

RESOURCE FAMILY RECRUITMENT IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY



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Insights & Pathways Forward



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Resource Family Recruitment in Los Angeles County

INSIGHTS & PATHWAYS FORWARD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose & Goal

The purpose of this analysis was to describe the current process of bringing families to provide foster or adoptive care—i.e., resource families—into the foster care system in Los Angeles County. Specific attention was paid to the bifurcated system comprising largely distinct Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and foster family agency (FFA) recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement efforts. The goal was to identify areas for improvement, where DCFS and FFAs can work complementarily to more efficiently and effectively recruit, train, assess, and approve new resource families, and place children in appropriate, safe, and secure homes.

Data Collection & Analysis Approaches

The data collection and analysis approaches were designed to describe each of the major points of the recruitment process, including areas for improvement and promising practices, and to document the impact of each piece of the dual system, with emphasis on identifying areas of need and potential solutions. To achieve these objectives, the evaluation team conducted a multiple methods study that looked closely, via qualitative methods, at how practices influenced outcomes, and the successes and challenges of the dual resource family recruitment system. In addition, quantitative and cost outcomes were derived from secondary data analysis.

Insights & Pathways Forward

The following summarizes key insights and pathways forward regarding the separate stages of becoming a resource parent: recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement. ***Please see the full report for additional detail.***

Recruitment

Coordination of recruitment efforts should be increased.

DCFS and FFAs have developed and engaged in a variety of useful recruitment strategies. However, it was evident that there was also some redundancy, at least in part due to communication problems or lack of information sharing across agencies. Given the limitation of resources that can be devoted to recruitment, coordination of efforts between FFAs and DCFS seems a prime area for enhanced focus. Better coordination could help to reduce the time and effort needed to engage and process prospective resource families. While FFA and DCFS-Placement Recruitment Unit (PRU) staff noted that there is some coordination between

public and private sector agencies around recruitment, most of those interviewed for this study remarked on the confusion many prospective resource families experience as a result of the dual recruitment efforts (i.e., FFA and DCFS). Another source of confusion that interacts with and confounds the existing recruitment system is communication of the requirements for dual approval (i.e., foster and adoption). Thoughtful coordination of recruitment efforts will reduce the inconsistencies in information relayed to prospective families from different agencies, as well as the confusion felt by many prospective resource families about critical issues that may affect their decisions, such as benefits, information sources, and approval requirements. Coordinating recruitment efforts, including response to inquiries in a consistent and strategic manner, may help to reduce confusion and increase motivation to foster children.

A potential approach to standardizing and effectively addressing responses from prospective resource families is the idea of “one-line” recruitment whereby a joint effort would be made to establish a single point of contact for prospective resource families. This cross-agency effort would require further analysis to implement, and require explicitly defining equitable support for the service and a fair and efficient process for disseminating referrals. However, the inquiry type, location, and characteristics of inquirers to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline suggest that the data could be gathered to support a transparent stakeholder driven process to be developed.

Further, Internet inquiries have increased as the number of personal referrals have decreased, suggesting online venues are not being effectively leveraged as a primary contact and resource point for prospective families. As an example, a single website and accompanying mobile application, including a common cross-agency registration process and calendar of orientations, could be developed as the central medium through which the child welfare system reaches out to families and brings them into the fold. Such straightforward approaches may help to alleviate some of the confusion that potential resource families feel about the dual system, and that many recruitment staff reported struggling to clarify. Such strategic cross-agency recruitment ideas and current efforts should be further explored.

Effective recruitment practices should be more closely tracked and studied, and findings should be disseminated.

FFA and DCFS staff involved in this study described their need for more systematic, complete, and reliable tracking of recruitment efforts. Much of the hard work and innovative recruitment work accomplished by these agencies is not quantified or characterized in ways that allow for efficient identification of promising or effective practices. Some promising approaches are highlighted in this report, but more complete tracking, and efficient analysis and dissemination of such practices would allow for better development and improvement of Los Angeles County resource family recruitment processes.

Additional efforts should be focused on recruitment of homes appropriate for the most difficult to place children.

Among the most consistent themes across FFA staff, DCFS staff, and resource families was the difficulty in finding appropriate homes for harder to place children (e.g., sibling groups, very young children, older children, and children with special needs). Many FFAs as well as DCFS-PRU do recruit resource families capable and willing to serve harder to place children (e.g., through Angels in Waiting, the Diligent Recruitment Grant program including support for the Kidsave program). However, those interviewed consistently described the need and desire to focus more effort on recruitment of such homes. The most common suggestion was to focus on establishing relationships with communities that tend to include families

who have the knowledge, skills, and potential desire to care for hard to place children. This has been done to a limited extent with nurses, but such efforts could be expanded to include many other communities (e.g., other medical professionals, older adults, communities centered around specific disabilities or special medical needs). Increasing focus on relationship building with communities of families capable of providing appropriate care for the most difficult to place children appears to be a fertile area for development.

Current resource families should be further engaged in recruitment efforts.

Word of mouth referrals or recommendations can be very influential in families' decisions to seek additional information and to pursue foster care or adoption. As such, many FFA staff described informally enlisting current or previous resource families in their recruitment efforts. More formally, DCFS-PRU has supported the Recruitment Ambassador Program, in which trained resource parents help recruit and then support prospective resource families, and are compensated for every approved family they work with. The Recruitment Ambassador Program is promising as a more strategic approach to involving current or former resource families in recruitment efforts, but it is currently run at a small scale (approximately 15 families). Such practices, with accompanying resources, should be expanded and their effectiveness in Los Angeles County should be further studied.

Training

The training process should include a continuum of support.

To encourage commitment to this journey and partnership with the agency, some FFAs reported that one or a few staff members conducted orientations, trainings, and home visits. The central element of this approach was the consistent point of support for the family throughout the training and approval processes. This provision of a continuum of support for prospective families should be further expanded across agencies, and the impact of this approach should be studied.

However, the costs of additional pre-placement support must be weighed carefully. Resource Families represent a considerable monetary investment beyond the immeasurable value of opening their hearts and homes to children in need.

Uniform FFA training process and outcome data should be collected.

Data pertaining to the movement of prospective families through training were limited. Some FFAs do diligently collect information about training processes and outcomes, but the data gathered by these tracking systems were not sufficiently similar, or housed in a consolidated database, to be useful within the scope of this analysis. Complete understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of the training process will require that FFAs more uniformly and reliably collect information regarding the training process.

Existing resource families should be engaged to orient prospective families.

Among the innovations reported by some FFAs was the practice of conducting orientations in the homes of current resource families. This was described as a productive recruitment tactic that contributes to the support and commitment of prospective resource families who are entering the training and approval processes. In many cases, this practice also included the provision of incentives for host families. This approach, which draws on the lived experiences of others, holds promise and should be studied to identify its effectiveness. Successful orientation practices for partnering with existing resource families should then be promoted across the foster and adoption communities.

More effective and efficient ways to orient prospective resource families and engage current resource families regarding ITFC should be identified.

Despite DCFS initiatives to encourage Awareness of Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC), this area needs increased focus across agencies. Awareness among prospective resource families was reported to be low. Specifically, engaging new families in this type of care when they had no prior interest was described as an often difficult and time-consuming part of the orientation process. To overcome this challenge, some agencies reported recruiting and orienting current resource families to ITFC, as they may be more likely to have had enough experience to be able to understand the need for and develop a more positive orientation to the possibility of providing more intensive care. However, agencies also noted that this requires significant resources, money, attention, and time. Given the need for more families capable of providing this type of care, more effective and efficient ways to attract and orient prospective resource families and to engage current resource families regarding ITFC should be identified and developed.

Online orientation should be explored.

Staff members explained that the need to include the California Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) in each orientation limited the number of sessions they could provide each month. To remove this constraint, CCLD was in the process of moving their portion of the orientation online, as part of the Resource Family Approval (RFA) program, to be initiated in January 2017. This change may allow for additional sessions to be scheduled and may streamline the orientation process for prospective families, partly through moving the approval burden from the state to counties and FFAs. If such changes prove efficient and effective, it may be prudent to explore providing the entire DCFS orientation online—especially considering the increasing number of online recruitment referrals. While there will likely always be a demand for in-person orientation, an online venue would ensure that the demand for this training at any given time could be satisfied.

Assessment & Approval

High quality standards for the assessment and approval process should be adopted.

The evaluation team found variation between FFAs and DCFS, as well as across FFAs, in the extent and components of the assessment and approval processes. These differences were often confusing for prospective resource families and were a source of inefficiency and complication across agencies. Many FFA staff suggested that the adoption of high quality standards for assessment and approval across agencies would reduce confusion for prospective families and allow them to more easily share or transfer cases, thereby supporting more efficient allocation of resources across the system.

Transparency of the assessment and approval process should be increased.

Assessment and approval staff interviewed recommended that the extent, duration, costs, and requirements of the assessment and approval processes—both between FFAs and DCFS, as well as across FFAs—be made clearer and more accessible for prospective families. Further, progress through the assessment and approval process, including milestones completed or requirements outstanding, should be made clearer and more accessible for families engaged in the process. Currently, there is substantial variation across agencies in the degree of regular communication with families in the approval process, so routinized and increased transparency may contribute to support and retention. Additionally, identifying workers across agencies who

are assigned to assessment and approval or other specific services might further support the efficient allocation of resources.

DCFS oversight and support for prospective resource families should be increased.

Another common thread of discussion was the potential positive impact of additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective families (e.g., more home visits, more time for relationship building and engagement during training and assessment). As training has been outsourced, DCFS assessment and approval workers' focus has shifted away from this area and toward approval. This has reduced their opportunities to engage and build rapport with families, which may be contributing to the increasing proportion of newly approved certified (i.e., approved by an FFA), rather than licensed (i.e., approved by CCLD), families each year. The importance of personal connections and relationship building evident in the recruitment, training, and approval processes suggests that additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective resource families may improve the quality and retention of homes throughout the DCFS assessment and approval process.

Placement

Interagency communication and collaboration should be improved.

DCFS and FFA staff highlighted interagency communication and collaboration as a particular hurdle for moving placements forward. While both parties to this process agreed that safety and successful placements for children are the goal, the understandable but sometimes conflicting agency perspectives can disrupt agency relations and communications. This issue has been acknowledged to some extent by both FFAs and DCFS, and both have collaborated on new strategies to address barriers to communication and coordination. Specifically, the interagency placement event planned for 2015 involving DCFS, FFAs, and resource families is an encouraging step and a potentially promising approach to collaboration.

Relationship building among agencies, families, and children is especially important. Broad approaches, such as conferences, trainings, and policy development workshops, might facilitate system-wide coordination and development. Likewise, more focused approaches, such as working groups or associations of parties with interest or stake in the placement of specific groups (e.g., those with specialized care needs, or of particular ages or races/ethnicities) hold promise to generate dedicated interest and involvement. Communication and collaboration appear to be fertile ground for sowing the seeds of an improved placement system.

Intake/admissions procedures should be improved.

As a symptom of the larger communication and collaboration difficulties between DCFS and FFAs around placement, the intake/admission process was specifically highlighted as problematic. DCFS staff described the need for more availability and responsiveness from FFAs, particularly for urgent or emergent placements/replacements. FFAs noted a lack of communication and inaccurate information from social workers regarding the types of placements needed or details such as specialized care needs, traumas, or child characteristics. Both issues represent significant barriers to efficient placement and appropriate matches. While CCLD regulations provide guidance regarding intake/admission, more standard and specific policies and procedures across agencies would standardize the process. More uniform procedures would simplify coordination between organizations, and ultimately improve efficiency after an appropriate placement and match has been identified.

The Foster Care Search System should be further developed.

The Foster Care Search System (FCSS), launched in 2014, has reportedly made the placement search process more efficient. DCFS staff supporting the FCSS reported it will ultimately include automation of FFA reports to DCFS, email reminders to FFAs when recertification of homes is required, and electronic signatures for approval of home certification. Each of these planned developments has the potential to increase efficiency and communication while adding accountability. However, any system requiring manual data entry from multiple sources (i.e., FFAs, DCFS, and licensed families) requires safeguards such as routine data checks to ensure completeness and accuracy. Additionally, such user driven data systems require continuous technical support (e.g., maintenance of the system, training and troubleshooting for users) and organizational support (e.g., policies requiring use) in order to reach their potential and sustain effectiveness.

Preliminary Cost Analysis

The initial cost analysis data collected in this study suggest no meaningful differences between DCFS and FFA costs per family to recruit, assess, approve, and train families. During the post-approval period, however, costs per family were greater for FFAs than those reported by DCFS. In order to provide context for the post-approval period finding, the Full-Time Equivalent (one full-time staff person) was calculated in order to determine the staff ratio serving resource families. The DCFS staffing ratio is one full-time staff person for every 79 resource families, and the pilot sample FFA staffing ratio is one full-time staff person for every 8 resource families. The results suggest that FFAs devote more time to resource families post-approval.

It is important to note that cost data received from the FFAs surveyed and from DCFS were incomplete and not comprehensive, and thus cost findings are suggestive only. However, it can be stated that cost data made available to the research team indicate that post approval DCFS supports fewer staff per resource family compared to that supported by FFAs.

Overall Insights & Pathways Forward

There are opportunities to overcome the challenges of the bifurcated system.

At each point along the resource parent recruitment path, FFA and DCFS staff identified and richly described the challenges and limitations of the dual foster care recruitment system. Available data regarding the outcomes of these dual pathways largely support the notion that this approach has deleterious consequences for agencies, families, and children. While there is largely acceptance that the current bifurcated system is not preferable, many agency staff members have concluded that both foster care pathways need to be maintained in order to avoid losing homes. However, there is a great need for additional placements, and the potential consequences of moving to a single system warrants further study.

If policymakers and stakeholders decide that the dual recruitment system must be continued, at least in the short-term, there appear to be many opportunities for FFAs and DCFS to coordinate and collaborate at each stage of the process. As noted, recruitment processes could be much better aligned and streamlined across agencies, such that the first step onto the pathway is simplified for prospective families and efficiency and effectiveness are increased for FFAs and DCFS. High quality training standards could be adopted across agencies, possibly through common training curricula or protocols. This is being done currently in many counties throughout California using QPI California, a comprehensive training curriculum that has been

approved by CDSS (see www.qpicalifornia.org). This would support greater consistency in how resource families are prepared, and thus increase the overall quality of the care they provide.

Participants from both DCFS and FFAs believed the requirement for dual assessment and approval for foster care and adoption limits the pool of potential resource families, but also encourages a higher standard of care. The redundancy and inflexibility of this process should be further examined and streamlined across agencies while maintaining appropriate approval standards. DCFS development of a Foster Care Search System appears to already be improving the efficiency of identifying potential placements, but must continue to be developed, including additional efforts to ensure consistent FFA participation. Further, the process for working with FFAs or families after identification of appropriate placements should be standardized to increase efficiency. These and other opportunities to overcome the challenges of the bifurcated system exist, and they are largely acknowledged across agencies.

Cost per resource family should be taken into account.

Pilot study results indicate that no meaningful difference between DCFS and FFAs in pre-certification costs, including training. Differences do emerge after resource families are approved. This closely aligns with reports from FFA staff, who say they provide support to resource families that is individually tailored, available 24/7, and responsive to their needs. Likewise, DCFS staff reported a desire for reduced caseloads that would allow them to better tend to resource family needs. Of particular interest is the impact of post-certification support on resource family retention. FFAs were found to increase retention of placements year-to-year, whereas DCFS retention was relatively stable. Increased retention among certified homes may be a desirable outcome of the additional post approval investment of FFAs. Such cost implications should be more completely investigated.

Information systems capable of identifying and driving system improvements should be developed.

As described throughout the report, there are limitations and gaps in the documentation of processes and outcomes at each stage of recruitment. More complete tracking of initial contacts across agencies, for example, would allow for more accurate and timely information to drive decisions regarding public information strategies. Likewise, uniform data collection regarding training across agencies would help to identify more efficient and effective training models. More reliable assessment and approval information (e.g., regarding placement capacity and characteristics) would provide a more accurate understanding of the homes available to meet current needs, and potentially support a more strategic placement process. Finally, much information regarding placements and the experiences of children, their wellness, and their care is qualitative, anecdotal, and/or not readily analyzable. Such characteristics should be more accurately and reliably measured to support appropriate and safe placements. Opportunities abound to better use data to identify and drive resource family recruitment system improvements.

Resource Family Recruitment in Los Angeles County

INSIGHTS & PATHWAYS FORWARD

PURPOSE & GOAL

The purpose of this analysis was to describe the current process of bringing families to provide foster or adoptive care—i.e., resource families—into the foster care system in Los Angeles County, with specific attention to the bifurcated system of largely distinct Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and foster family agency (FFA) recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement efforts. The goal was to identify areas for improvement, where DCFS and FFAs can work complementarily to more efficiently and effectively recruit, train, assess, and approve new resource families, and place children in appropriate, safe, and secure homes.

HISTORY & CONTEXT

The National Picture

Historically and nationally, the recruitment and retention of resource families capable of providing high-quality care have been persistent challenges for child welfare agencies.¹ Fostering or adopting children is very demanding, and so a high rate of families exit care annually. A substantial proportion of resource family attrition is due to foster families exiting the system. A recent study found that across three states, the typical length of service in foster parenting was less than many children's stay in foster care.² These circumstances dictate that child welfare agencies must work diligently on an ongoing basis to recruit many new families and to retain high rates of experienced families in order to provide sufficient numbers of appropriate homes for children in out-of-home care.

The Local Picture

In California, the need for resource families has been particularly acute for older children and children with severe emotional and behavioral concerns. California's Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) program is intended to support children and youth ages 10 to 17 who have serious emotional or behavioral issues by shifting them out of group homes and into foster homes where they can receive the type of care they require before a permanent situation is identified. Homes capable of such care are relatively rare, however, and thus recruiting foster parents for ITFC has been a significant hurdle statewide and in Los Angeles County.

In 2011, the *Katie A., et al., vs. Diana Bonta, et al.* (State of California and County of Los Angeles) settlement required Los Angeles County to provide \$17.3 million to support ITFC care to 300 children.³ As of June 2012, DCFS reported 86 Treatment Foster Care (TFC) certified homes with 68 children placed.⁴ This illustrates the challenge in providing sufficient care for children with such needs. Additionally, in 2012, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) expanded a moratorium on new group home applications

for fiscal year (FY) 2012–2013.⁵ This lack of expansion of new group homes has put additional pressure on Los Angeles to expand the pool for foster care placements.

Los Angeles County must currently meet the challenge of providing care—basic, as well as ITFC and other types—through a bifurcated system for licensing (i.e., State approval) and certifying (i.e., FFA approval) resource families to foster and adopt. DCFS works with the Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) of the CDSS to directly license and approve resource families to foster and adopt in Los Angeles County. As a now distinct path to foster care, FFAs were statutorily created as an alternative to group homes in 1984.⁶ They were originally established to help meet the need for additional foster families. FFAs are now licensed by CCLD and certify families to provide care for children that counties place with the FFA. Thus, Los Angeles County maintains two separate, and to some extent parallel, foster care systems. The implications of this dual approval policy are also considered within the context of the two-track resource family recruitment system in Los Angeles County.

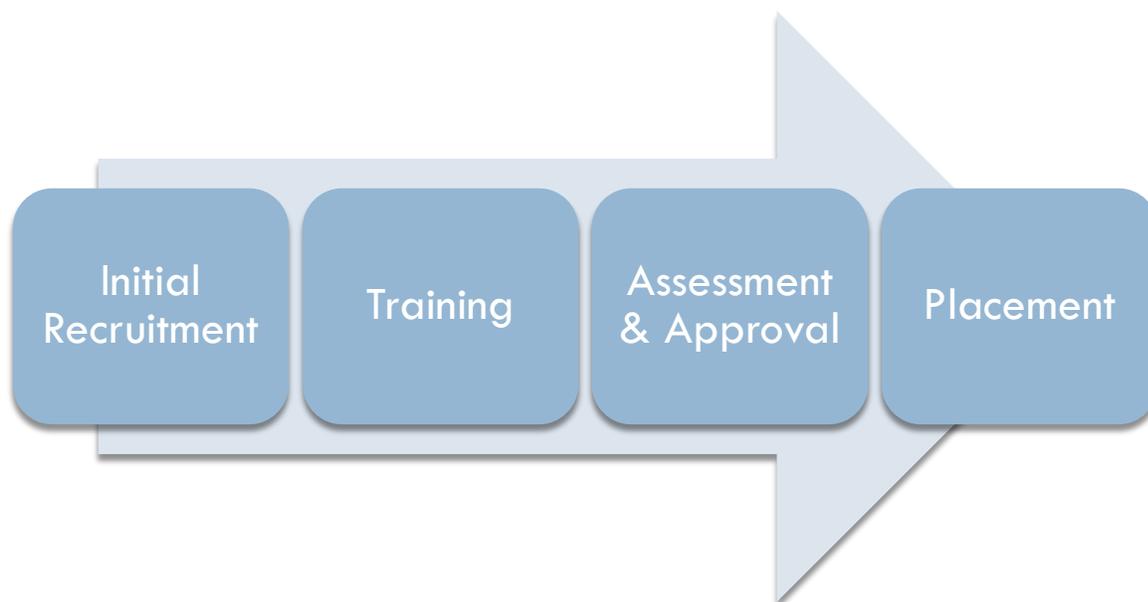
Research Questions to be Addressed

The specific charge of the research team was to address ten questions regarding resource family recruitment processes and outcomes in Los Angeles County:

- Should the current dual system of licensed and FFA certified homes be continued?
- How can DCFS and the FFAs better coordinate their efforts and work more efficiently together?
- Is a "one-line" recruitment approach feasible?
- What is the current cost for staff to recruit, train, and oversee licensed and certified homes?
- What is the difference in cost to support licensed and certified homes?
- Are there ways to ensure better oversight and safety of foster parents?
- Is there any evidence of difference in the quality or outcomes achieved by licensed and certified homes?
- Are there enough available foster homes?
- What types of homes (e.g., geography, child age, type of care) are needed?
- Should all FFAs be required to be accredited?

Organization of the Report

First, the research approaches employed to address the study questions are detailed. Then, each of the research questions is addressed in the context of each stage of the recruitment process as displayed in Figure 1. Within each of these stages of the recruitment process, the report provides description, analysis, insights, and pathways forward. Finally, the larger implications of results across the recruitment process are discussed.

Figure 1. The resource family recruitment process

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS APPROACHES

The goals of the process and outcome analysis were to describe each of the major points of the recruitment process, including areas for improvement and promising practices, and to document the impact of each piece of the dual system, with emphasis on identifying areas of need and potential solutions. To achieve these objectives, the research team conducted a multiple methods study. Specifically, the team looked closely, via qualitative methods, at how practices influenced outcomes, and the successes and challenges of the dual resource family recruitment system. In addition, quantitative and cost outcomes were derived from secondary data analysis.

Data Collection

Primary Data Collection & Procedures

Within a non-experimental, descriptive study design, the research team conducted many semi-structured in-person/telephone interviews, and collected self-report survey data from FFA staff, DCFS staff, and foster parents.

Recruitment & Participants

Several recruitment approaches were employed to garner interview participation. DCFS administration assisted in identifying the office, units, and workers most relevant to the resource family recruitment process. Supervisors and managers of each respective group were contacted for participation, and they then identified staff members who were willing and able to be interviewed.

All 46 FFAs that had contracted with Los Angeles County in FY 2013–2014 were invited to participate in this study. Recruitment continued until a minimum of three agencies within each of three size ranges (small = 0–50 homes; medium = 51–100 homes; large = 101–197 homes) agreed to participate. The resulting FFA

sample was made up of 17 agencies, including eight small agencies, six medium, and three large. Table 1 displays the number of staff who participated across agencies. The sample represents 37% of all FFAs serving Los Angeles County in FY 2013–2014, and is generally proportional to the number of agencies serving these ranges of homes across the county. However, the data collected from this convenience sample of agencies should not be considered perfectly representative of all 46 agencies serving the county.

Both DCFS and FFA workers were asked to provide referrals for current resource families who would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences. Some families who declined to participate expressed concerns about time constraints and about sharing current experiences. While 12 families indicated interest, only two completed participation. The insights of these two families were enlightening, but cannot be considered representative of all resource families in the county.

Additionally, all 46 FFA agencies were invited to complete a self-report survey regarding the effectiveness of their recruitment and placement activities and procedures. This yielded the participation of 58.7% (27/46) of all Los Angeles County FFAs.

Table 1. Overview of mixed-method primary data collection

Data Sources	Number of Interviews / Surveys	Number of Participants
DCFS Staff Interviews & Surveys: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement & Recruitment Unit • Assessment & approval • Advanced Placement Team • Service bureaus • Out-of-home care • Supervisors and administrators 	15	75 staff members
FFA Staff Interviews & Surveys: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement & Recruitment Unit • Assessment & approval • Management • Support • Other key staff 	17	91 staff members
FFA Survey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectiveness of recruitment and placement activities 	--	27 agencies
Interviews with Resource Families	2	2 families

Procedures. On average, the individual and group interview process for all participants spanned one to two hours and involved a brief pre-interview survey followed by a semi-structured interview. For DCFS and FFA staff, the initial survey inquired about participants’ roles with their respective agencies, then asked them to list and rank up to 10 job tasks within each stage of the recruitment process (i.e., recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement). Interviews were conducted upon completion of the initial survey.

Families interviewed were not asked to complete a pre-interview survey. The semi-structured interviews mirrored the structure of the initial survey instrument, in that the discussion progressed through each stage of the recruitment process as relevant to the staff member or family member being interviewed. These complementary procedures provided for a linear and efficient interview process.

Invitations for the FFA survey of recruitment and placement were distributed via email and responses were submitted online at agencies' convenience.

Administrative Data Collection & Procedures

Existing data from a variety of state and DCFS administrative data sources were also collected and analyzed. Table 2 details the types of data extracted from each administrative data system. To extract data, the research team worked with DCFS data analysts. Data regarding each stage of the recruitment process were obtained and analyzed for the last five complete fiscal years (2009–2010 through 2013–2014).

Table 2. Overview of administrative data collection

Data Sources
<p>DCFS—Business Information Systems (BIS):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Welfare Services / Case Management System (CWS/CMS) data regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Homes (e.g., approvals and characteristics) ○ Placements (e.g., child characteristics)
<p>Placement & Recruitment Unit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative data regarding recruitment (e.g., contacts and orientation)
<p>Adoptions & Permanency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PS-MAPP training administrative data

Upon receipt of data, a quality review process was conducted, including inspection for missing, unknown, or out of range values. Data quality issues are highlighted as relevant throughout the report.

Analysis Approaches

Qualitative Analysis

Interview and open-ended survey response data were transcribed and entered into an analysis-ready database. An emergent approach⁷ was used to code and organize the data into themes. This provided a rich description of the approaches and activities in which FFA and DCFS staff engage. Our iterative analysis process revealed shortcomings and promising practices at each stage of the recruitment process. Results of the qualitative analysis are described throughout the report.

Quantitative Analysis

Primary and existing quantitative data were consolidated into an analysis ready-database. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using a variety of software packages (i.e., Stata, SPSS, and R).

Data visualization software, Tableau, was also utilized for analysis and interactive visualization of the figures throughout the report. Quantitative results that complement descriptions of recruitment practices and highlight important outcomes at each stage of the recruitment process are described throughout the report.

ANALYSIS OF THE DUAL RESOURCE FAMILY RECRUITMENT SYSTEM IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

As recognized in the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994,⁸ in order to achieve timely and appropriate placement of all children, agencies need to recruit an adequate pool of families capable of promoting each child's development and case goals. Child welfare agencies' recruitment processes must therefore focus on developing a pool of resource parents willing and able to foster or adopt children needing placement.

The Children's Bureau of the Administration of Children and Families, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, advises that an adequate recruitment process has a number of key features.⁹ In particular, recruitment efforts should provide information to potential resource families throughout the community about the characteristics and needs of available children, the foster care and adoption processes, and the supports available to foster and adoptive families. Both general and targeted recruiting are important.¹⁰ Reaching all members of the community requires use of general media (e.g., radio, television, print), but information should also be disseminated through community organizations such as religious institutions and neighborhood centers. Dissemination is strengthened when agencies develop partnerships with groups in the communities from which children come, both to help identify and support potential resource families as well as to conduct activities that make waiting children more visible.

To meet the recruitment effort requirements of MEPA, agencies should have a comprehensive recruitment plan that includes:

- a description of the characteristics of waiting children;
- specific strategies to reach all parts of the community;
- diverse methods of disseminating both general and child-specific information;
- strategies for assuring that all prospective parents have access to the home study process, including location and hours of services that facilitate access by all members of the community;
- strategies for training staff to work with diverse cultural, racial, and economic communities;
- strategies for dealing with linguistic barriers;
- non-discriminatory fee structures; and
- procedures ensuring a timely search for prospective parents awaiting a child, including the use of exchanges and other interagency efforts, provided that such procedures ensure that the placement of a child in an appropriate household is not delayed by the search for a same race or ethnicity placement.

These recruitment guidelines provide a useful framework through which to view the dual resource family recruitment system in Los Angeles County. In the sections that follow, the findings related to each of the four stages of recruitment are discussed: initial recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement.

Initial Recruitment

Resource Family Recruitment Processes & Strategies

Resource family recruitment within DCFS is conducted by the Placement and Recruitment Unit (DCFS-PRU). In Los Angeles County, FFAs and DCFS-PRU engage in many and varied resource family recruitment strategies (see Figure 2). Most outreach and recruitment activities are of three types: general, focused, and child-specific.

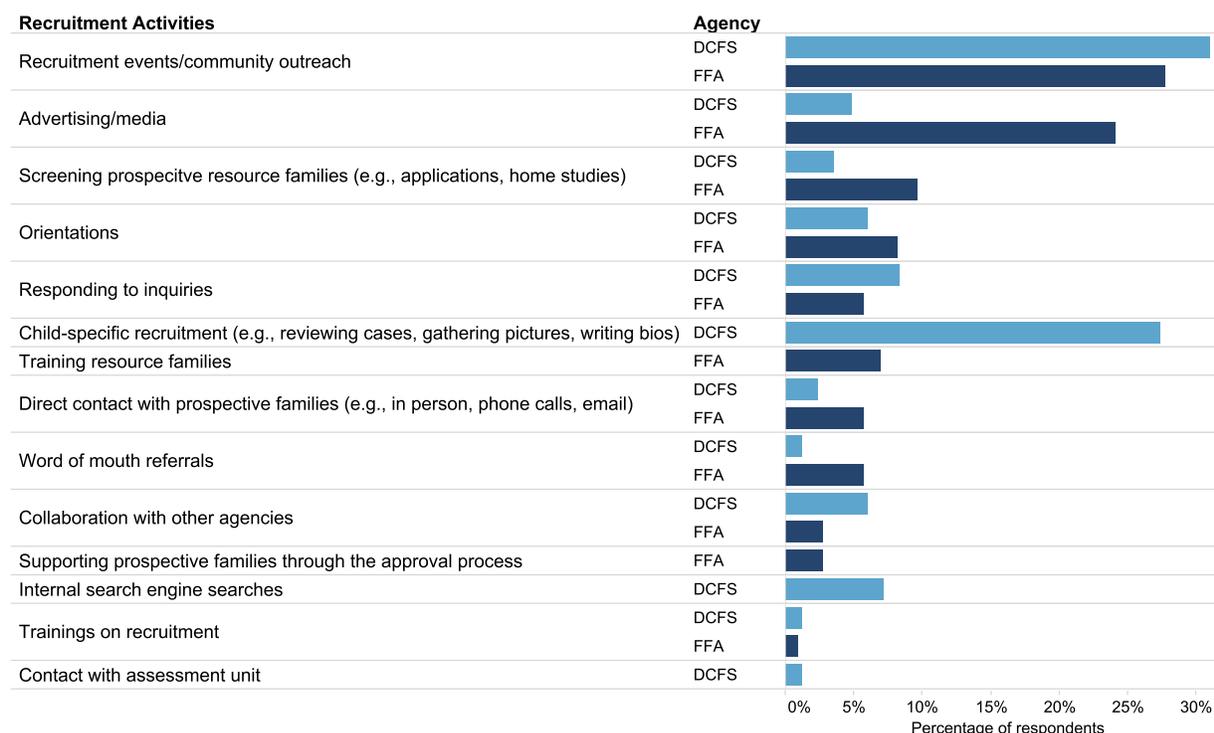
To what extent do agencies focus on resource family recruitment? As FFAs vary in size, scope, and focus, they also vary in the resources devoted to recruitment. FFAs reported the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff focused on recruitment ranged from one to 12, with less than four recruitment-focused staff on average. Most FFAs reported that staff members devoted a portion of work time to recruitment, among several other responsibilities. Few agencies reported staff dedicated to recruitment activities exclusively.

DCFS-PRU includes 35 FTE individuals, ranging in positions from division chief to social workers and clerks. The responsibilities of the unit include both placement and recruitment, so work is focused on these two areas. Similar to the approach of many FFAs, staff members vary in the extent to which their work time is focused on new resource family recruitment, as opposed to other tasks such as recruiting approved families to care for waiting children.

Most FFA and DCFS-PRU staff reported relatively stronger emphasis on issues other than new resource family recruitment. For FFAs, the focus tends to be on certified families, children placed in their homes, and service and retention of approved homes. Many DCFS-PRU staff reported working from the perspective of advocating for the many individual children for whom they are charged with identifying appropriate placements. In both cases, efforts to recruit new resource families are emphasized less than the needs of waiting children or currently approved families. As such, among FFAs and DCFS-PRU, new resource family recruitment is included in the responsibilities of many individuals, but it is the sole focus of few.

The recruitment strategies and activities most often described by DCFS and FFA recruitment staff are displayed in Figure 2. The resource family recruitment strategies and activities described by respondents align with the three main steps of the recruitment process: outreach and recruitment, orientation, and training.

Figure 2. Recruitment strategies and activities of DCFS and FFAs



General Recruitment

This broad recruitment approach includes media campaigns (e.g., television, radio, Internet, and print) and community outreach, including events intended to connect with racial/ethnic communities, faith-based communities, or people associated with specific industries). FFAs and DCFS-PRU both engage in these strategies and activities to various extents. However, as a single agency with consolidated resources and the opportunity to coordinate recruitment, DCFS-PRU is able to support a more extensive general recruitment approach and conduct wider-scale advertising and outreach, as compared to individual FFAs.

DCFS-PRU general recruitment activities include advertising, particularly on radio (e.g., KJLH, KCRW, KCPP, Que Buena, and Clear Channel), and several events throughout the year. The general recruitment calendar highlights varied outreach events spanning many locations and communities across the county. Collectively, FFAs also conduct various events, but individual agencies tend to concentrate recruitment resources on reaching out to specific communities (see the “Focused Recruitment” section below).

Among the innovative recruitment activities conducted by DCFS-PRU is The Heart Gallery LA, a traveling and online photographic exhibit displaying professional quality photographs of children in the Los Angeles County foster care system.¹¹ Photography services are provided by professional photographers who volunteer their time and effort to artistically capture the spirit and personality of children awaiting adoption. The Heart Gallery LA is a humanizing approach to recruitment that generally increases awareness of and interest in fostering and adoption and also serves child-specific recruitment needs by highlighting individual children in need of permanent homes. Nearly all FFA and DCFS staff and resource families interviewed for this analysis discussed the necessity of a personal connection to drive the decision to foster or adopt and to persist to completion of the approval process. The Heart Gallery LA appears to have the potential to promote personal

connections among prospective and approved resource families. The efficacy of this and similar strategies that focus on personal appeals should be further investigated.

Focused Recruitment

FFAs and DCFS-PRU also devote resources to more focused recruitment strategies intended to connect with specific communities—in particular those based on race/ethnicity, disability, location, or faith. FFAs and DCFS-PRU differ in the scope of their focused recruitment approaches, however.

Many FFAs described efforts to reach out to one or a few communities, often those falling within the geographical scope of their agency, and their focused recruitment approaches often result in long-term relationships with the communities. FFA and DCFS-PRU staff indicated that one of the most impactful outcomes of positive engagement with specific communities is increased referrals to their agencies through word of mouth (see additional discussion in the “Resource Family Recruitment Effectiveness & Outcomes” section below).

The smaller scale of FFAs requires them to concentrate resources on a few communities, while DCFS-PRU conducts focused recruitment with a range of communities. DCFS-PRU conducts or participates in several focused recruitment efforts each year. Examples of these efforts include:

- In partnership with Angels in Waiting (AIW), DCFS-PRU recruits nurses to become foster and adoptive parents. AIW drafted and authored Assembly Bill 1133 that became law in California on January 1, 2014. This bill allows nurses who care for medically fragile foster children to be reimbursed through DCFS and Medi-Cal.
- Through a partnership with Korean American Family Services (KFAM), DCFS-PRU conducted a recruitment campaign for Korean resource families that included PSAs through LA18 TV, print ads, radio talk shows, magazine articles, and social media announcements.
- Under a 2010 Diligent Recruitment Grant from the Children’s Bureau, DCFS-PRU subcontracts with Boys’ and Girls’ Aid Society of Los Angeles County (Five Acres) to recruit resource families for deaf children; Kidsave International, Inc. (Kidsave) to recruit resource families for older African-American and Latino youth in the foster care and probation systems; and Sycamore Park Foursquare Church (SPFC) to recruit resource families from faith-based communities.
- DCFS-PRU works in partnership with the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health (DMH) and 12 FFAs that provide therapeutic foster care (TFC) to routinely plan and conduct recruitment events and advertising campaigns focused on families that can provide such specialized care.

In these ways, FFA and DCFS-PRU staff conduct, support, and participate in a wide array of recruitment activities intended to connect with a variety of communities across Los Angeles County. The effectiveness of these strategies is discussed in the “Resource Family Recruitment Effectiveness & Outcomes” section below.

Child-Specific Recruitment

Among recruitment approaches, FFAs and DCFS-PRU differ most with regard to child-specific recruitment. FFAs approach the recruitment process with greater emphasis on the vantage point of resource families; because DCFS-PRU is pressured by the need to find appropriate placements for waiting children, they approach recruitment more from the perspective of children. Thus, they devote resources to recruiting prospective resource families for specific children, whereas FFAs tend to search for children who are appropriate matches for the families they work with as part of the placement process.

DCFS-PRU's emphasis on recruiting on behalf of individual children also tends to raise general awareness of foster care and adoption, in part due to the personal connections families begin to form with children as they learn specific details about them. As such, child-specific recruiting can also serve as a general recruitment strategy. Examples of child-specific recruitment conducted or supported by DCFS-PRU include:

- The Wednesday's Child program,¹² which features children in Los Angeles on FOX 11 KTTV (Wednesdays at 10pm and Sundays at 10am) who are waiting in foster care to be adopted, and shares success stories of families who have adopted from foster care;
- The Heart Gallery LA (detailed above), which is a traveling and online photographic exhibit displaying professional quality photographs of children in the Los Angeles County foster care system;
- A list of waiting children that is sent monthly to all FFAs to provide details about them;
- Features of waiting children on several adoption websites, including www.CAKidsConnection.com, www.AdoptUSKids.org, and www.Adopt.org;
- The Wendy's Wonderful Kids program, which provides additional support for staff who are devoted full time to child-specific recruitment—an approach that researcher has recently been shown to be effective¹³;
- Media exposure of specific children, including through features on “Good Day LA” and “Home for the Holidays”; and
- The Kidsave Los Angeles Weekend Miracles program, which provides children with the opportunity to spend weekends with host families who help advocate for their adoption.

The three central approaches to resource family recruitment described here, and the many examples of each, demonstrate the breadth of child-specific recruitment conducted in Los Angeles County, and indicate that the MEPA recruitment guidelines have generally been followed. These approaches are also consistent with the recruitment strategies recommended nationally and implemented in many states and counties.^{14,15} Opportunities to harness the common goals of FFAs and DCFS to collaborate in the recruitment of new resource families seem to have largely been missed, however. Additionally, the impact of recruitment strategies across agencies is not consistently or reliably tracked, preventing the identification of effective approaches across the county. Through interviews, document review, and analysis of existing DCFS administrative data, the research team revealed the impact of various recruitment approaches, however, and these are highlighted below in the “Resource Family Recruitment Effectiveness & Outcomes” section below.

Recruitment Support for Resource Families

What support is provided for prospective resource families? FFAs and DCFS-PRU provide support for prospective resource families in person, at outreach events, and through responses to online inquiries through respective agency websites. The source of support most often noted by staff, however, was agency hotlines. Many FFAs maintain an agency line dedicated to general inquiries, the majority of which are inquiries about the foster or adoption processes. The primary point of DCFS-PRU support for prospective resource families is the Foster Care Recruitment Hotline (888-811-1121).

Several national and state public and private agencies provide information on foster care or adoption (e.g., www.all4kids.org, www.adoptuskids.org, www.cakidsconnection.org, www.cdss.ca.gov). FFA and DCFS-PRU staff emphasized, however, that many prospective resource families require personal support in order to successfully be recruited, make the initial decision to foster or adopt, and then move on to the orientation

stage. As such, hotlines are the primary point of support. For discussion of inquiries to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline, see the “Resource Family Recruitment Effectiveness & Outcomes” section below.

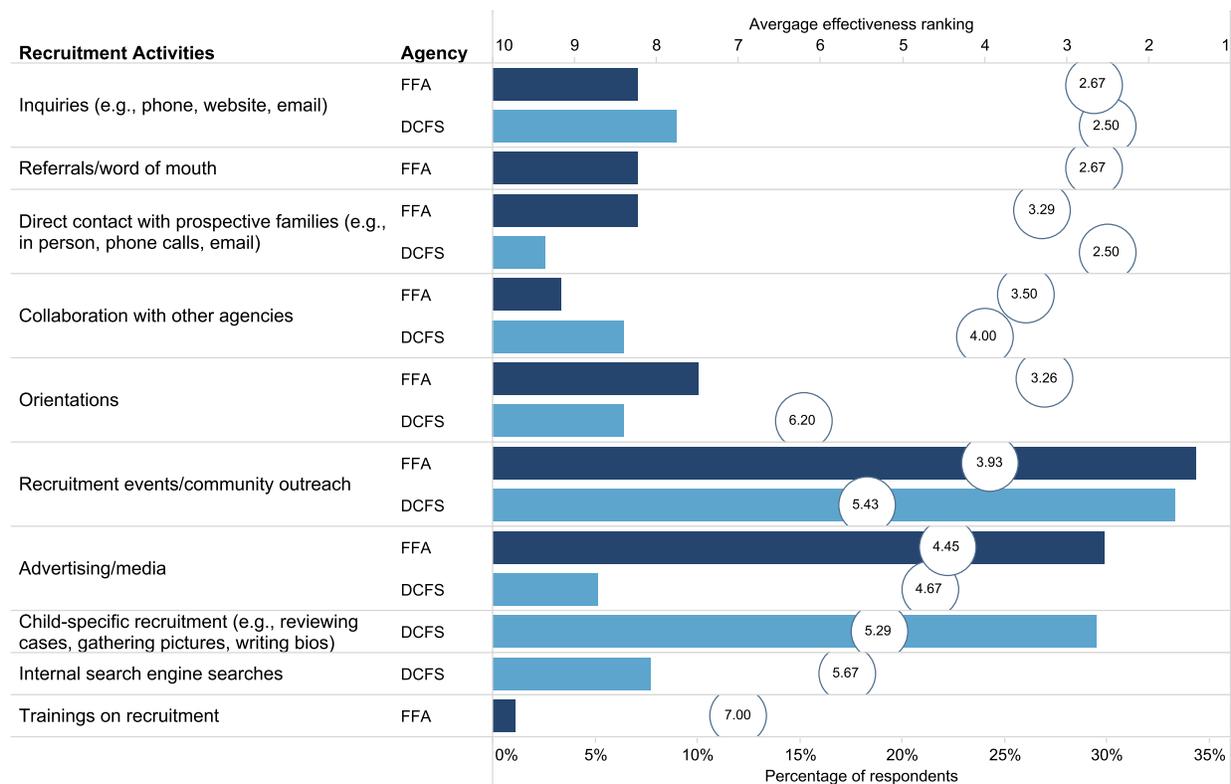
Is “one-line” recruitment feasible? The prospect of establishing a single contact point for all prospective Los Angeles County resource families has been raised, in part to provide a single streamlined source for information and support. Many FFAs and the DCFS-PRU have individually and collaboratively considered this approach in terms of a telephone hotline, but staff reported little previous consideration of online venues as part of a single point of contact. Among those interviewed, the majority view was favorable toward the potential effectiveness of this approach, but questions of implementation (e.g., How will inquiries be referred to agencies?) and resources (e.g., Who will staff the hotline and contribute financial resources?) were emphasized as the most significant hurdles.

In order for a one-line recruitment approach to be feasible, a thoughtful stakeholder-driven development process would be required. Issues of equitable support for the service and a process for disseminating referrals to agencies that is fair to children, families, and agencies would need to be addressed. Analysis of inquiries to the DCFS-PRU Foster Care Recruitment Hotline, detailed in the next section, provide additional insight into the feasibility of one-line recruitment.

Resource Family Recruitment Effectiveness & Outcomes

What recruitment activities are perceived to be effective? To reveal the relative effectiveness of resource family recruitment activities, FFA and DCFS-PRU staff were asked to list and then rank the recruitment activities they conduct. Figure 3 displays how frequently they noted each type of activity and its average ranking of effectiveness. The activities ranked as most effective (i.e., responding to inquiries, word of mouth referrals, and direct contact with prospective families) require more personal engagement with families, as opposed to less personal advertising strategies. Rankings of effectiveness were largely similar between FFA and DCFS-PRU respondents. The greatest divergences between FFA and DCFS respondents’ ratings were regarding orientations and recruitment events as well as community outreach.

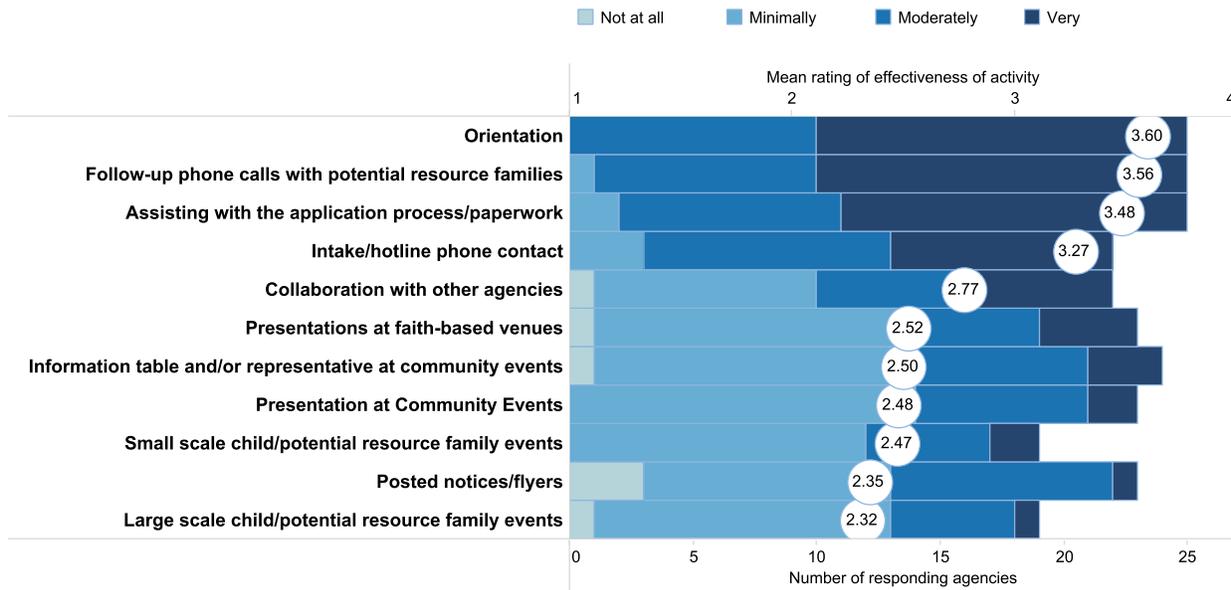
Figure 3. Most frequently mentioned and average perceived effectiveness of recruitment activities



Interview responses indicate that different perceptions of the effectiveness of orientations as a recruiting approach are due to the more rigid (in terms of scheduling, length, and content) and less personal orientations DCFS is required to conduct. (Orientations are described in more detail in the “Training” section below.) Likewise, different perceptions of recruitment events and community outreach are in part due to the large-scale events that DCFS-PRU supports, which provide staff with limited immediate feedback regarding effectiveness. FFAs also participate in larger-scale recruitment events supported by DCFS-PRU, but they tend to conduct more focused events that yield more immediate feedback regarding effectiveness (e.g., through orientation sign-up). Notably, as Figure 3 displays, recruitment events/community outreach was the most frequently discussed strategy, although this approach was not ranked among the most effective. This pattern suggests recruitment efforts are not proportionally directed toward strategies that staff find most impactful.

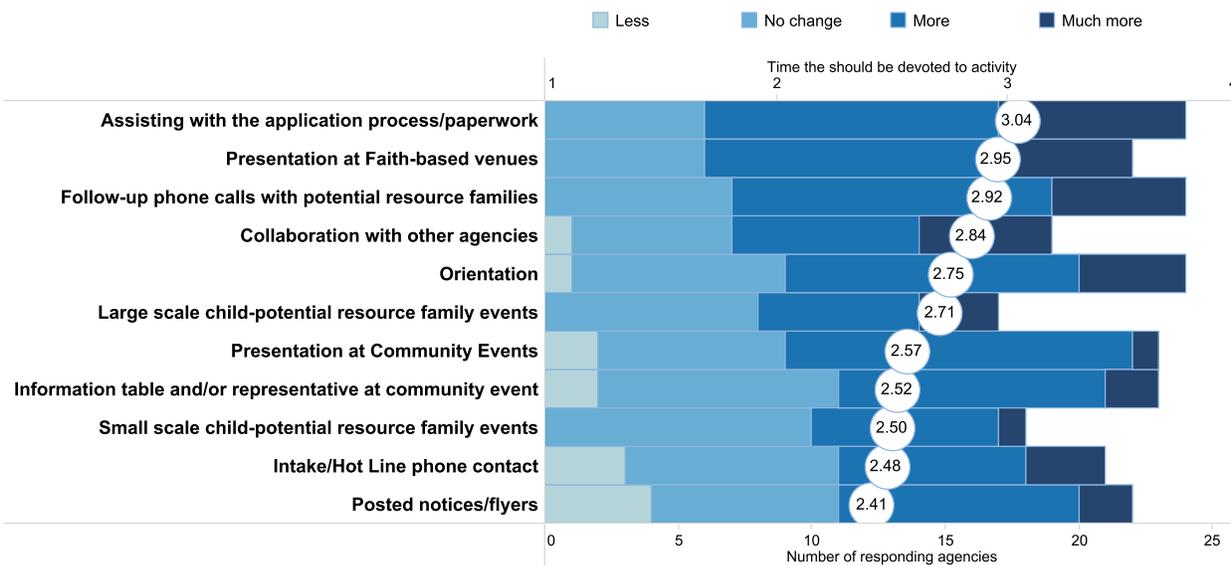
To further gauge the effectiveness of FFA recruitment activities, all 46 FFAs that had contracted with DCFS in FY 2014–2015 were invited to complete an online survey regarding recruitment activities. The activities in the survey were informed by prior interviews with FFA staff members. For each activity, agencies were asked to indicate how effective it is (“not at all” to “very”) and how much time should be devoted to it (“less time” to “much more time”).

Figure 4. Perceived effectiveness of recruitment activities among FFAs



For the 25 (54%) FFAs that responded to the survey, orientations, follow-up phone calls with potential resource families, assistance with the application process/paperwork, and intake/hotline phone contacts were moderately to very effective (see Figure 4). These findings reinforce the importance of more personalized contact. Other, somewhat less personal recruitment activities were rated as minimally to moderately effective.

Figure 5. Perceived time required for recruitment activities among FFAs



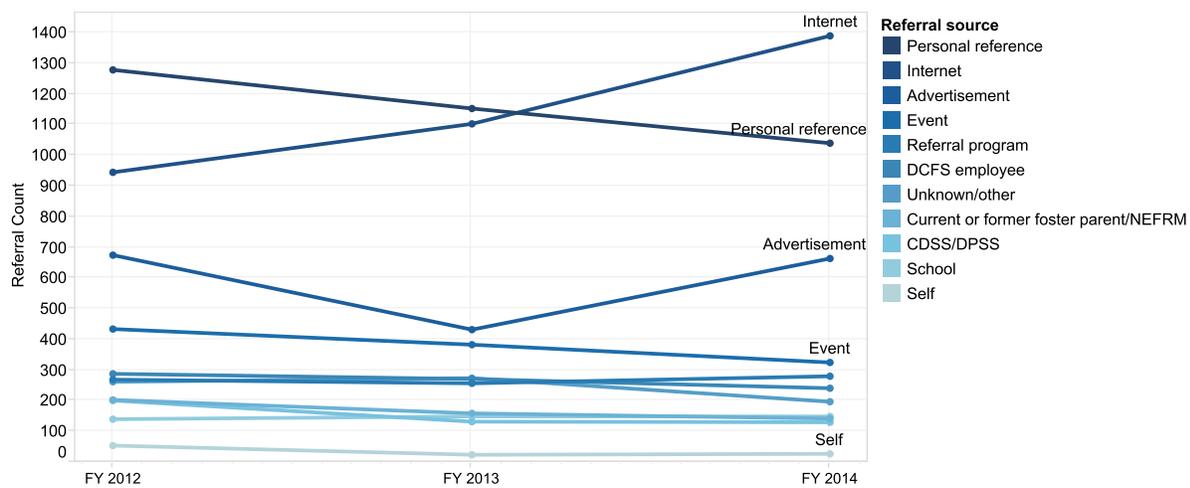
FFAs also indicated the amount of time they felt should be dedicated to each recruitment activity (see Figure 5). On average, assisting with the application process/paperwork was the only recruitment activity that they perceived to be deserving of more time. In contrast with average ratings of the effectiveness of presentations

at faith-based venues and collaboration with other agencies, these activities were among those agencies on average indicated were deserving of more time and effort.

To provide further indication of the outcomes of the varied recruitment activities described, the frequency, referral sources, types, and locations of foster or adoption inquiries to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline were analyzed. Similar inquiry tracking data were not available from a representative sample of FFAs. To support a more complete analysis of the outcomes of recruitment strategies, FFAs will need to collect uniform and reliable inquiry information across agencies.

What are the characteristics of inquirers to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline? The DCFS-PRU has tracked contacts to their recruitment hotline since 2011. They track several characteristics, including the source of the referral, the topic of the inquiry, the race or ethnicity of the inquirer, and location of the inquirer. Analysis of the source of referrals provides an indication of the initial information source for many prospective resource families (see Figure 6).

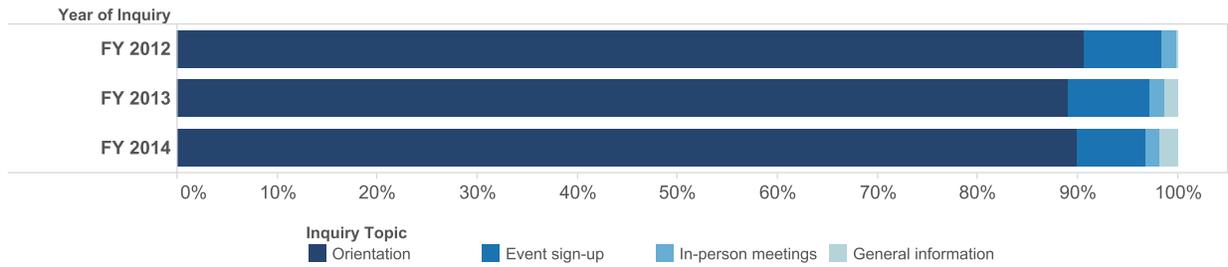
Figure 6. DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline inquiries by referral source



The Internet, personal references, advertisements, and events were among the most frequent sources of referrals over time. The overall pattern is largely consistent with DCFS-PRU staff descriptions of their efforts and perceived effectiveness of recruitment activities. Notably, in FY 2014 the Internet overtook personal references as the most frequently mentioned referral source by prospective resource families. Consistent with FFA and DCFS-PRU staff interviews, this result highlights the increasing importance of the World Wide Web as an information source, and points to the potential recruitment benefits of shifting resources toward more streamlined and coordinated online recruitment. Such efforts could include online orientation registration and the coordination of orientation registration and scheduling across DCFS and FFAs. Further, a single online point of contact for prospective Los Angeles resource families might reduce the confusion of the dual recruitment system by allowing for a consistent recruitment message, resource, and initial point of contact with agencies. Finally, the frequency analysis highlights the significance of personal recommendations in the initial decision to pursue becoming a resource parent.

The topics prospective resource families inquire about have also been tracked over the previous three fiscal years. The types of questions fall into four categories: orientations, event sign-up, in-person meetings, and general information (see Figure 7).

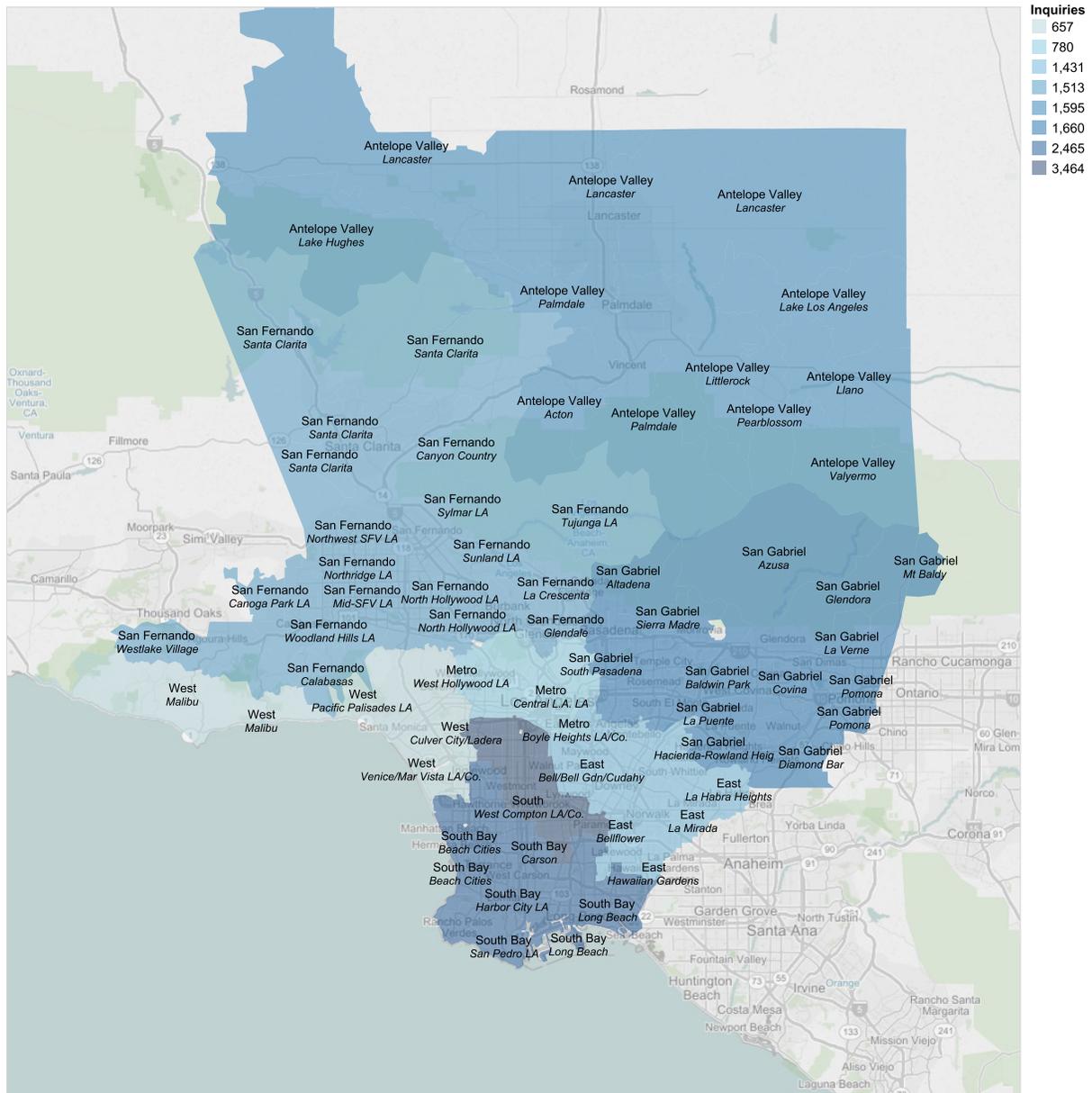
Figure 7. Topics of inquiries to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline



Orientation was consistently the most frequently inquired-about topic. DCFS-PRU staff interview responses suggest this is due in part to the fact these events are routinely full. Thus, many prospective resource families require multiple contacts before identifying a convenient orientation date to attend or to reserve a place. The orientation process is discussed in detail in the “Training” section, below, but this pattern is reflective of its importance as the first step to approval as a DCFS resource family.

The zip code from which inquiries to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline originated were analyzed with regard to Service Planning Area (SPA). This provides an indication of where recruitment activities yield the most responses (see Figure 8).¹⁶

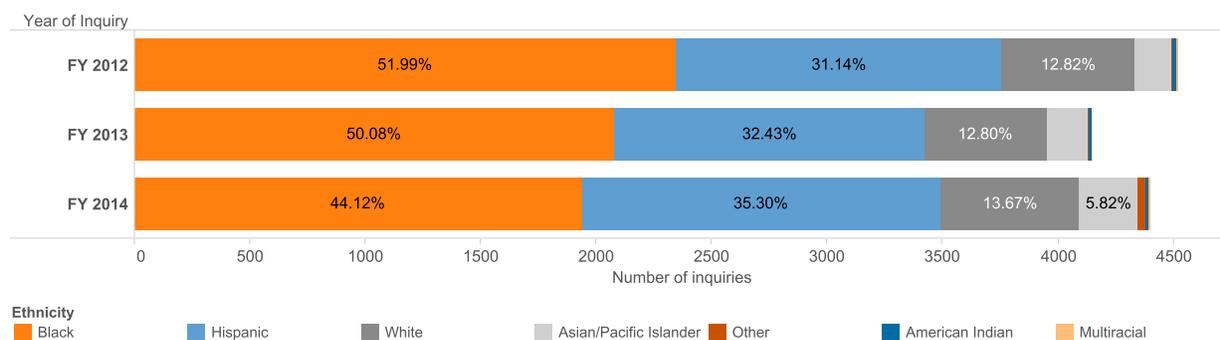
Figure 8. Total DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline inquiries by SPA (FY 2011–2012 to 2013–2014)



Across the previous three fiscal years, the most inquiries originated from the South and South Bay SPAs. The spread of inquiries across SPAs is largely consistent with their population density.¹⁷ The need for placements relative to the location of inquiries is explored in the “Placement” section, below.

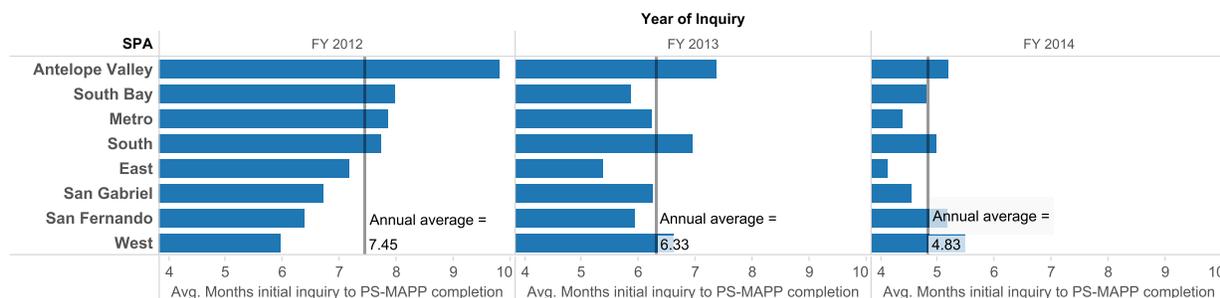
The race/ethnicity of inquirers was also explored, to better understand whom recruitment efforts are likely to have reached (see Figure 9). Hispanic and Black prospective resource families contacted DCFS-PRU at greater rates than other groups in each of the previous three years. This pattern suggests that recruitment activities are reaching varied communities across Los Angeles County, in line with the MEPA guidelines regarding the dissemination of information.

Figure 9. Race/ethnicity of DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline inquirers



As an indication of the effectiveness of recruitment activities and support in the persistence of prospective resource families, the length of time between initial inquiry to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline and completion of the Permanence and Safety-Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (PS-MAPP) training course, a requirement for licensure, was examined (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Average months from initial DCFS inquiry to PS-MAPP completion



Across the three most recent fiscal years, the average period from initial inquiry to completion of PS-MAPP training decreased from 7.45 months to 4.83 months for all SPAs. Many interviewees, including FFA and DCFS-PRU staff, as well as current resource families, indicated that the length of the process is a key factor in the likelihood of persistence to approval. Thus, this decrease in time to PS-MAPP completion is a positive indication of efforts to streamline training and approval processes.

Is “one-line” recruitment feasible? The source and topic of inquiries, the characteristics of inquirers to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline detailed above, and interviews with FFAs regarding the processing of inquiries all suggest that a consolidated recruitment conduit (e.g., website, phone, text, and email) is feasible. Moreover, this consolidation holds the potential to improve the efficiency of the recruitment process for DCFS and FFAs in several ways, including reducing the confusion stemming from multiple recruitment messages presented to prospective resource families (e.g., concerning motivations, benefits, information sources, and approval requirements). There appears to be sufficient commonality of purpose across agencies, a reasonable volume of inquiries from prospective families, and significant variation in the characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity and location) of prospective resource families to support a single recruitment conduit (e.g., hotline, website, web applications, etc.).

Insights & Pathways Forward

Coordination of recruitment efforts should be increased.

DCFS and FFAs have developed and engaged in a variety of useful recruitment strategies. However, it was evident that there was also some redundancy, at least in part due to communication problems or lack of information sharing across agencies. Given the limitation of resources that can be devoted to recruitment, coordination of efforts between FFAs and DCFS seems a prime area for enhanced focus. Better coordination could help to reduce the time and effort needed to engage and process prospective resource families. While FFA and DCFS-Placement Recruitment Unit (PRU) staff noted that there is some coordination between public and private sector agencies around recruitment, most of those interviewed for this study remarked on the confusion many prospective resource families experience as a result of the dual recruitment efforts (i.e., FFA and DCFS). Another source of confusion that interacts with and confounds the existing recruitment system is communication of the requirements for dual approval (i.e., foster and adoption). Thoughtful coordination of recruitment efforts will reduce the inconsistencies in information relayed to prospective families from different agencies, as well as the confusion felt by many prospective resource families about critical issues that may affect their decisions, such as benefits, information sources, and approval requirements. Coordinating recruitment efforts, including response to inquiries in a consistent and strategic manner, may help to reduce confusion and increase motivation to foster children.

A potential approach to standardizing and effectively addressing responses from prospective resource families is the idea of “one-line” recruitment whereby a joint effort would be made to establish a single point of contact for prospective resource families. This cross-agency effort would require further analysis to implement, and require explicitly defining equitable support for the service and a fair and efficient process for disseminating referrals. However, the inquiry type, location, and characteristics of inquirers to the DCFS Foster Care Recruitment Hotline suggest that the data could be gathered to support a transparent stakeholder driven process to be developed.

Further, Internet inquiries have increased as the number of personal referrals have decreased, suggesting online venues are not being effectively leveraged as a primary contact and resource point for prospective families. As an example, a single website and accompanying mobile application, including a common cross-agency registration process and calendar of orientations, could be developed as the central medium through which the child welfare system reaches out to families and brings them into the fold. Such straightforward approaches may help to alleviate some of the confusion that potential resource families feel about the dual system, and that many recruitment staff reported struggling to clarify. Such strategic cross-agency recruitment ideas and current efforts should be further explored.

Effective recruitment practices should be more closely tracked and studied, and findings should be disseminated.

FFA and DCFS staff involved in this study described their need for more systematic, complete, and reliable tracking of recruitment efforts. Much of the hard work and innovative recruitment work accomplished by these agencies is not quantified or characterized in ways that allow for efficient identification of promising or effective practices. Some promising approaches are highlighted in this report, but more complete tracking, and efficient analysis and dissemination of such practices would allow for better development and

improvement of Los Angeles County resource family recruitment processes.

Additional efforts should be focused on recruitment of homes appropriate for the most difficult to place children.

Among the most consistent themes across FFA staff, DCFS staff, and resource families was the difficulty in finding appropriate homes for harder to place children (e.g., sibling groups, very young children, older children, and children with special needs). Many FFAs as well as DCFS-PRU do recruit resource families capable and willing to serve harder to place children (e.g., through Angels in Waiting, the Diligent Recruitment Grant program including support for the Kidsave program). However, those interviewed consistently described the need and desire to focus more effort on recruitment of such homes. The most common suggestion was to focus on establishing relationships with communities that tend to include families who have the knowledge, skills, and potential desire to care for hard to place children. This has been done to a limited extent with nurses, but such efforts could be expanded to include many other communities (e.g., other medical professionals, older adults, communities centered around specific disabilities or special medical needs). Increasing focus on relationship building with communities of families capable of providing appropriate care for the most difficult to place children appears to be a fertile area for development.

Current resource families should be further engaged in recruitment efforts.

Word of mouth referrals or recommendations can be very influential in families' decisions to seek additional information and to pursue foster care or adoption. As such, many FFA staff described informally enlisting current or previous resource families in their recruitment efforts. More formally, DCFS-PRU has supported the Recruitment Ambassador Program, in which trained resource parents help recruit and then support prospective resource families, and are compensated for every approved family they work with. The Recruitment Ambassador Program is promising as a more strategic approach to involving current or former resource families in recruitment efforts, but it is currently run at a small scale (approximately 15 families). Such practices, with accompanying resources, should be expanded and their effectiveness in Los Angeles County should be further studied.

Resource Family Training

Once a prospective resource family has been successfully recruited and has made the choice to pursue this role, they participate in training. In order to provide a more complete understanding of the availability of resource family homes in Los Angeles County, it is important to understand the process and outcomes of this required step in the pathway to becoming a resource family. The process includes initial orientation and then training required by the agency that the resource family chooses to work with (i.e., DCFS or an FFA).

Analysis of interviews with FFAs (18 agencies) and DCFS staff (55 individuals across seven divisions or offices), as well as training records provided by the Adoption and Permanency Resources Division of DCFS provide insight into the training process. In this section, the orientation and training processes are described, outcomes of the training process among DCFS resource families are detailed, and promising pathways forward are outlined.

Resource Family Orientations

In line with differences in recruitment processes, the structure, mission, and legacy of Los Angeles County FFAs and DCFS also drive differences in the orientation process.

FFA Resource Family Orientations

Variations across Los Angeles FFA orientations are driven by the California Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) regulations regarding training¹⁸ and assessment and approval,¹⁹ as well as the size, mission (e.g., population or community served), and legacy (e.g., size, tenure, values, and culture) of the agency. The California Code of Regulations²⁰ provides structure to the orientation process, but FFA orientations vary in several ways. The influence of the various characteristics of FFAs on the orientation process is most evident in the type, size, and frequency of the orientations they provide. Most agencies interviewed reported conducting public orientations weekly (e.g., 1–2 times) or monthly (e.g., some 2–4 times), with private orientations upon request. Public FFA orientations were reported to include from five to 15 participants, and private orientations typically involve one or a few families.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE: Several agencies reported conducting orientations in current resource family homes. In some cases, FFAs provide incentives to current resource families for hosting these meetings. This was identified as a useful recruitment tactic, as well as a way to increase the commitment of prospective resource families entering the training and approval processes. Largely, the type, size, and frequency of the orientations provided by FFAs are driven by the demand from prospective resource families.

The content of FFA orientations is similar across agencies. Most include a handful of common topics: Title 22 regulations, the application and approval process, procedures, forms, costs, and training. Many of the agencies reported that the greatest challenge is ensuring prospective families are clear about the process and all requirements, while not overwhelming them to the extent that they are dissuaded from persisting. As evidence of the burden perceived by prospective families, many agencies reported a steep reduction in participation following orientation and throughout the training and approval processes. To retain families, FFAs reported most require ongoing support beyond the initial orientation to become comfortable with the training and approval processes and its requirements.

PROMISING PRACTICE: Another significant orientation challenge that FFAs described was explaining Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC) to prospective resource families and garnering their support. The regular orientation process that now includes information regarding ITFC is much longer and more complicated compared to basic rate care, as prospective families are often completely unaware of ITFC. To overcome this challenge, some agencies reported recruiting and orienting current resource families to ITFC, as they tend to be more familiar with and prepared for this type of care. However, this requires significant resources, money, attention, and time.

“Becoming a foster parent is a journey starting at orientation that gets deeper throughout the training process.” —Foster Family Agency

PROMISING PRACTICE: The most unifying aspect across agencies was the perspective of the orientation process as a “journey.” Agencies described this journey as a partnership between the family and the agency.

To encourage commitment to this journey and partnership with the agency, some FFAs have the staff member who conducts the orientation for a given family stay involved in training and home visits. This continuum of support through the training and approval processes should be further explored and the potential impact studied.

DCFS Resource Family Orientations

The DCFS orientation process is similarly driven by the requirements of CCLD regarding training²¹ and approval,²² the structure of DCFS as a single agency working directly with prospective resource families, and the required participation of CCLD²³ in each orientation. These factors have limited the frequency of DCFS orientations and caused them to become fairly standardized.

DCFS-PRU staff members organize and conduct orientations eight times per month at various locations across the county. The orientation schedule includes some evening sessions and regularly one Saturday session. The orientation schedule is posted online,²⁴ and prospective families register for an orientation by calling the Foster Care Recruitment Hotline. Online registration is not available. DCFS-PRU staff reported that the orientations are often full and a waiting list allows spaces opened by cancellations to be filled. Such regular demand for orientations suggests additional sessions would often be useful, but the staffing resources of CCLD were reportedly a limiting factor.

Both DCFS-PRU and CCLD have limited staff time devoted to orientations. While several DCFS-PRU staff members contribute to recruiting and registering prospective families for orientations, only approximately 1.5 FTE is committed to organizing and conducting orientations. This is driven at least in part by the CCLD decision to limit their participation to eight sessions per month, which in turn limits the number of orientations DCFS can conduct. DCFS-PRU has made this limitation clear to their state partners.

PROMISING PRACTICE: To remove this limitation, as part of the new statewide Resource Family Approval (RFA)²⁵ program to be initiated in January of 2017, CCLD is in the process of moving their portion of the orientation online. DCFS-PRU staff reported this will not only allow them to organize additional sessions as necessary, but the orientation itself will be streamlined and less burdensome for prospective families. To increase efficiency and reduce the burden on prospective families, the impact of moving the CCLD orientation portion—and potentially the entire DCFS orientation—online should be explored in line with the development of the new RFA program.

Resource Family Training Approaches

California Community Care Licensing Division regulations regarding training²⁶ and assessment and approval²⁷ require resource families to complete 12 hours of initial training. The topics include: an overview of the child protective system; the effects of child abuse and neglect on child development; positive discipline and the importance of self-esteem; health issues in foster care; accessing education and health services available to foster children; and the right of a foster child to have fair and equal access to all available services, placement, care, treatment, and benefits, and to not be subjected to discrimination or harassment on the basis of actual or perceived racial/ethnic group identification, ancestry, national origin, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, mental or physical disability, or HIV status. Resource families are also required to be first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certified. As with the orientation process, variations across FFA initial resource family trainings are driven by the size, mission, and legacy of agencies.

FFA Resource Family Training

To meet state regulations and guidelines (e.g., 12 hours of initial training) while adhering to organizational principles, most FFAs provide one of a few training programs. These are summarized below.

- *Permanence and Safety-Model Approaches for Partnerships in Parenting (PS-MAPP)*.²⁸ PS-MAPP is a 30-hour preparation and selection program for prospective foster and adoptive parents. It is designed to help prospective resource families understand the difference between the desire to help and the commitment to bringing children into their homes. In a group context, participants learn about the child welfare system and the role of foster parents, develop the necessary skills to become successful foster/adoptive parents, and undergo assessments to determine if they are a good fit for the role of foster parent and for the agency.
- *Parent Resource for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE)*.²⁹ PRIDE is a competency-based model of practice designed to strengthen the quality of family foster care and adoption services by developing and supporting foster and adoptive families who are willing, able, and have the resources to meet the needs of traumatized children and their families. The PRIDE model is based on five competency categories: (a) protecting and nurturing children; (b) meeting children’s developmental needs and addressing developmental delays; (c) supporting relationships between children and their families; (d) connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime; and (e) working as a member of a professional team.
- *NuParent*.³⁰ NuParent is a family support and development program created by the Children’s Bureau with curricula that cover all ages and stages from birth to five years. The program focuses on issues of child development, nutrition, and health and safety, among others. It includes three key components: (a) a didactic or knowledge-enrichment section that provides opportunities to improve and enhance child-rearing knowledge and skills; (b) a joint parent/child activity section to strengthen the bonding process; and (c) a social support section that provides an opportunity to share and compare ideas, experiences, information, frustrations, and successes.

These programs are offered in five to 12 sessions, across five to 10 weeks. Beyond the regulatory requirement of 12 hours of training, most agencies reported providing approximately 30 hours of training for basic rate care, and approximately 40 hours of training for ITFC care. Despite the significant time and resource commitment required of resource families, those interviewed reported a positive training experience.

“We’ve learned a lot—we’ve changed a lot. We had an agenda—wanted to help kids and build our family. We’ve come to know that our interests can’t trump the best interests of a child.” —Resource Parent

Foster family agencies identified the need to provide more initial training, as well as more frequent training for current resource families. This is driven by increasingly “intense” needs and behaviors of children placed with their agencies, as well as by the growing population of second or third generation foster children. Additionally, FFA staff frequently asserted the need to adjust the focus of trainings. Many described the current initial training as weighted toward adoption content and lacking information and resources for foster care specifically. As such, models of resource family training should be further investigated for the extent to

which they meet the needs of all resource families, including those interested in providing both adoption and foster care.

Agencies described training as part of a “mutual selection process” beginning at orientation and continuing throughout training and assessment. For example, if at any point an agency decides the partnership is not productive for them, they inform the prospective family they are no longer welcome to continue training or the approval process with the agency. Such a decision might be prompted by inappropriate or inconsistent behavior, safety concerns, or lack of perceived fit with organizational ideals or culture. Many agencies highlighted the importance of the training and assessment period for building rapport with families.

“They are going to be our partners, they are going to be part of our team, and so they need to fit with our culture.” —Foster Family Agency

Thus, in addition to the required and supplemental training described, partnership building between prospective resource families and FFAs is a central factor in the training process. While the required training elements are very consistent between FFA and DCFS initial resource family training, such relationship building is less emphasized by the structure of DCFS training.

DCFS Resource Family Training

To meet state requirements for initial training of resource families, DCFS contracted with The Community College Foundation (TCCF) to provide PS-MAPP³¹ training, described briefly above. TCCF describes their PS-MAPP training as a workshop series emphasizing collaboration between resource families, DCFS, birth families, and other stakeholders. The series provides: (a) support for the goal of safety and permanency for children in Los Angeles County; (b) a process to help screen, target, and support potential resource families interested in fostering and adoption; and (c) a solution that takes into consideration the unique needs of each child.

The PS-MAPP training model is also provided by many FFAs, so the resource family initial training approach is largely similar across agencies. However, DCFS supports a subcontractor to provide this training, with DCFS staff participating in four to five training sessions across 30 hours, whereas FFAs tend to provide training with their own staff. As such, DCFS staff often do not have the opportunity to build rapport and provide additional support at the same individual level that many FFAs report. This difference is in line with the previously described DCFS emphasis on working from the perspective of children rather than families, whereas FFAs tend to operate more so from the resource family perspective. This difference in approach should be further investigated to identify its potential impact on the support, retention, and quality of resource families.

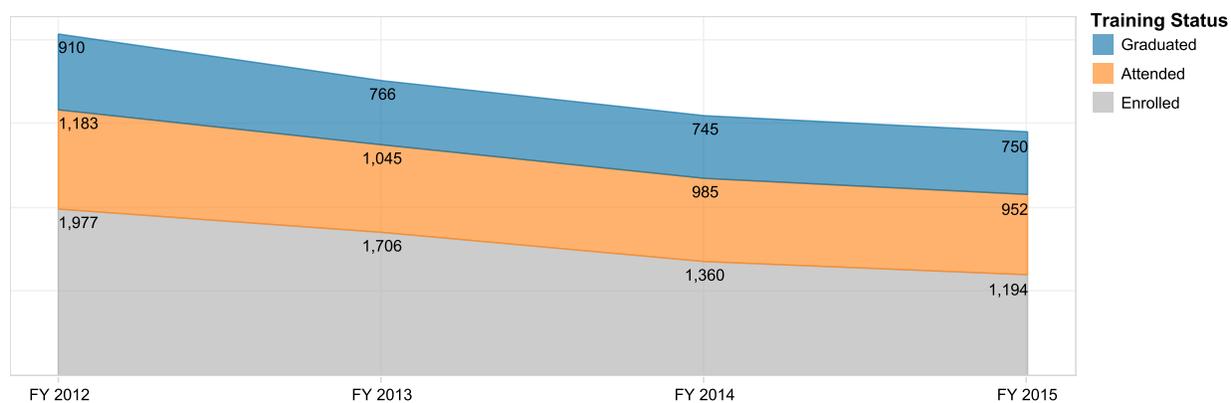
Training Outcomes

The Department of Children and Family Services, with their training subcontractor TCCF, regularly tracks the movement of prospective resource families through the PS-MAPP training process. These data were analyzed to identify the immediate outcomes of DCFS training, and the results are described in this section. Reliable information regarding the movement of prospective families through training was not available from

a representative group of FFAs within the scope of this study; thus, comparable training outcomes could not be presented for FFA-trained families. Complete understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of the training process will require that FFAs uniformly and reliably collect information regarding the training process. Meanwhile, analysis of DCFS training outcomes does provide insight into the effectiveness of DCFS processes.

At what rate do resource families complete DCFS initial training? Across the three fiscal years and nine months of data available, the average retention rate from enrollment to attendance was 68.2%, and the average retention rate from attendance to graduation was 76.2%. Since FY 2011–2012, the retention rates from enrollment to attendance and attendance to graduation increased in each subsequent year. Encouragingly, although the number of families entering the training process decreased, the proportion of families successfully moving through each step of the process increased (see Figure 11). Please note that only nine months of FY 2014–2015 data were available at the time of analysis; thus, at minimum, at the completion of this fiscal year the number of families entering initial DCFS training is likely to exceed the previous year.

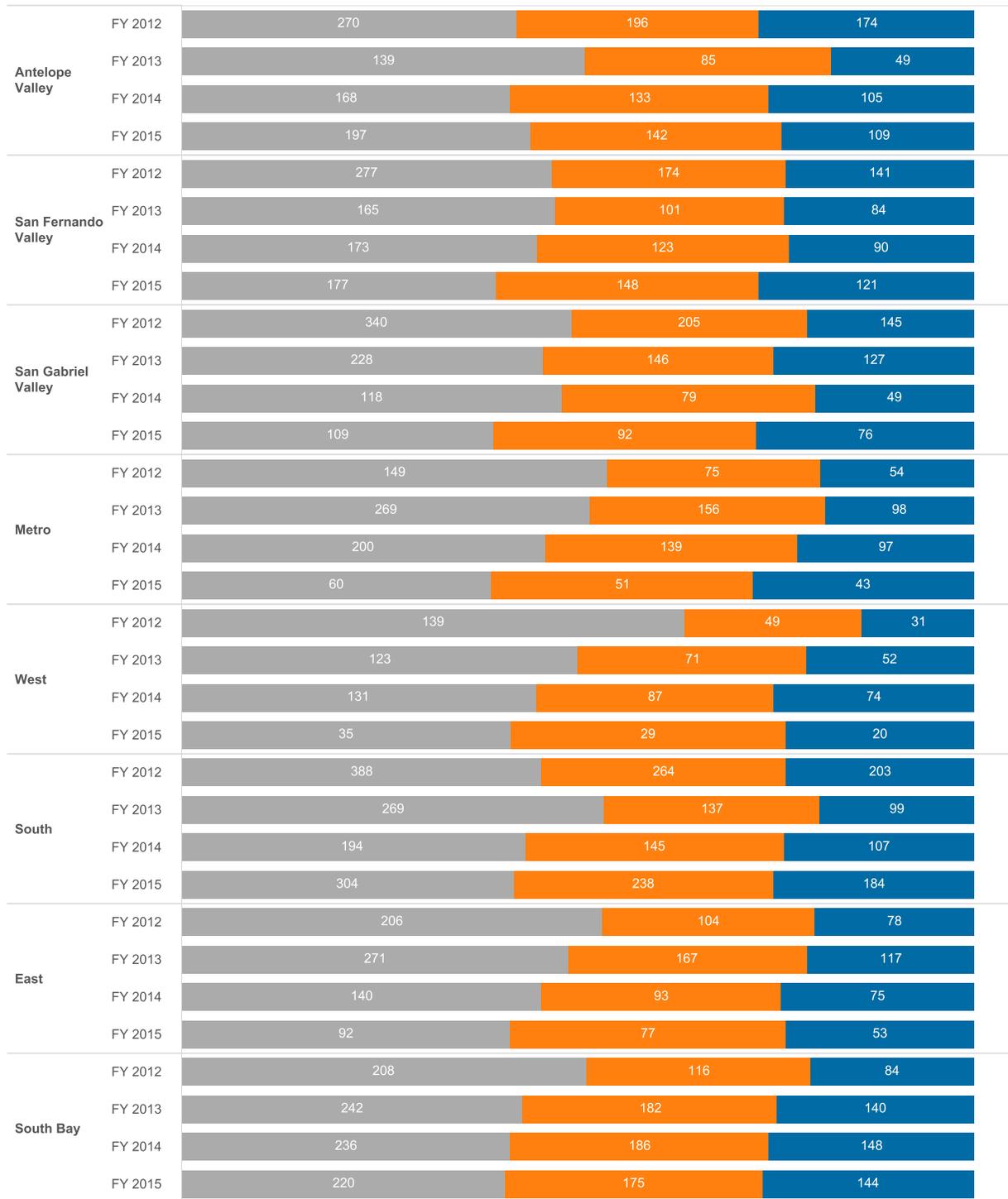
Figure 11. DCFS PS-MAPP training by fiscal year



*FY 2015 counts include only a partial year (July 2014–March 2015). Thus, the complete year counts are likely to be greater than the previous complete year (FY 2014).

The movement of new DCFS families through the initial training process was also investigated among each Service Planning Area (see Figure 12). Most SPAs demonstrated a positive trend in the number of families attending and graduating from training, consistent with the overall trend across Los Angeles County. These results highlight a positive trend in prospective DCFS resource families moving through the training process, and indicate TCCF has improved the retention of families throughout DCFS training; this is an encouraging sign. However, the DCFS approach to providing training through a subcontractor rather than integrating training more with the assessment and approval process—as many FFAs do—should be further investigated to identify the potential impact on the support, retention, and quality of resource families, post-training.

Figure 12. DCFS PS-MAPP training status by fiscal year and Service Planning Area



Training Status
 Enrolled
 Attended
 Graduated

*FY 2015 counts include only a partial year (July 2014–March 2015). Thus, the complete year counts are likely to be greater than the previous complete year (FY 2014).

Insights & Pathways Forward

The training process should include a continuum of support.

To encourage commitment to this journey and partnership with the agency, some FFAs reported that one or a few staff members conducted orientations, trainings, and home visits. The central element of this approach was the consistent point of support for the family throughout the training and approval processes. This provision of a continuum of support for prospective families should be further expanded across agencies, and the impact of this approach should be studied.

However, the costs of additional pre-placement support must be weighed carefully. Resource Families represent a considerable monetary investment beyond the immeasurable value of opening their hearts and homes to children in need.

Uniform FFA training process and outcome data should be collected.

Data pertaining to the movement of prospective families through training were limited. Some FFAs do diligently collect information about training processes and outcomes, but the data gathered by these tracking systems were not sufficiently similar, or housed in a consolidated database, to be useful within the scope of this analysis. Complete understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of the training process will require that FFAs more uniformly and reliably collect information regarding the training process.

Existing resource families should be engaged to orient prospective families.

Among the innovations reported by some FFAs was the practice of conducting orientations in the homes of current resource families. This was described as a productive recruitment tactic that contributes to the support and commitment of prospective resource families who are entering the training and approval processes. In many cases, this practice also included the provision of incentives for host families. This approach, which draws on the lived experiences of others, holds promise and should be studied to identify its effectiveness. Successful orientation practices for partnering with existing resource families should then be promoted across the foster and adoption communities.

More effective and efficient ways to orient prospective resource families and engage current resource families regarding ITFC should be identified.

Despite DCFS initiatives to encourage Awareness of Intensive Treatment Foster Care (ITFC), this area needs increased focus across agencies. Awareness among prospective resource families was reported to be low. Specifically, engaging new families in this type of care when they had no prior interest was described as an often difficult and time-consuming part of the orientation process. To overcome this challenge, some agencies reported recruiting and orienting current resource families to ITFC, as they may be more likely to have had enough experience to be able to understand the need for and develop a more positive orientation to the possibility of providing more intensive care. However, agencies also noted that this requires significant resources, money, attention, and time. Given the need for more families capable of providing this type of care, more effective and efficient ways to attract and orient prospective resource families and to engage current resource families regarding ITFC should be identified and developed.

Online orientation should be explored.

Staff members explained that the need to include the California Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) in each orientation limited the number of sessions they could provide each month. To remove this constraint, CCLD was in the process of moving their portion of the orientation online, as part of the Resource Family Approval (RFA) program, to be initiated in January 2017. This change may allow for additional sessions to be scheduled and may streamline the orientation process for prospective families, partly through moving the approval burden from the state to counties and FFAs. If such changes prove efficient and effective, it may be prudent to explore providing the entire DCFS orientation online—especially considering the increasing number of online recruitment referrals. While there will likely always be a demand for in-person orientation, an online venue would ensure that the demand for this training at any given time could be satisfied.

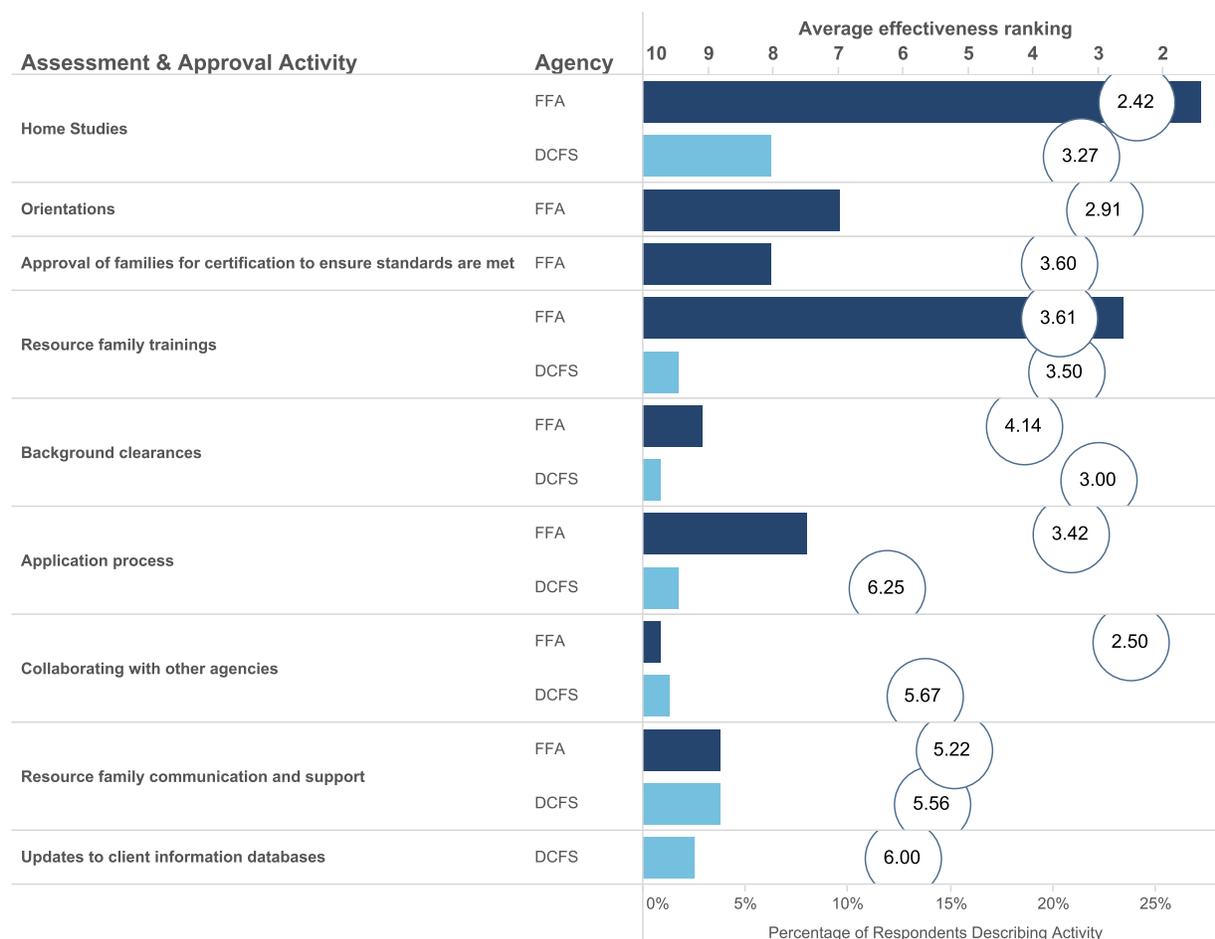
Assessment & Approval

California Community Care Licensing Division regulations³² (e.g., applications, background clearances, first aid/CPR certification, health screening, and home study), the Health and Safety Code,³³ as well as the size, mission, and legacy of an agency drive the configuration, timeline, and requirements of the resource family assessment and approval process. While regulation provides important structure and minimum requirements, most agencies' assessment and approval processes go well beyond the basics. In this section, FFA and DCFS assessment and approval processes are described, promising practices are highlighted, outcomes are detailed, and then insights and pathways forward are identified.

FFA Assessment & Approval

Often occurring parallel to new resource family training, assessment and approval processes within FFAs also vary by agency. Differences include the length, order, and requirements of FFAs' assessments and approval processes for new resource families. As Figure 13 displays, both FFA and DCFS parties interviewed tended to agree about the emphasis and effectiveness of various processes. The differences illuminate areas where assessment and approval efficiencies and promising practices may be explored. These potential pathways forward are detailed in this section.

Figure 13. Most frequently described and average effectiveness of assessment and approval activities



The Process

FFA staff described the length of the assessment and approval process as depending upon the prospective resource family. Specifically, as the assessment process is inherently invasive, agencies emphasized the need to be sensitive to the somewhat unique schedules, needs, and motivations of families. Additionally, the complexity of each prospective resource family’s structure (e.g., single parent, couple, or other adults in the home) can slow the approval process. Prospective families that are more passionate or proactive may complete the process in less time, although many reportedly require six months or more. Most agencies agreed that if the approval processes requires more than one year, it typically indicates that the family or agency is not appropriate or ready to move forward. However, FFA differences in the order and requirements of assessment and approval may also account for variation in the length of the process.

As noted in the “Training” section, many FFAs described assessment and approval as beginning at orientation and continuing as an integral part of training. Thus many agencies described the order of the process as: orientation, application, home study (e.g., background clearances, interviews, and assessments), training, and then agency review and approval. Interestingly, agencies differed most in the order of their home study and training processes. Some advocated for assessing the appropriateness of the prospective family (e.g., Live Scan and response from DCFS Out of Home Care) and their home before taking any

further step, such as training. This was motivated by the desire to expend as few resources as possible before investing and building a relationship with the family. However, other FFAs initiated training prior to beginning a home study. Such agencies described the desire to make sure prospective families are well aware of the process and requirements before investing in the assessment process. These variations should be explored to identify guidelines for efficiency and improved retention of families at this stage.

The Home Study

The home study is among the most burdensome pieces of assessment and approval. The Structure Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) home study was described as a standardized assessment approach that allows practitioners to identify a home's strengths and areas of concern, and provides reference information for interpreting and assessing the information gathered.³⁴ Completion of the SAFE home study is required by FFA contracts with DCFS, but agencies vary in the components and extent of the home studies they conduct.

Most FFA home studies include some combination of background checks (e.g., references, Live Scan, DOJ, FBI, and DMV history), inspection of the home for adherence to regulations, financial review, and certifications (e.g., first aid and CPR). These elements are more extensive depending upon the resources and policies of the agency. Some agencies include other aspects, such as an “autobiography” that can provide a picture of the parent from their own perspective. Such approaches may seem invasive at times, but were described as providing agencies with important information for determining a family's fit with an agency.

“What do families dream for their foster care experiences—does it match what we do?” —Foster Family Agency

While the SAFE model is a requirement of the FFA contract with DCFS, some agencies did report alternative models that include more in-depth inquiry. Home studies are most often completed by FFA staff, but may be contracted out based on the availability of staff at any point. Many agencies also reported contracting out home studies for Spanish-speaking families, as the availability of Spanish-speaking staff is sometimes limited.

What is Working?

As noted in the “Resource Family Training” section above, most agencies reported that training itself is one of the most effective forms of assessment for prospective families. Through the process, staff get to know parents and gauge their thought processes based on their behavior and the questions they ask. Training provides staff the opportunity to expose prospective families to many different parenting scenarios (e.g., how to discipline or form secure attachments) and see how they react and what decisions they make. Many FFAs emphasized this opportunity to extensively engage with families as integral to the assessment and approval process, and as such advocated for additional training time and resources for prospective families. Some agencies also characterized the face-to-face points of the home study as being key to assessment.

Agency staff described how important interviews and other opportunities for personal engagement with families are in the home study process. Many suggested that those who are more reserved in a group context, such as training, have the opportunity to express themselves more openly during the home study. Agency

staff explained that this is important for assessing families because disclosure builds trust, and many staff feel their partnerships with families are founded on trust.

PROMISING PRACTICE: Some agencies reported that processes such as “pre-certification,” an initial indication to prospective families that they meet approval standards prior to official certification, helps to engender trust and dedication to the process for families as well. In some cases, staff reported making recommendations to families early on (e.g., required changes or helpful service referrals) to increase their chances of being pre-certified. Approaches to trust-building during the home study process were also highlighted as particularly effective.

Dual Foster Care and Adoption Approval

Should the policy of dual approval for foster care and adoption be continued? Los Angeles County began to require FFAs to approve all resource families for foster care and adoption in October 2009. Many agencies interviewed cited the requirement for dual approval of families for foster care and adoption as an impediment to the assessment and approval process and as a limitation to the number of resource families available. Agencies frequently noted that some families simply do not want to adopt, and for such families the dual approval policy has important implications.

For example, families’ finances are reviewed not just for adequacy to support foster care but adoption as well. Thus, those who do not meet the criteria for adoption are not able to foster. Additionally, FFA staff noted that dual approval requires prospective foster parents to obtain two background checks (a foster clearance and an adoptive clearance), and that criminal record exemptions may be necessary for foster care approval, but not for adoption. Many interviewed suggested these factors have slowed the assessment process and prevented many families from providing care altogether.

The dual approval approach has gained momentum statewide. In fact, since 2013 some counties have been pilot testing dual approval policies and procedures (e.g., San Luis Obispo, Kings, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, and San Francisco Counties).³⁵ Given the concerns expressed by FFAs and the spread of this policy across the state, more specific study of its impact and effectiveness in Los Angeles County appears timely and vital for understanding the availability of out-of-home care. Initial indications of the impact of the dual approval policy are highlighted in the “Assessment & Approval Outcomes” section below.

DCFS Assessment & Approval

The DCFS assessment and approval process is similarly driven by state regulations regarding assessment and approval.³⁶ However, the structure of the DCFS assessment and approval process, working with CCLD to approve prospective resources families, differentiates this procedure.

The Process

DCFS staff described the length of the assessment and approval process as largely depending upon the prospective resource family. Similar to FFAs, DCFS staff also described the uniqueness of resource families (e.g., size, complexity, schedules, and motivations) as dictating the efficiency of the process. But assessment and approval case loads were often reported to be higher for DCFS staff compared to many FFAs; DCFS staff indicated they have less time to be flexible in accommodating the sometimes unique needs of families. To reduce such issues, DCFS assessment and approval staff responsibilities have shifted away from training to provide more staff resources to complete approvals.

DCFS assessment and approval staff are involved in the training process, but not to the extent that many FFA staff are (e.g., leading new resource family training). Since sub-contracting with The Community College Foundation to conduct PS-MAPP training, DCFS workers spend three class sessions with families. Thus, they cannot necessarily utilize the training process for assessment and relationship building with families. Shifting the training burden largely away from DCFS staff has allowed them time to complete more approvals per worker, however. Most DCFS assessment and approval worker time was reported to be focused on the home study process.

The Home Study

DCFS staff utilize the same SAFE home study model that FFAs are required to employ.³⁷ As such, home studies are largely the same across agencies. DCFS staff highlighted diligent background checks and data entry as key to supporting the efficiency of the home study process. Moreover, they described spending extensive time completing psychosocial interviews and gathering necessary documentation to mitigate concerns that arise through the home study assessment tools. This emphasis was driven by the department priorities of child safety and permanency.

“Priority being child safety and permanency.” —DCFS Social Worker

What is Working?

DCFS assessment and approval staff highlighted the importance of engaging with families during the assessment and approval process, but also expressed the desire for more time and resources to provide support. In particular, allaying concerns for families with different expectations and helping them understand the licensing process are key to supporting and retaining them. For example, explaining delays in the assessment and approval process and why they are impacting their journey as a resource family can impact the decision to continue with the process. Unfortunately, formal or procedural issues were cited as limiting the time and resources available for family engagement and support.

DCFS clinical social workers (CSWs) highlighted the significant responsibility of mitigating and corroborating documentation, among other procedures. Clerical team members have begun to take on basic documentation, however, and this has reduced the time CSWs devote to paperwork. Workers emphasized that efficiencies in documentation and paperwork completion throughout the resource family recruitment journey, such as online home study surveys and other forms, may improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their work.

The Dual System

Should the current dual system of DCFS and FFA approval be continued? Both FFA and DCFS staff expressed advantages and limitations of the current dual system. The most commonly cited advantage was that it provides more options for prospective families. Some require more support throughout the assessment and approval process, as well as through and after placement, and they may find this with an FFA; others are less interested in support and prefer a less invasive approval process, as well as a lower cost of participation. For example FFAs may require fingerprinting, which carries an upfront cost, and other background check processes, while DCFS does not.

At the same time, however, the differences in recruitment, training, and assessment and approval detailed in the preceding sections contribute to a lack of coordination and communication between agencies and create delays and confusion for families. Staff from both DCFS and FFA suggested this may prevent some families from entering the assessment process and compel others to lose interest before final approval. However, most came to the conclusion that given the scope of need for placements, removing either DCFS or FFAs from the system in the near term would result in a devastating loss of resource families. Most believed many families would not successfully make the transition from licensure to certification, or the opposite, without a substantial long-term, highly coordinated, and well resourced transition plan. Under the assumption that at least in the near term both FFAs and DCFS would continue to approve families, those interviewed were interested in discussing constructive paths for moving forward together, such as adopting clear high quality approval standards across agencies.

Collaboration for More Efficient, Effective Assessment & Approval

How can assessment and approval be improved? Staff from both DCFS and FFA tended to agree about improvements that could be made to the assessment and approval process. The most common suggestion was the adoption of assessment and approval standards across all agencies to reduce confusion for prospective families and allow agencies to much more easily share or transfer cases, thus more efficiently allocating resources across the system. Another common idea was to increase transparency by identifying all workers across agencies who are assigned to assessment and approval (or other distinct services) for each resource family, which could also support the efficient allocation of resources. Additionally, both DCFS and FFA staff agreed that additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective families (e.g., more home visits, more time for relationship building and engagement during training and assessment) would improve the quality and retention of both licensed and certified resource families through the assessment and approval process.

How can DCFS and FFAs better coordinate efforts and work more efficiently together? Most FFA staff reported attempting and requiring daily interpersonal contact with DCFS staff regarding different issues, including assessment and approval. Communication was cited most frequently as the primary obstacle to efficient collaboration. Many agencies reported an awareness of the heavy caseloads of DCFS social workers, and have pursued various strategies for working more collaboratively, including visits to DCFS offices to develop relationships with staff, designation of one point of contact for DCFS, and contact with supervisors. Working groups established by DCFS to improve communication and collaboration were also noted as productive. Suggestions for future collaboration include co-training around specific issues such as the core practice model and ITFC.

Through all stages of recruitment, including assessment and approval, the need for more collaboration to make the process more efficient was clear. The efficiency of the assessment and approval process specifically could be improved by streamlining requirements for approval across agencies (e.g., foster and adoption approval requirements) and with a more logically automated process for each agency to be alerted to the readiness of a given family to move on to the next stage of the process. As it stands now, for licensed and certified families, CCLD, DCFS, and/or FFAs must contribute to the process before a family can be approved. Bottlenecks often form as pieces of the assessment and approval of families (e.g., background checks) are required from different agencies with varying priorities, resources, and timelines. Thus,

efficiencies in the approval process may be found not only within each agency, but also across agencies in order to decrease the time families must wait before final approval.

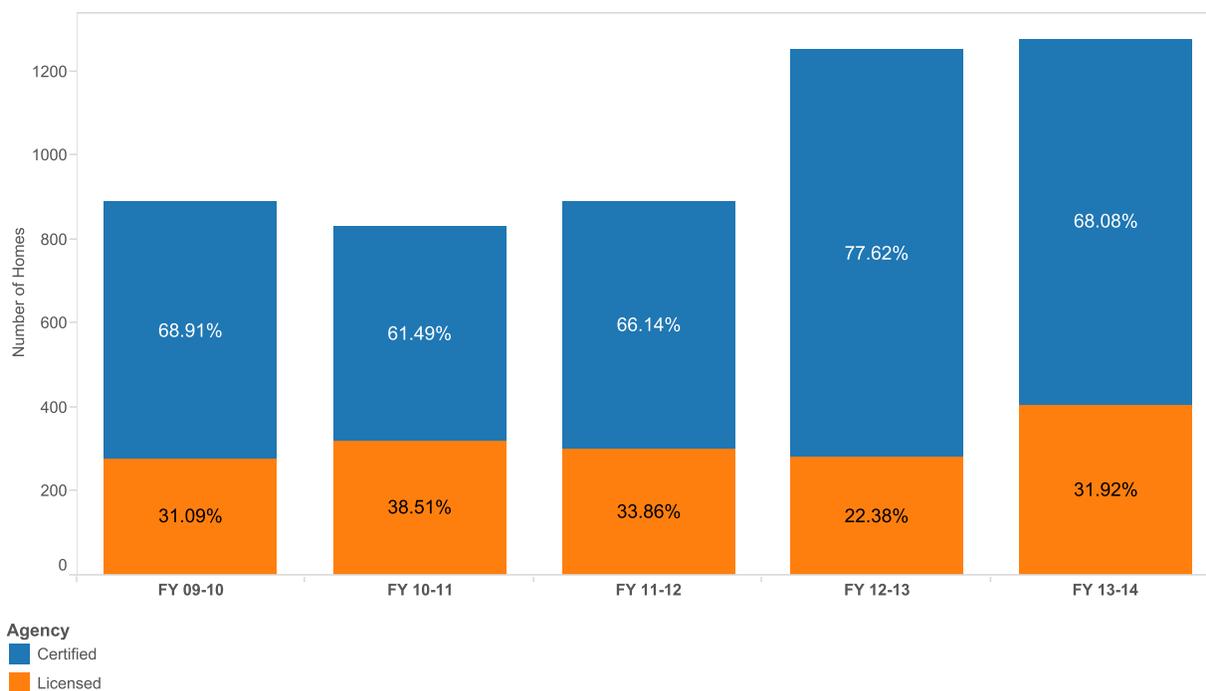
Despite differences in aspects of the assessment and approval process across FFAs and inefficiencies of collaboration with DCFS, it was heartening to learn about the common focus of approval across FFA organizations and DCFS: quality care for children.

“We look for loving and caring families. We look for families that have a home that feels like a home.” —Foster Family Agency

Assessment & Approval Outcomes

What has been the impact of DCFS and FFA assessment and approval processes? A comparison of newly approved (i.e., not approved previously) DCFS and FFA homes annually over a recent five-year period (FY 2009–2010 through 2013–2014) shows the relative effectiveness of the assessment and approval processes. As Figure 14 displays, the number of newly approved homes has generally increased annually. The overall trend is positive, but an annual decrease is evident in FY 2010–2011, likely attributable in part to the redeployment of many DCFS Adoption and Permanency Resources Division staff to the front line.

Figure 14. Newly approved homes by fiscal year



Analysis of newly approved homes annually among DCFS and FFAs separately provides a bit more insight. Beginning in FY 2010–2011 and continuing through FY 2013–2014, FFAs provided a larger proportion of the newly approved homes annually. In the last three years, licensed homes accounted for less than 34% of

newly approved resource families. This pattern is attributable in part to the fact that the staff among the 46 FFAs contracted with FFAs are assessing families, while only 16 DCFS social workers conduct assessments. The trends of increasing numbers of newly approved families annually, and proportionally more FFA than DCFS approved homes, was found consistently across each SPA (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Newly approved homes by SPA



The relatively steady trend of an increasing proportion of new homes approved by FFAs may be accounted for by the additional support for families that both DCFS and FFA staff reported FFAs tend to provide, or it may underscore the impact that several relatively small agencies can have in aggregate, as compared to a single large agency such as DCFS.³⁸

Also notable in these results is a decrease in the number of new resource families approved in FY 2010–2011. This decrease temporally aligns with the initiation of the requirement for dual approval (i.e., foster care and adoption) that was cited by many as limiting the number of families willing or able to complete the assessment and approval process and increasing the length of the process. Since FY 2011–2012, however, the number of newly approved families has returned to an annual increasing trend. Thus, any negative impact from the introduction of dual approval appears to have been ameliorated, or other factors (e.g., recognition of increasing need for resource families) have mitigated the impact of this policy change. Given these findings and the piloting of this policy in many other counties, the impact of the dual approval policy in Los Angeles warrants more specific study.

Insights & Pathways Forward

High quality standards for the assessment and approval process should be adopted.

The evaluation team found variation between FFAs and DCFS, as well as across FFAs, in the extent and components of the assessment and approval processes. These differences were often confusing for prospective resource families and were a source of inefficiency and complication across agencies. Many FFA staff suggested that the adoption of high quality standards for assessment and approval across agencies would reduce confusion for prospective families and allow them to more easily share or transfer cases, thereby supporting more efficient allocation of resources across the system.

Transparency of the assessment and approval process should be increased.

Assessment and approval staff interviewed recommended that the extent, duration, costs, and requirements of the assessment and approval processes—both between FFAs and DCFS, as well as across FFAs—be made clearer and more accessible for prospective families. Further, progress through the assessment and approval process, including milestones completed or requirements outstanding, should be made clearer and more accessible for families engaged in the process. Currently, there is substantial variation across agencies in the degree of regular communication with families in the approval process, so routinized and increased transparency may contribute to support and retention. Additionally, identifying workers across agencies who are assigned to assessment and approval or other specific services might further support the efficient allocation of resources.

DCFS oversight and support for prospective resource families should be increased.

Another common thread of discussion was the potential positive impact of additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective families (e.g., more home visits, more time for relationship building and engagement during training and assessment). As training has been outsourced, DCFS assessment and approval workers' focus has shifted away from this area and toward approval. This has reduced their opportunities to engage

and build rapport with families, which may be contributing to the increasing proportion of newly approved certified (i.e., approved by an FFA), rather than licensed (i.e., approved by CCLD), families each year. The importance of personal connections and relationship building evident in the recruitment, training, and approval processes suggests that additional DCFS oversight and support for prospective resource families may improve the quality and retention of homes throughout the DCFS assessment and approval process.

Placement

California Community Care Licensing Division regulations³⁹ (e.g., safety, caregiver requirements, admission/intake procedures, medical assessments, and health services) and the Health and Safety Code⁴⁰ provide guidelines and minimum requirements for the placement process for agencies and resource families. The system that has developed under these policies and the current level of need for homes have created challenges for FFAs, DCFS, and resource families. In this section, placement processes are described, promising practices are highlighted, and outcomes are detailed. Then, insights and pathways forward are identified.

The Placement Process

Foster Family Agency and DCFS staff described the placement process as primarily driven by DCFS. The process for identifying placements was reported to vary somewhat across DCFS offices, but for most children it involves a request for placement, gathering of relevant information regarding the child and a list of potential placements, contact with agencies or homes until an appropriate placement is identified, and then approval. DCFS administrative staff complete the bulk of the work to gather lists of potential placements; this was previously done by filtering through list of available placements, but DCFS has recently developed the Foster Care Search System⁴¹ (FCSS), which has reportedly made this process more efficient.

PROMISING PRACTICE: The FCSS is a web-based application that allows licensed caregivers or agencies to update their home profiles (e.g., description and contact information), report discrepancies regarding foster children in a home, update and maintain home certification (e.g., recertification and decertification), and update availability of individual beds within a home and home preferences (e.g., characteristics of children the family prefers to serve). The goals of this new system are to provide more accurate and reliable information regarding resource homes to facilitate more efficient and appropriate placements. DCFS staff indicate that in early stages of implementation it has made an impact. Previously, administrative staff would cull through lists of often hundreds of potential placements, many of which were inaccurately listed as available; the new system provides lists of dozens of potential placements. Thus, the FCSS has reportedly made the search more efficient. Regardless of the efficiency of the search system, however, identifying appropriate homes for some children remains challenging.

Both DCFS and FFA staff described the difficulties in placing very young children, teenagers, and children with special health or behavioral needs, in part because there are simply fewer resource families willing or able to care for them. Particularly, staff reported that deaf children and Specialized Care Increment Rate (i.e., D-rate) children require significantly more time to place. Despite additional compensation for children with specialized care needs, the smaller population of families willing or able to care for them may be driven by the additional cost or training requirements (e.g., 16 hours to provide F-rate care⁴²), which often requires that

caregivers do not work outside the home. DCFS and FFA staff agreed that the emphasis on speedy placements is important, but the pressure resulting from DCFS emphasis on placing children as quickly as possible to minimize time in the Welcome Center⁴³ and the priority placed on relative care has contributed to less than ideal matches of difficult to place children and resource families.

PROMISING PRACTICE: DCFS efforts to improve the efficiency of the placement process and appropriateness of matches include the Advanced Placement Team (APT). It is the responsibility of the social worker assigned to a child to identify placement immediately upon notification of the need, but in emergent situations the social worker may require assistance with temporary placement (or replacement) outside of normal business hours or when other efforts to find placement are unsuccessful. The APT was established to focus on such emergent needs and is available to assist.

PROMISING PRACTICE: While the APT tends to place very young children or those with specialized care needs, the Permanency Partners Program (P3) program was established in 2004 to address the permanency needs of older youth in long-term foster care. Older youth are the least likely to exit care with a permanent family relationship, which puts them at greater risk for homelessness, incarceration, welfare dependency, early pregnancy, unemployment, and educational loss. Key to the P3 strategy is an additional worker assigned to youth between the ages of 12 and 18 who focuses on family finding and engagement. Modeled after “cold case” approaches in law enforcement, P3 CSWs are part-time and retired social workers who focus on finding adult connections to support such youth. In particular, they learn how youth feel about family and assist the primary social workers in overcoming identified barriers to permanency. As of July 2011, P3 provided services to 4,635 youth, and 37% of these cases resulted in legal permanency plans. Additional and focused resources to improve placement and permanency, such as APT and P3, have reported and demonstrated promise and should be further explored—including for other difficult to place populations—and expanded as evidence of impact warrants.

Communication in the Placement Process

DCFS has engaged in several programs and approaches to facilitate more efficient placement overall, and they have devoted resources to more difficult placements. DCFS staff also described more general measures to facilitate efficient and better quality matches. For example, to support efficiency, placement-related staff are centralized, and this has reportedly allowed for greater communication among staff.

**“Now we interface with children more and are making more placements.”
—DCFS Social Worker**

Most FFA staff did not, however, report similar improvements in communication between DCFS and their organizations. Many agencies highlighted the need for more responsiveness from DCFS workers throughout the placement process, citing frequent phone calls and emails that went unanswered for some time. FFAs explained that placement-related contact with DCFS happens most often when a DCFS social worker has an immediate admission/intake need. This pattern has resulted in many FFA staff feeling that their concerns and those of their resource families are often not well appreciated, and that this results in lower quality placement matches.

On the other side of this coin, DCFS placement staff reported lack of communication with many FFAs around admission/intake, particularly outside normal business hours or regarding specialized placements. Such dynamics point to the need for greater communication and coordination through clearly defined processes and protocols. But the overarching goals of safety and permanency for children and families can, should, and in some cases have been overriding factors driving solutions to misaligned organizational cultures and immediate objectives.

Personal Relationships

A different pattern of communication was reported by agencies that formed more personal relationships with individual DCFS workers or offices. Some FFA staff described that once they or their agency showed they were efficiently serving the needs of DCFS workers, children, and families, then DCFS staff began to view them more as partners and resources when placement needs arose. This more constructive pattern of mutually beneficial communication and management should be more intentionally fostered to improve the placement process. For example, approaches to streamlining communication among DCFS placement staff could be applied to collaboration with FFAs (e.g., more regular personal contact and collaborative development of standard admission/intake processes). Additionally, as DCFS has the primary responsibility for protecting children in out-of-home care, specific DCFS staff could be designated as central points of contact regarding placement for each FFA. This might reduce confusion while improving communication and efficiency.

FFA and DCFS placement staff, as well as resource families, nearly unanimously returned to the importance of personal relationships for placing children. Specifically, many noted the need for collaboration among placement staff within and between organizations. As noted previously, however, communication and information sharing between FFAs and DCFS is often insufficient and impedes the placement process. Encouragingly, acknowledgement of this situation appears to have generated efforts to ameliorate it on the part of both DCFS and FFAs.

How can DCFS and FFAs better coordinate efforts and work more efficiently together? In addition to direct contacts, DCFS has routinely communicated with all FFAs regarding children awaiting placement by distributing a monthly list. More recently, DCFS and FFAs have collaborated to improve the placement process and appropriateness of matches. Specifically, staff described the coordination of an event in early 2015 at which detailed and contextualized information about individual children in need of families was presented to DCFS and FFA staff, licensed families, and certified families. The goal was to spotlight specific children in need of placement while building relationships among agencies and resource families through more personal contact. If successful, such meetings may be made routine process.

“Connecting with these children is key, really important” —DCFS Social Worker

Many DCFS workers described that personal relationships can be effectively built by interviewing children, reviewing court reports, and contacting previous caregivers. Similarly, both FFA and DCFS staff described the significance of forging relationships with resource families for learning about their needs and goals, which facilitates assessment of the appropriateness of a match. They agreed that relationships with families are most frequently forged through regular contact; resource families themselves echoed this call for regular

communication, as they expressed the lack of current or complete information about the placement process as one of the most frustrating aspect of being a resource parent.

“The thing that’s frustrating...is the unknown factor—a child may be available, but [you’re] not sure how long. You think a week, could be months; you think months, could show up in weeks. The most rewarding thing is that children who have stayed with us, no matter how long, are ending up in a better situation.” —Resource Parent

For DCFS to regularly form such personal relationships with resource families in ways similar to what many FFA agencies described, however, DCFS staff must be encouraged to supplement their current primary focus on the needs of children, to also approach the process from the perspective of the families. Such an organizational or cultural change may also bring the recruitment approaches of DCFS and FFAs further in line and facilitate easier collaboration and communication.

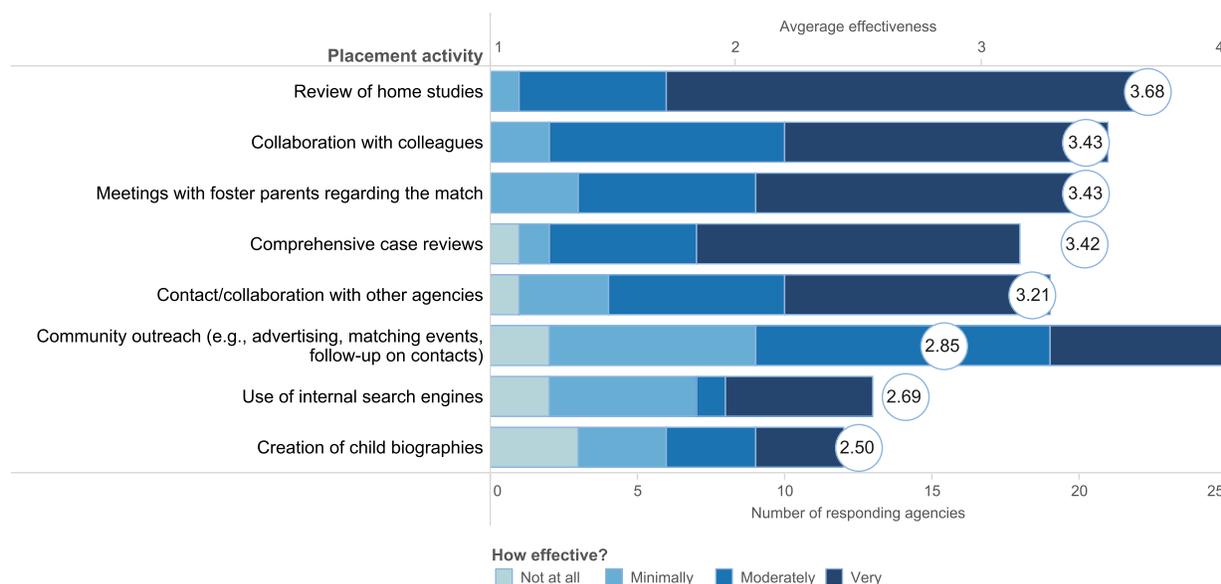
FFA Accreditation

Accreditation of FFAs may increase quality while supporting the efficiency of collaboration and communication with DCFS at all stages of the recruitment process, particularly for identifying and maintaining appropriate placements. Several national accreditation bodies currently assess FFAs, including Los Angeles County agencies, for standards and best practices. These include Council on Accreditation, The Joint Commission, and CARF, among others. The current state and county assessment and approval processes focus on safety. Many FFA staff reported positive experiences with accreditation and the desire for standard requirements to lift the quality and reputation of all. However, an opposing view focused on concerns about requiring smaller or less well-resourced agencies to complete a sometimes cost-prohibitive process. Likewise, potentially “squeezing out” some agencies could also result in a reduction of available certified homes. Again, measures to ensure quality must be weighed against the immediate need for homes.

Placement Outcomes

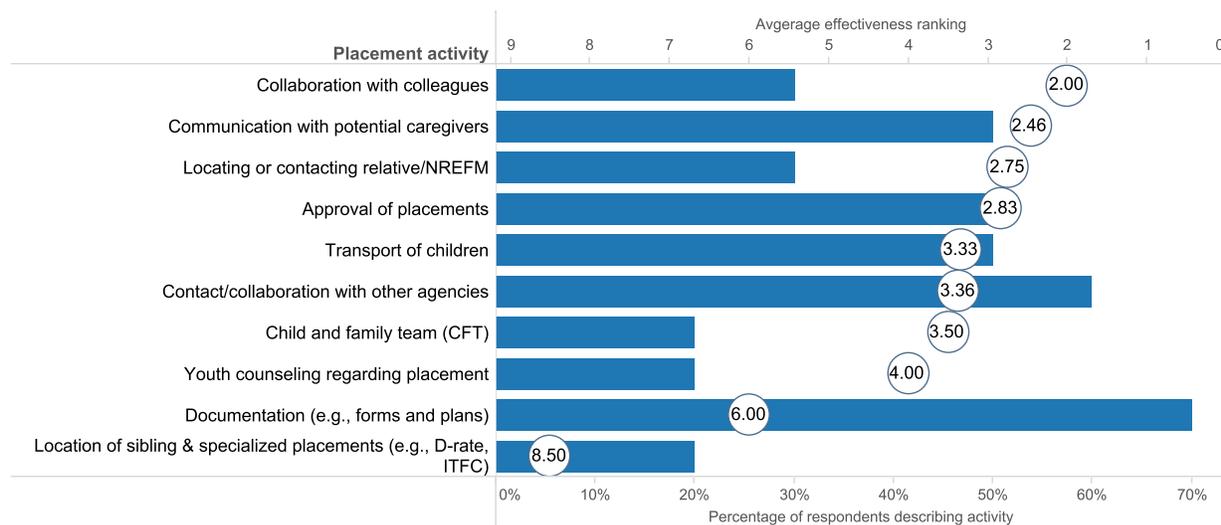
What placement processes were perceived to be most effective? To reveal the relative effectiveness of placement processes, DCFS and FFA staff were asked to rate the effectiveness of their respective placement procedures. As displayed in Figure 16, the activities FFAs rated on average as moderately effective or better included reviewing home studies, collaborating with colleagues, meeting with resource families regarding matches, conducting case reviews, and collaborating with other agencies. These ratings are largely in line with what FFA participants described during their interviews.

Figure 16. FFA staff most frequently described and perceived effectiveness of placement activities



DCFS placement staff reported a different perception of the most impactful placement processes. As displayed in Figure 17, they rated collaboration with coworkers, communication with potential caregivers, locating or contacting relatives or non-related extended family members (NREFM), and approval of placements among the most effective.

Figure 17. DCFS placement staff most frequently described and perceived effectiveness of placement activities

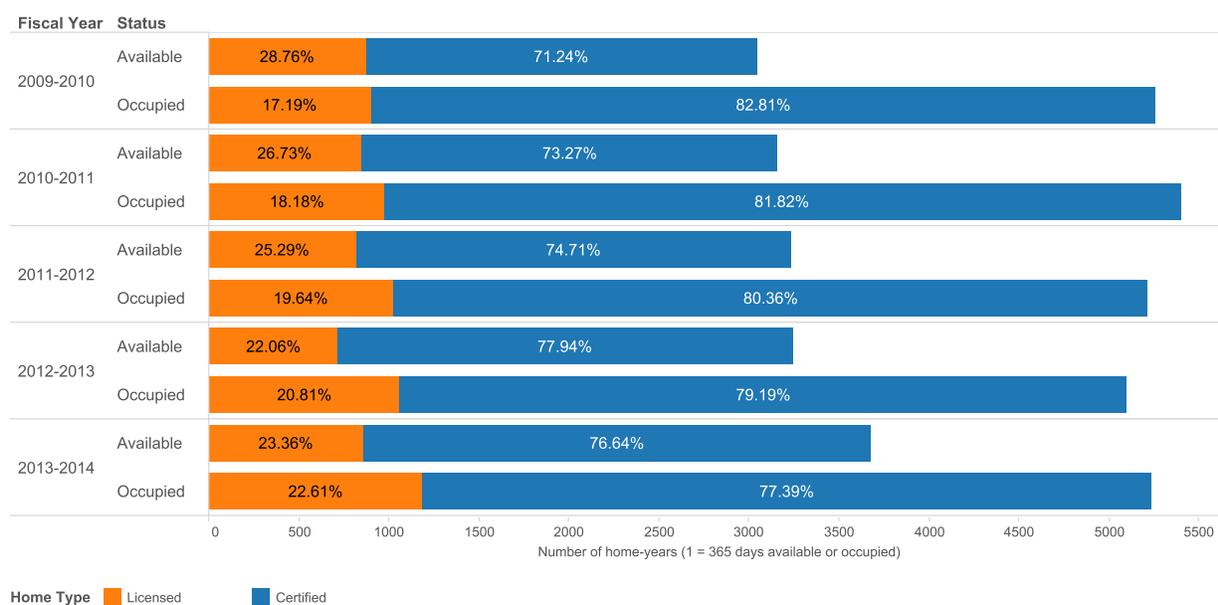


Notably, both DCFS and FFA respondents rated activities involving collaboration with coworkers or other agencies and identifying or getting to know potential caregivers as among the more effective practices (see Figures 16 & 17). However, DCFS staff more often discussed documentation (e.g., forms and plans) as a focus of their efforts; FFA staff more often discussed community outreach efforts (e.g., matching events or

advertising). Similar to findings regarding new resource family recruitment, again we see that the emphasis of placement efforts tend not to align with the activities workers view as more effective.

Are there enough available foster homes? To identify the extent to which sufficient approved homes exist, the availability of homes was compared to the extent to which they were occupied. Each of the most recent five fiscal years (FY 2009–2010 to 2013–2014) with complete data available were examined. To support appropriate comparisons between available homes and child placements, both types of data were calculated as “home-years.” For the purpose of this comparison, one home-year was defined as 365 days a home was either available to or occupied by a child. Through this metric, Figure 18 displays the annual comparison of available licensed and certified home-years to child placements.

Figure 18. Available and occupied home-years



Across the five years analyzed, an overall positive trend in available placements was found. Additionally, a steady high rate of out-of-home care was found, in line with the trends reported elsewhere for Los Angeles County⁴⁴ and statewide⁴⁵ during this period. The consistent level of demand for placements was also described by DCFS and FFA staff. The number of home-years increased annually, and the largest proportional increase in available homes was found in the most recent fiscal year analyzed. Considered together, the relatively stabilized use of out-of-home care and increasing availability of homes suggest a positive trend for the availability of homes, but indicate an insufficient supply of available placements relative to the level of need.

It should be noted that there were more home-years occupied than available in each fiscal year analyzed. This is likely due primarily to the reliability of the data, which dictated the way in which the home-year variable was calculated. Specifically, data regarding the number of placements approved for each home were not reliably or completely available across years. Further, DCFS and FFA staff reported that families often will not accept the number of placements they are approved for. Thus, even if it were the case that complete information regarding the number of placements approved for homes was available, this would likely not be an accurate

accounting of the true number of placements available for many homes. The magnitude of discrepancy between approval and “real” available placements should be the subject of further investigation.

To overcome current data limitations, the calculation of home-years was based upon the number of days a foster home was available for placement, regardless of the number of children the home was approved to care for. This yielded a conservative estimate of the number of available placements; thus, increases in the availability of homes appear more encouraging. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the availability and occupation of homes underscores the need for additional placements.

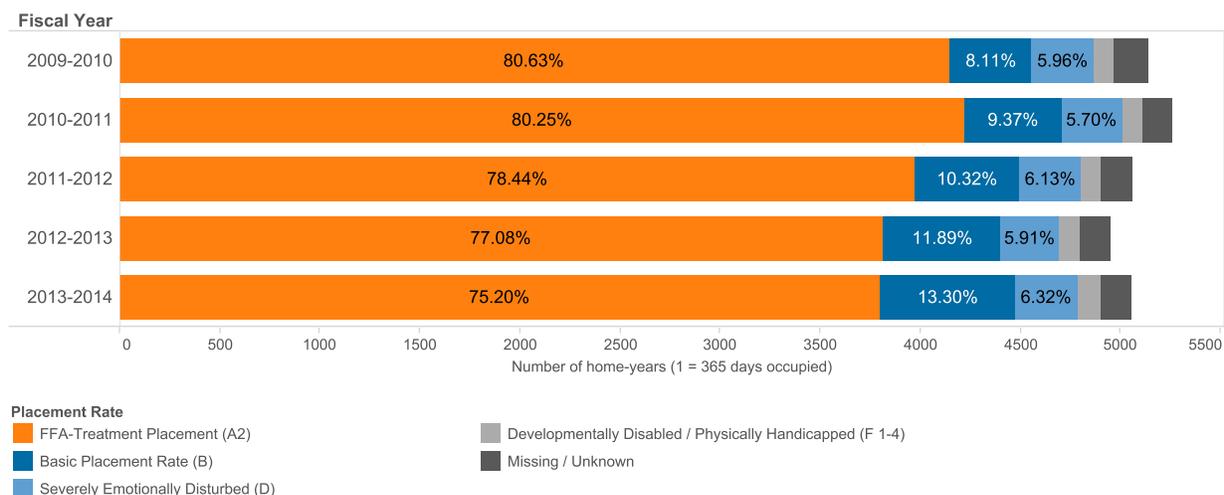
Analysis of the ratio of home-years to occupied homes (subtracting occupied home-years from available home-years) by SPA across the last five full fiscal years revealed few areas where homes were more available than occupied (see Table 3). This is in line with the countywide analyses presented above, in Figure 18. This analysis does, however, point to SPAs in which additional placements are needed. Specifically, Table 3 shows that the need for certified homes in FY 2013–2014 was most evident in the Antelope Valley, East, San Gabriel Valley, and South SPAs.

Table 3. Available minus occupied home-years by service planning area (SPA)

SPA	Home Type	Fiscal Year				
		2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Antelope Valley	Certified	-351.5	-396.8	-356.4	-336.7	-331.9
	Licensed	-37.0	-56.8	-77.4	-81.9	-117.2
East	Certified	-377.7	-345.9	-279.4	-234.1	-207.8
	Licensed	-4.1	-14.6	-17.8	-25.5	-34.9
Metro	Certified	-40.5	-41.0	-22.4	-15.6	4.5
	Licensed	0.5	3.9	-1.9	-1.8	11.3
San Fernando Valley	Certified	-257.9	-207.3	-174.5	-107.1	-47.1
	Licensed	17.0	-1.3	-0.7	-21.3	-1.7
San Gabriel Valley	Certified	-382.6	-388.9	-350.3	-300.6	-240.9
	Licensed	-36.9	-48.2	-51.0	-64.0	-41.0
South	Certified	-389.5	-377.3	-326.7	-292.1	-208.3
	Licensed	-63.1	-84.4	-89.9	-118.7	-139.8
South Bay	Certified	-223.8	-187.4	-81.5	-36.1	-13.4
	Licensed	-29.4	-50.6	-56.9	-85.2	-84.9
West	Certified	3.7	16.8	17.8	14.5	18.5
	Licensed	8.1	3.6	5.7	4.9	9.3

Analysis of placements by placement rate across the most recent complete five fiscal years reveals a largely steady pattern (Figure 19). FFA treatment placement accounts for the majority of homes in each fiscal year, however there has been a proportional increase in D-rate placements for children who are severely emotionally disturbed. This increase in the use of placements requiring care for special needs may account for some of the placement difficulties reported by staff. Other levels of placement remained consistent across years.

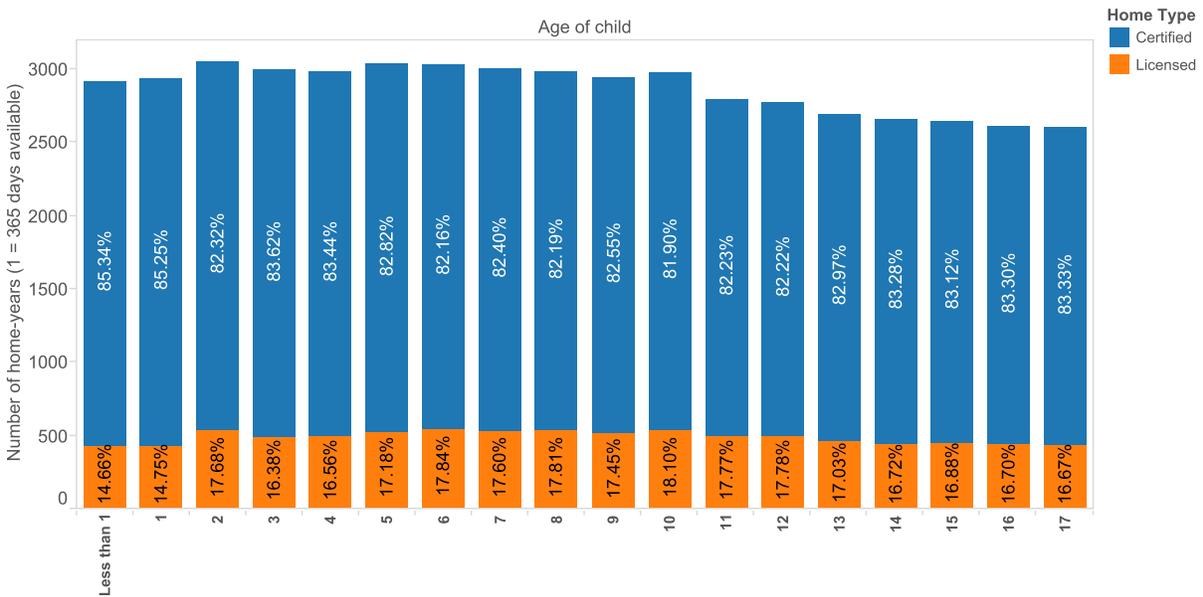
Figure 19. Time in out-of-home care by placement rate



Unfortunately, the data did not support analysis of available homes by placement rate, as rate data are much more reliably tied to child placements, and much less reliably to homes. Such an analysis would provide additional instruction regarding the sufficiency of available homes at each placement rate, but would require more accurate and complete information regarding the level of care families are approved for and the level of care they are realistically willing to provide.

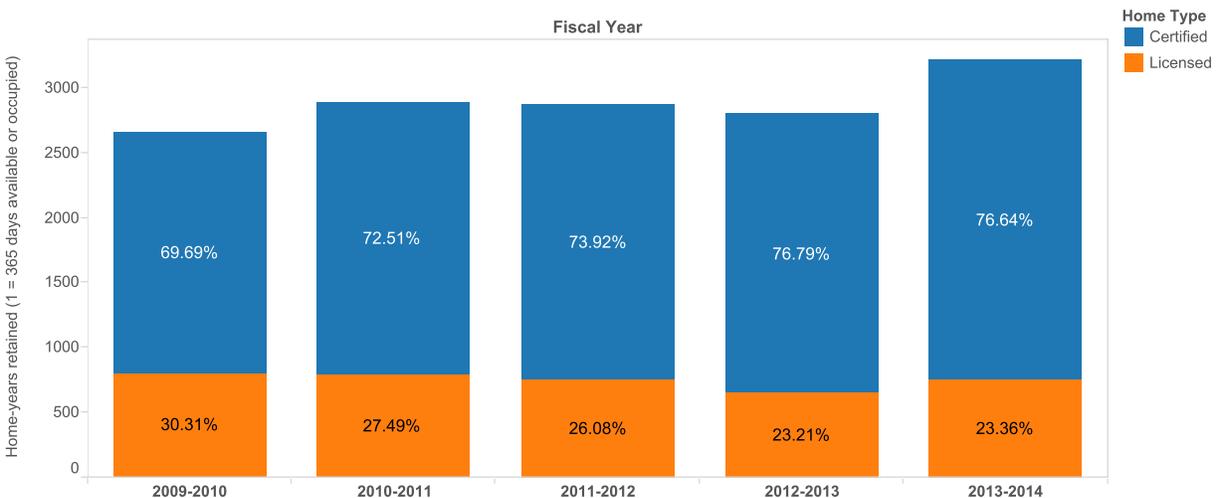
DCFS and FFA staff also described the relative difficulty of placing very young children and teenagers. Thus, the availability of homes approved to serve each age was analyzed for the most recent fiscal year studied (i.e., FY 2013–2014). As the figure below displays, the availability of homes (again, measured in home-years) was relatively steady for placements accepting children from less than one year through ten years of age. A modest decline in the availability of homes was found among placements accepting children ages 11 through 17. These results support staff reports of greater difficulty identifying placements for children moving into and through teen years, but they do not indicate substantially less availability of homes accepting younger children.

Figure 20. Available homes by age in fiscal year 2013–2014



To further elaborate on the availability of homes, retention of homes from the previous year was analyzed for the most recent five fiscal years considered (FY 2009–2010 to 2013–2014). Figure 21 displays a fluctuating but overall positive trend in the number of homes retained. There was a proportional increase in certified homes retained over this same period. These trends are in line with proportional increases in the availability of FFA certified homes (see Figure 18). Increasing retention of available certified homes may indicate that FFA efforts to forge and maintain relationships with families and to provide additional support to resource families are having a positive impact. The decline in retention of licensed homes during this period may reflect worker descriptions of the relatively fewer opportunities and resources DCFS workers have to build relationships and provide more individualized support to resource families.

Figure 21. Retention of available homes from previous fiscal year



Overall, these results suggest there have been increasingly more foster homes available in recent years. However, the patterns of increase in D-rate placements, more limited availability of homes for children age

11 or older, and declining retention of available licensed homes all identify areas where new or additional efforts are needed to recruit and retain resource families capable of specific types of care.

Insights & Pathways Forward

The Foster Care Search System should be further developed.

The Foster Care Search System (FCSS), launched in 2014, has reportedly made the placement search process more efficient. DCFS staff supporting the FCSS reported it will ultimately include automation of FFA reports to DCFS, email reminders to FFAs when recertification of homes is required, and electronic signatures for approval of home certification. Each of these planned developments has the potential to increase efficiency and communication while adding accountability. However, any system requiring manual data entry from multiple sources (i.e., FFAs, DCFS, and licensed families) requires safeguards such as routine data checks to ensure completeness and accuracy. Additionally, such user driven data systems require continuous technical support (e.g., maintenance of the system, training and troubleshooting for users) and organizational support (e.g., policies requiring use) in order to reach their potential and sustain effectiveness.

Interagency communication and collaboration should be improved.

DCFS and FFA staff highlighted interagency communication and collaboration as a particular hurdle for moving placements forward. While both parties to this process agreed that safety and successful placements for children are the goal, the understandable but sometimes conflicting agency perspectives can disrupt agency relations and communications. This issue has been acknowledged to some extent by both FFAs and DCFS, and both have collaborated on new strategies to address barriers to communication and coordination. Specifically, the interagency placement event planned for 2015 involving DCFS, FFAs, and resource families is an encouraging step and a potentially promising approach to collaboration.

Relationship building among agencies, families, and children is especially important. Broad approaches, such as conferences, trainings, and policy development workshops, might facilitate system-wide coordination and development. Likewise, more focused approaches, such as working groups or associations of parties with interest or stake in the placement of specific groups (e.g., those with specialized care needs, or of particular ages or races/ethnicities) hold promise to generate dedicated interest and involvement. Communication and collaboration appear to be fertile ground for sowing the seeds of an improved placement system.

Intake/admissions procedures should be improved.

As a symptom of the larger communication and collaboration difficulties between DCFS and FFAs around placement, the intake/admission process was specifically highlighted as problematic. DCFS staff described the need for more availability and responsiveness from FFAs, particularly for urgent or emergent placements/replacements. FFAs noted a lack of communication and inaccurate information from social workers regarding the types of placements needed or details such as specialized care needs, traumas, or child characteristics. Both issues represent significant barriers to efficient placement and appropriate matches. While CCLD regulations provide guidance regarding intake/admission, more standard and specific policies and procedures across agencies would standardize the process. More uniform procedures would simplify coordination between organizations, and ultimately improve efficiency after an appropriate placement and

match has been identified.

Preliminary Cost Analysis

The goal of the cost analysis was to calculate the cost of recruiting, training, certifying, and retaining resource families. A study objective was to provide a comparison between recruitment and training costs of FFAs and DCFS for FY 2013–2014. However, neither organization participated fully in the cost analysis due to the following study limitations: (a) a truncated study period; (b) optional participation; (c) the time/effort required by the agency; and (d) the requirement to provide confidential financial data. Some of the additional limitations of this cost analysis include:

- providing estimates of staff time by activity posed a particular challenge for FFAs;
- many FFAs were unable or unwilling to provide the detailed line item expenditure data required;
- the PS-MAPP contractor did not provide a detailed line item expenditure breakdown, or any estimates of staff time spent on core activities;
- DCFS did not provide a breakout of other direct costs, director-level or clerical expenditures, or the amount expended on indirect costs; and
- reliable data regarding resource family entry into the system was not available.

The initial activity categories of interest included: (a) recruitment, (b) assessment and approval, (c) training, and (d) retention and support. Due to data limitations, however, the categories were condensed during the study period into the following: pre-certification (recruitment; assessment and approval); training; and post-certification (retention; support).

Because of the limitations noted above, the findings should be considered preliminary. Nevertheless, they do provide useful initial insight into costs. Specifically, the initial data suggest no meaningful difference during the pre-approval period between DCFS and FFA cost per family to recruit, assess, approve, and train families. During the post-approval period, cost per family is greater for FFAs than DCFS. In order to provide context for this finding, the full-time equivalent (one full-time staff person) was calculated in order to determine the staff ratio serving resource families. The results suggest that FFAs devote more time to resource families post-approval:

- DCFS has a ratio of one full-time staff person to every 79 resource families.
- The FFA sample has a ratio of one full-time staff person to every 8 resource families.

Again, these findings are suggestive only and cannot be considered representative of FFAs or DCFS in general.

For a more complete cost study to be conducted, the following will be required:

- *Time-motion documentation*, where staff, over a two-week period, document tasks every 15 minutes. Time-motion studies provide a very accurate means of accounting for how staff spend their time.

- *A line item budget* for the fiscal year of study, to include personnel by name and title with their hourly rate, fringe rate, other direct costs (specific, not lump sum), indirect rate.
- *Line item expenditures for the fiscal year* that include personnel categories listing individual staff by name and title, so that expenditures can be linked back to time-motion documentation, fringe benefits, and other direct costs broken out by location and indirect rate.
- *Resource family information* by unique identifier, date of certification, and start and end dates when families opt out of placement. Because CWS/CMS data contains errors (particularly related to the validity of date variables) and is missing resource family related data, a six-month period must be built into the cost study in order to allow for data cleaning and validation of key variables within the system.
- *Child information* by unique identifier, and start and end date of placement by resource family. (See previous item regarding database cleaning and validation.)
- *Study length of time* of 12–24 months, with a fully committed, representative group of FFAs and full participation from DCFS and the PS-MAPP subcontractor.

Once again, these findings **should not be considered conclusive**. They are merely suggestive of the need for additional research. For a more detailed description of the preliminary cost analysis, see the Appendix.

OVERALL INSIGHTS & PATHWAYS FORWARD

For each stage of the recruitment process considered (i.e., initial recruitment, training, assessment and approval, and placement) this report has described fertile areas for growth and improvement, where DCFS and FFAs can work complementarily to more efficiently and effectively recruit, train, and assess and approve new resource families, and then ultimately place children in appropriate, safe, and secure homes. Across the stages of recruitment, however, some larger points of emphasis are evident.

There are opportunities to overcome the challenges of the bifurcated system.

At each point along the resource parent recruitment path, FFA and DCFS staff identified and richly described the challenges and limitations of the dual foster care recruitment system. Available data regarding the outcomes of these dual pathways largely support the notion that this approach has deleterious consequences for agencies, families, and children. While there is largely acceptance that the current bifurcated system is not preferable, many agency staff members have concluded that both foster care pathways need to be maintained in order to avoid losing homes. However, there is a great need for additional placements, and the potential consequences of moving to a single system warrants further study.

If policymakers and stakeholders decide that the dual recruitment system must be continued, at least in the short-term, there appear to be many opportunities for FFAs and DCFS to coordinate and collaborate at each stage of the process. As noted, recruitment processes could be much better aligned and streamlined across agencies, such that the first step onto the pathway is simplified for prospective families and efficiency and effectiveness are increased for FFAs and DCFS. High quality training standards could be adopted across agencies, possibly through common training curricula or protocols. This is being done currently in many

counties throughout California using QPI California, a comprehensive training curriculum that has been approved by CDSS (see www.qpicalifornia.org). This would support greater consistency in how resource families are prepared, and thus increase the overall quality of the care they provide.

Participants from both DCFS and FFAs believed the requirement for dual assessment and approval for foster care and adoption limits the pool of potential resource families, but also encourages a higher standard of care. The redundancy and inflexibility of this process should be further examined and streamlined across agencies while maintaining appropriate approval standards. DCFS development of a Foster Care Search System appears to already be improving the efficiency of identifying potential placements, but must continue to be developed, including additional efforts to ensure consistent FFA participation. Further, the process for working with FFAs or families after identification of appropriate placements should be standardized to increase efficiency. These and other opportunities to overcome the challenges of the bifurcated system exist, and they are largely acknowledged across agencies.

Cost per resource family should be taken into account.

Pilot study results indicate that no meaningful difference between DCFS and FFAs in pre-certification costs, including training. Differences do emerge after resource families are approved. This closely aligns with reports from FFA staff, who say they provide support to resource families that is individually tailored, available 24/7, and responsive to their needs. Likewise, DCFS staff reported a desire for reduced caseloads that would allow them to better tend to resource family needs. Of particular interest is the impact of post-certification support on resource family retention. FFAs were found to increase retention of placements year-to-year, whereas DCFS retention was relatively stable. Increased retention among certified homes may be a desirable outcome of the additional post approval investment of FFAs. Such cost implications should be more completely investigated.

Information systems capable of identifying and driving system improvements should be developed.

As described throughout the report, there are limitations and gaps in the documentation of processes and outcomes at each stage of recruitment. More complete tracking of initial contacts across agencies, for example, would allow for more accurate and timely information to drive decisions regarding public information strategies. Likewise, uniform data collection regarding training across agencies would help to identify more efficient and effective training models. More reliable assessment and approval information (e.g., regarding placement capacity and characteristics) would provide a more accurate understanding of the homes available to meet current needs, and potentially support a more strategic placement process. Finally, much information regarding placements and the experiences of children, their wellness, and their care is qualitative, anecdotal, and/or not readily analyzable. Such characteristics should be more accurately and reliably measured to support appropriate and safe placements. Opportunities abound to better use data to identify and drive resource family recruitment system improvements.

APPENDIX: PRELIMINARY COST ANALYSIS

The goal of the cost analysis was to calculate the cost of recruiting, training, certifying, and retaining foster/resource families. A study objective was to provide a comparison between FFA and DCFS processes. It was necessary to select a fiscal year for analysis that had already concluded. This was important because the analysis required:

- Line item budget for the fiscal year (e.g., personnel, other direct costs);
- Line item expenditures for the fiscal year (e.g., personnel categories, fringe benefits, other direct costs, indirect rate);
- Resource family information (e.g., date of certification, hold dates); and
- Child information (e.g., date of placement).

Fiscal year (FY) 2013–2014 (July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014) was selected because it was recent, and access to each of the data sources described above was expected, based upon discussions with DCFS, the Association of Community Human Service Agencies (ACHSA), and review of the variable list within CWS (provided by DCFS).

Cost Analysis Activity Categories

The initial activity categories of interest included: (a) recruitment, (b) assessment and approval, (c) training, and (d) resource family retention and support. During the study period, the categories were condensed, as follows:

- Pre-certification:
 - recruitment, assessment and approval
 - training
- Post-certification: retention and support

For the sake of simplicity, activity categories will be referred to as pre-certification, training, and post-certification throughout the remainder of this appendix.

A General Note

The following sections describe each step of the cost analysis. The number of participating FFAs is also presented, along with the various data access and quality challenges encountered.⁴⁶ As a condition of participation, FFAs were guaranteed anonymity and therefore are not named anywhere in this report, in any appendix, or in any material provided to DCFS or the funder. Materials provided by the FFAs to the research team were not (and will not be) shared with DCFS or the funder because they contain confidential financial information. Only summary statistics (i.e., summary cost calculations) that resulted from the use of financial information provided by the FFAs and by DCFS are presented.

The results presented in this report should be considered cautiously and in context. The findings are not conclusive and further study is needed, as the FFAs that chose to participate fully throughout every step of the cost analysis should not be considered representative of all FFAs.

Step 1: Estimates of Staff Time

Estimates of staff time are typically collected through time-motion studies, as is done under Medicaid audits. A time-motion study requires staff to document tasks every 15 minutes over a two-week period. In this manner, Medicaid auditors are able to account for billable activities and hours allowable under the program. Time-motion studies provide a very accurate means of accounting for how staff spend their time. This approach was not possible under the current study parameters, however.⁴⁷

As previously discussed, the research team was able to conduct a series of focus groups with the FFAs. In addition, the FFAs were asked to have certain staff complete a brief survey (15 minutes) about time they spent engaged in activities related to resource family pre-certification, training, and post-certification. In each FFA, the survey was completed by representative staff who were engaged in pre-certification, training, and post-certification activities (e.g., social workers, parent coordinators, supervisors).

A total of 17 FFAs participated in Step 1 of the cost analysis process. Completion was not mandatory, and among staff at these 17 FFAs, survey completion ranged from none (all items left blank) to complete. Some staff noted that they had difficulty estimating the amount of time spent on various activities. Because estimated hours are not the same as actual hours, the time series study is the preferred method of collecting data.

The DCFS Placement and Recruitment Unit (PRU) staff engaged in a parallel process of focus group and survey participation, and completed Step 1.

Step 2: Submit Fiscal Information and Organizational Chart

The Step 2 request was issued to the 17 FFAs that had participated in Step 1. The request was also made of DCFS-PRU and the PS-MAPP contractors. The request included information for FY 2013–2014 that is typically compiled annually for fiscal reporting, such as operating budget, funds expended, and the agency's organization chart. Line item expenditures were requested for personnel by class/staff category in order to properly allocate FTE hours from the FFA survey. Typical expenditure reports show fringe benefits as a separate line item and break out other direct costs and indirect costs into separate line items.

Among the 17 FFAs, eight refused to participate in Step 2 by providing fiscal information. Reasons included objections from boards of directors and concerns about confidentiality. Table A1 below displays the documentation status for the remaining nine FFAs, DCFS-PRU, and the PS-MAPP contractors.

Table A1. Status of cost analysis study documentation by agency

Agency	Organization Chart	Budget	Expenditures	Retain for Study?
DCFS	Yes	Yes (see exp. notes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Director-level and clerical-level staff line items are missing Fringe rate is not broken out ODCs are provided in lump sum (not broken out) No indirect rate is provided 	Yes, but with caveat that any cost estimate is an underestimate (and includes 10% indirect rate).
PS-MAPP Contractors (<i>Training Activity Category</i>)	No	No	Lump sum total by SPA is provided, with no breakout information	Yes
FFA 1 (mid-size)	Yes	Yes	Yes and actual amount of time x FTE per activity category is provided	Yes
FFA 2 (mid-size)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FFA 3 (small)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FFA 4 (small)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FFA 5 (small)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No. Organization chart reveals that two categories of staff did not complete time survey. Unable to collect survey from missing staff classes and have no basis to estimate time spent by activity category. Insufficient data to retain for cost analysis.
FFA 6 (small)	Yes	No	No	No. Was only able to provide a 990 form. Doesn't contain line item expenditures by staff class. Insufficient data to retain for cost analysis.

Agency	Organization Chart	Budget	Expenditures	Retain for Study?
FFA 7 (mid-size)	Yes, but doesn't break out Southern California offices	Yes (see exp. notes)	Yes, but line item expenditures are provided for all states	No. Cannot tell from organizational chart how many staff are in LA County; cannot match back to expenditure line items. Detailed organization chart, line items, and pay rates not provided, so there is no basis to estimate time by activity category. Insufficient data to retain for cost analysis.
FFA 8 (large)	Yes	Yes (see exp. notes)	Yes, but line item expenditures are provided for all counties (not just LA County)	No. LA County staff are not separated into line items and pay rates are not provided, so there is no basis to estimate time by activity category. Insufficient data to retain for cost analysis.
FFA 9 (large)	Yes	Yes (see exp. notes)	Yes, but expenditures are rolled up for personnel and not broken out by category	No. Staff are not separated into line items and pay rates are not provided, so there is no basis to estimate time by activity category. Insufficient data to retain for cost analysis.

Step 3: Develop Expenditure Matrices

At this point in the process, an explanation of the difference between the terms “cost” and “expenditures” is in order. The methods used in this study resulted in a report about the amount *expended* (rather than the true cost). The amount expended is reported based upon the fiscal information provided by DCFS and the FFAs (i.e., what they actually spent in FY 2013–2014). A study of *cost* accounts for all of the variables that reflect the true cost of service; this was beyond the scope of the study, as true cost studies require extensive documentation of all potential sources that contribute to cost, including volunteer hours, board member contribution, etc. Cost studies are, by nature, expensive and require a longer inquiry period than the current study allowed for. However, the term “expenditure” is unfamiliar to most readers. Thus, for ease of readability, “cost” is substituted for “expenditure” here, keeping in mind that this study and the resulting findings reflect expenditures—i.e., not the true cost of service.

Among the eight FFAs that provided usable expenditure data, matrices were developed to link the time estimate data provided in Step 1 to the expenditure data provided in Step 2. As Table A1 illustrates, information gaps existed for numerous FFAs and requests for additional information were issued. In order to complete the matrix, personnel class categories were tied back to specific expenditure line items in such a way that an hourly rate or FTE (percentage of time spent) could be calculated. For various reasons (see Table A1), this was not possible with the data provided by FFAs. The result was retention of four FFAs with sufficiently robust data to proceed to Step 4 in the analysis.

Step 4: Calculate Cost Per Resource Family (Pre-Certification and Training) and Cost Per Service Day (Post-Certification)

There is an important distinction between pre-certification activities and post-certification activities. The pre-certification activity costs are meaningfully expressed as a *per-family* cost. For the purpose of this study, we asked:

- How much does it cost to recruit, assess, and approve a resource family?
- How much does it cost to train a resource family?

Some cost studies report lump sums (total costs), but this is not meaningful or practical because lump sums are without context and leave the reader asking, “So what?” In contrast, a per-family cost provides a means to compare and gauge whether costs seem reasonable.

Following certification, resource families are available to provide a service (i.e., foster care/adoption) to children in need. Thus, for the purpose of this study, we asked:

- What is the cost-per-day to support and retain resource families?

Need for a Proxy Variable⁴⁸

Reliable data regarding resource family entry into the system were not available. Thus, the research team turned to child data within CWS/CMS. Given the emphasis on child placement and tracking the child’s history, the administrative data contained valid child placement dates sufficient to recreate historical status with resource families. However, this proxy variable is certainly more conservative because it relies upon:

- *Resource families new to providing care in FY 2013–2014*: a resource family that provided care for the first time during FY 2013–2014 (new resource family), as defined by at least one child placed in-home at some point from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014.
- *Resource families continuing to provide care in FY 2013–2014*: a resource family that provided care in an earlier fiscal year, and also provided care during FY 2013–2014 (continuing resource family), as defined by at least one child placed in-home at some point prior to July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014, AND at some point during July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014.

The robust nature of the child data facilitated calculation of a proxy variable for new resource families, continuing resource families, and for days of service. Again, these calculations are conservative because *days of service* reflects actual days in care (rather than the number of days *available* for placement).⁴⁹

At this point in the calculations, one of the remaining small FFAs was not included because there were no new resource families produced in the proxy variable calculation for this FFA. The end result for the purpose of this report is displayed in Table A2.

Table A2. Final study documentation status

Agency	Pre-Certification Cost per Resource Family?	Training Cost per Resource Family?	Post-Certification Cost per Service Day?	Retain for Study?
DCFS	Yes	No (see below; contracted out)	Yes	Yes, but costs are an underestimate because clerical and director-level staff were not provided and ODCs were not broken out (so we do not know if the typical ODC line items are included). A 10% indirect cost was applied to the total because indirect was not included.
PS-MAPP Contractors (<i>Training Activity Category</i>)	No	Yes	No	Yes, but use proxy measure (<i>New Resource Family</i> variable) in order to provide a more accurate comparison to FFA training costs.
FFA 1 (mid-size)	Yes	Yes	Yes, and provided actual amount of time x FTE per activity category.	Yes
FFA 2 (mid-size)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FFA 3 (small)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FFA 4 (small)	No	No	Yes	No. Insufficient data to retain for cost analysis – no “new” Resource Families.

Many FFAs found it challenging to distinguish between hours spent on recruitment and assessment/approval activities. In addition, DCFS staff activities and line item expenditures broke out into “pre-certification” and “post-certification.” Therefore, the cost analysis results are reported in the following sections:

- Pre-certification: assessment and approval (with a note that recruitment costs are aggregated here as well)
- Training
- Post-certification: placement

Limitations

Because this was a pilot study conducted with incomplete cost information, as detailed in the body of the report (see pages 46-47), all indications of differences in costs between DCFS and FFAs should be considered tentatively, and in the context of the limited cost data that was analyzed, as detailed in this section.

Summary of Cost Analysis Findings

How much does it cost to recruit, assess, and approve a Resource Family? The cost study examined pre-certification cost per family. Pilot study data suggest that there is no meaningful difference between DCFS and FFA cost per family to recruit, assess, and approve families.

How much does it cost to train a resource family? The cost study examined the training cost per family. Recall that the proxy variable for “new resource family” was applied to the PS-MAPP contractor (The Community College Foundation) in order to provide a meaningful comparison with FFAs. Keeping this caveat in mind, preliminary data suggest there is no meaningful difference between The Community College Foundation and FFA cost per family to train resource families.

How much does it cost to support a resource family for 12 months? The cost per service day was examined for resource families (DCFS and FFA) that provided care to a child at any point during FY 2013–2014. Here we found a difference in cost: costs were greater for FFAs than for DCFS.

In order to provide context, the full-time equivalent (one full-time staff person) was calculated in order to determine the staff ratio for resource families:

- The DCFS ratio was one full-time staff person for every 79 resource families.
- The sample FFA ratio was one full-time staff person for every 8 resource families.

Examination of both cost per service hour and staffing ratios confirms feedback provided by the FFAs in focus groups, indicating that they are:

- available and on-call to resource families 24/7;
- able to spend much more time with resource families; and
- able to provide more personalized attention to resource families.

Feedback from DCFS staff provided in focus groups was also confirmed. Specifically, the data indicate:

- caseloads are too high;
- staff are overworked; and
- staff would like to provide more personalized service, but heavy caseloads make this difficult to do.

Thus, the reason FFA cost per service hour is higher is simple: FFAs provide more personalized attention and support to resource families post-certification. This finding is borne out in the staffing ratio per resource family and in focus groups with staff. It is therefore to be expected that a ratio of one FTE for every eight resource families is going to cost more than a ratio of every one FTE for every 79 resource families.

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⁴⁶ The cost study subcontract was executed in December, allowing only six months for the cost analysis. Thus, the truncated study timeline posed a substantial challenge. Non-profits are generally mistrustful when asked to provide confidential financial information (including salaries/pay grades). Building trust and confidence in the process requires a lengthier period, one that the current study did not allow for.

⁴⁷ Unfortunately, time-motion documentation was not allowable under the current study parameters. During the first meeting with the ACHSA, the evaluation team was made aware of severe constraints upon staff time that prohibited site visits to conduct individual key stakeholder interviews. In the absence of the “gold standard,” the cost analysis team considered proxy measures that could be administered in conjunction with the evaluation team’s process and outcome data collection efforts.

⁴⁸ The plan (based upon review of the CWS variable list) was to calculate:

- the number of resource families certified in FY 2013–2014 (new resource families); and
- the number of resource families certified in an earlier fiscal year, and still available for placement in FY 2013–2014 (continuing resource families).

The number of new resource families would be generated and cost per resource family calculated in order to answer Research Questions 1 and 2. In order to answer Research Question 3, the number of days in which new and continuing resource families were available for placement would be generated, and a cost per day calculated. However, the resource family database was received at the end of May. At this point, UCLA had completed what QA was possible in the truncated period from the time they received the data. Receipt of the CWS data from DCFS near the end of the study left little more than 30 days until the report’s due date. The cost analysis team had prepared programming language based upon review of the CWS variable list. Upon testing the programming language developed for the resource family certification dates and hold dates, anomalies emerged, in that “certification dates” routinely occurred after hold dates. Review of the data revealed that the “certification date” variable is actually a “status date” variable that reflects the current status of the resource family (whether the resource family is currently certified). For the purpose of placing children, this is an entirely appropriate use of the CWS system. For the purpose of conducting archival data analysis, finding a variable reflecting first date of certification presented a serious challenge.

⁴⁹ The child placement dates (start and end date) were listed by child ID, resource family, and FFA. The robust nature of the child data facilitated calculation of a proxy variable for new resource families, continuing resource families, and days of service. Again, these calculations are very conservative because “days of service” reflects actual days in care (rather than the number of days *available* for placement, as was the original plan). In other words, “Days of Service in FY 2013–2014” is equivalent to the number of days children were in the care of a resource family from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014.