeted to subgroups of potential foster parents; and
- update state and agency policy to make sure agencies are providing the support foster parents need.

These were all key elements that could help Oklahoma encourage kin placements and find foster families. But first, CWSG team members needed to help Oklahoma eliminate logjams that were stalling the foster home approval process to better implement their foster parent Recruitment, Development and Support (RDS) strategy. Between October 2014 and May 2015, Oklahoma made critical improvements. For example:

- Fingerprinting results are now handled electronically, reducing the processing time to days rather than weeks.
- Military applicants may use out-of-state identification when being considered for fostering.
- Prospective foster parents who are not in the military and do not have a state driver's license can have home studies conducted while they obtain an in-state license, within 30 days.
- Applicants receive an easy-to-follow guide to the foster parent approval process.

With these issues resolved, the focus shifted to family recruitment, with an emphasis on avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to finding families. Oklahoma realized it needed to work harder to recruit from a variety of communities in which ties between the agency and residents needed strengthening, including parts of the state with large Native American, African-American and Latino populations.

Reviewing data by race, OK DHS saw that about 24 percent of foster kids in foster care were Native American. CWSG worked with the agency to build ties with tribal organizations and rapidly increase the number of tribal foster homes available.

To open the lines of communication, CWSG offered to host free workshops to help private agencies form — and nurture — better relationships with local tribes. The workshops were planned by workgroups of tribal members and took place in various cities throughout the state, including Tulsa, Ada and Lawton.

“We met one-on-one with [CWSG RDS consultant] Denise Goodman and got to pick her brain,” said Hettie Charboneau, program manager for Cherokee Nation. “It was an opportunity for us to figure out how to locate and recruit families for our kids.”

CWSG expanded this practice to African-American and Latino populations, introducing informational sessions that included an overview of targeted and community-based recruitment. The sessions were designed to help recruiters, foster care licensing staff, supervisors and managers from the tribes build effective recruitment plans that drive results. The sessions were hands-on and characterized by lively, participatory work.

Key to this success was helping the state strike the right balance in privatizing foster parent recruitment. Initially, OK DHS had signed contracts with four private agencies that would recruit families as well as oversee subcontractors’ efforts to meet the ambitious new recruitment goals required by the Pinnacle Plan. Casey helped OK DHS build an infrastructure to ensure all parties were working toward the same goals and agencies were appropriately supported and monitored. When it became apparent that additional resources were needed to meet recruitment goals, OK DHS restarted its foster care recruitment and approval processes. This public-private collaboration ultimately led to a dramatic increase in foster homes.

In 2015, as part of a campaign to build interest in foster parenting, Oklahoma held friendly competitions to encourage private foster care agencies to continue to boost the number of families. Prizes were given to those that not only brought on the most parents but also recruited families that met the needs of children in the system. The state asked employers to encourage their employees to become foster parents, creating incentives such as steeply discounted membership rates at the YMCA.

In its work with staff throughout the state, CWSG also introduced the [Foster Home Estimator](#),⁸ a tool created in 2006 that helps agencies build a more robust pool of foster parents by accurately estimating how many additional foster homes are needed, especially for specific populations of children, such as teens or large sibling groups.

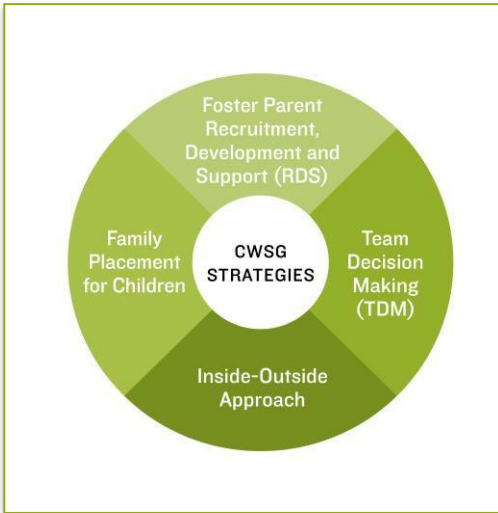
Using data extracted from information systems, the tool analyzes different placement types and the level of difficulty in finding foster homes for children of different ages. Resource managers and data staff identify targeted placements. Over the years, the Foster Home Estimator has been refined to enable agencies to target recruitment by geography, age, race and national origin.

“The estimator is best used as part of efforts to improve how your agency is meeting the needs of kids and families,” said Judy Wildfire, who developed the estimator for the Foundation with Denise Goodman. “It can stimulate rich discussions about agency policies, practices and aspirations.”

Broad Collaboration for Long-Term Results

Sweeping in with new practices, trainings and protocols could bring success to a region, but for how long? CWSG’s goal was to look beyond the present conditions and consider how its work with OK DHS could have a long-term effect on child welfare. To do so meant going beyond CWSG’s usual approach of primarily focusing its work on the state child welfare agency. After two years of partnering with OK DHS, CWSG’s conversation shifted to how progress being made could be sustained.

“Casey wanted to make changes that would stick,” said Dan Cowan, who worked on the Oklahoma effort as a CWSG consultant. “Good leadership is important for this kind of work, but it won’t get you far without policy in place to protect the work.”



Casey noticed that there was not much child welfare advocacy in the state and little to no trust between advocates and agencies. CWSG stepped in as a connector, slowly building the bridges to what would hopefully turn into a long-term, productive partnership. Casey called this work the “inside-outside” strategy, as it involved CWSG doing its usual consulting work with the child welfare system but also working to align the external advocacy community and the agency on policy priorities as a means of sustaining reforms.

While CWSG continued working to build those bridges, the agency focused on educating legislators about the overall improvements being made.

Funders and providers were brought into

discussions whenever possible. Casey, OK DHS and other partners explored what would be needed to sustain reform: creating new policies at the agency level, revising state statutes or changing fiscal approaches.

In large systems-change efforts, “it isn’t uncommon for new leadership to come in after the fact, decide something doesn’t align with their practices and undo critical progress made,” said Rob Geen, Casey’s director of policy reform and advocacy who oversees the Foundation’s advocacy strategy related to child welfare. “With the inside-outside approach, we sought to connect the dots to sustain key changes.”

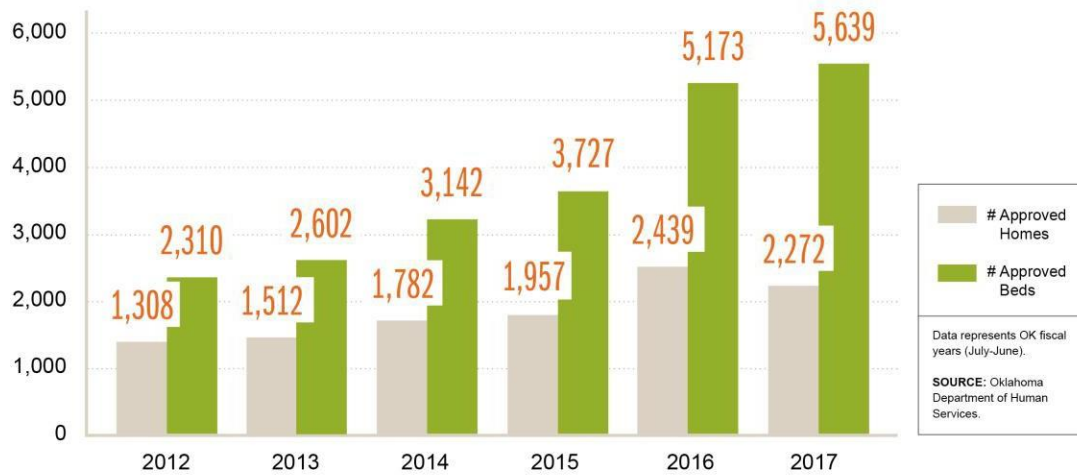
Working with advocates and policymakers, the agency helped propel the efforts to shut down shelters. The effort became controversial in Tulsa, where communities had supported building a top-of-the-line shelter for children. More than two years later, however, Oklahoma had closed its last shelter.

A Vision for the Future

“Though Oklahoma’s child welfare system presented numerous challenges, OK DHS was committed to creating a system that protected and nurtured its children,” Feild says. “The staff worked closely with us to ensure their practices and strategies are serving the goal of better outcomes for kids and families.”

By the end of fiscal year 2017, Oklahoma led the nation with the largest number of additional foster homes added since 2012 (for a total of 3,302 new foster care beds), according to the Chronicle of Social Change. Foster care also became a more stable experience for many Oklahoma children. Those who stayed in the same home in foster care, without moving, increased by 40 percent during this period.

Oklahoma Increases Foster Homes and Beds



There has been a 74% increase in the number of foster homes available since 2012 and a 144% increase in the number of approved beds available.

Several key factors drove Oklahoma's success:

- **Community involvement.** Effective systems change often involves encouraging the larger community, including families, community organizations, advocates, funders and others to work together. Practicing Team Decision Making and updating agency Recruitment, Development and Support strategies can help bring members of the community into closer contact with a child welfare agency, but the agency must make relationship building and outreach a continuous priority to achieve results.
- **Strong partner relationships.** Agencies must build relationships with a broad range of partners, from legislators and private providers to the media and the courts. Without those relationships, they are unlikely to be able to gauge community needs for services, recognize family and community strengths and needs and make good decisions about when to provide guidance to families and when to intervene.
- **Outreach to communities of color.** Agencies must make particular efforts in communities of color to build trust and cultural awareness; ensure sufficient support for birth and foster parents and caregiving relatives; and include families in decision making.

Oklahoma's experience shows what can happen when the right strategies build a solid foundation. "Change is difficult," Feild says. "We've learned that improvements are possible — but they also must be safeguarded. OK DHS and its partners have taken critical steps to do better by kids and families and address the demands of the Pinnacle Plan. Now it's up to all the decision makers in the state to continue to work together and with OK DHS to provide the leadership and vision to keep Oklahoma's children safe and thriving."

¹ Perry, G. (2019, May 2). *New KIDS COUNT Data Book ranks Oklahoma near worst in the nation for child well-being* (Blog post). Retrieved from <https://okpolicy.org/new-kids-count-data-book-ranks-oklahoma-near-the-worst-in-the-nation-for-child-well-being>

² Oklahoma Department of Human Services. (n.d.). *The Oklahoma Pinnacle Plan*. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from http://www.okdhs.org/okdhs%20pdf%20library/OklahomaPinnaclePlanFinal_cfsd_07252012.pdf

³ The Chronicle of Social Change. (2017). *The foster care housing crisis*. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-Foster-Care-Housing-Crisis-10-31.pdf>

⁴ Alliance for Strong Families and Communities. (n.d.). *Overview of provisions in the Family First Prevention Services Act*. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from <https://www.alliance1.org/web/news/2018/feb/overview-provisions-family-first-prevention-services-act.aspx>

⁵ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). *Team decision making: A better way to assess child safety*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from www.aecf.org/blog/team-decision-making-a-better-way-to-assess-child-safety

⁶ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2014, March 5). *Team Decision Making: Engaging families in placement decisions*. Retrieved from [file:///C:/Users/ngjoni/Box%20Sync/NGjoni/Downloads/AECF-TeamDecisionMakingCaseStudy-2014%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/ngjoni/Box%20Sync/NGjoni/Downloads/AECF-TeamDecisionMakingCaseStudy-2014%20(1).pdf)

⁷ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017, Sep. 25). *How to: Creating a kin-first culture in child welfare* (Blog post). Retrieved from www.aecf.org/blog/how-to-creating-a-kin-first-culture-in-child-welfare

⁸ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2016). *Foster home estimator*. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/blog/foster-home-estimator-helping-child-welfare-agencies-plan-for-family-recruitment/>