



Foster Parent Work Group

Legislative Report in Accordance with Act 116

Lissa Schneckenburger, *Chair*, Foster Parent and VFAFA Member

Karen Shea, DCF Family Services Deputy Commissioner

Why This Matters

- DCF Family Services is responsible for children who come into state custody due to child abuse and neglect or due to behavior challenges (including delinquency)
- Currently, there are over 1,300 children in DCF custody
- Of those children, over 1,000 are in foster care (kin or other)
- DCF Family Services can not effectively serve children in state custody without the support and availability of foster parents.
- Foster parents are core to our ability to fulfill our mandate

Background

- ▶ Last session S.189 proposed a Foster Parent Bill of Rights
- ▶ After hearing testimony on the proposed bill, the legislature created a working group that was to meet three times and submit a report around several areas identified in the Bill:
 - ▶ Access to DCF on weekends/evenings
 - ▶ Access to DCF records about a particular child or foster family
 - ▶ Scheduling of court-orders visits and appointments with DCF
 - ▶ Fear of reprisal for refusal of a placement or raising concerns about DCF or the foster care system
 - ▶ Regional differences identified in the State's foster care system

Work Group Composition:

- ▶ Lissa Schneckenburger, *Chair*, Foster Parent, and VFAFA Member (VT Foster Adoptive Family Association)
- ▶ Amy Brady, Voices for Vermont's Children
 - *Ridmi Coe, Youth Advocate
 - Hon. Brian Gearson, Chief Superior Judge
 - *Brenda Hamlin, Kin Foster Parent, VFAFA Member
 - Barb Joyal, DCF Family Services System of Care Unit Director
 - *Erinn Rolland-Forkey, Foster Parent and VFAFA Member
 - Karen Shea, DCF Family Services Interim Deputy Commissioner
 - Karen Vastine, Senior Advisor to the DCF Commissioner
- ▶ Additionally: David Kennedy, Guardian ad Litem Coordinator; Jim Forbes, DCF; Leslie Wisdom, DCF; Lindsay Barron, DCF

* Denotes Gubernatorial Appointee

Introduction/Process

- ▶ The work group met three times as part of its official charge and held additional meetings to continue its work.
- ▶ The group followed the topical headings recommended in Act 116 in its meeting discussions which generated additional ideas.
- ▶ The group primarily arrived at agreements and recommendations using a consensus model.
- ▶ There are some concepts named in the report that are still being developed. As such they were named with that qualification.

General Conclusions

- ▶ Improve communication between DCF and foster parents was identified as a top priority.
- ▶ There were several topics where everyone agreed on best practice; but it was clear that creating new expectations or reinforcing existing expectations with a bill of rights without adding resources could be counter-productive.
- ▶ The group supports establishing a bill of right in policy or legislation this biennium as a vehicle to memorialize our valued relationship.
- ▶ Use existing survey results or administer a new survey to foster parents that could provide a needed state-wide perspective on what improvements are needed.
- ▶ Some members suggested the possible need for an independent voice.

Next Steps

There will be an on-going working group focused on the issues identified by the legislative group comprised of foster parents, DCF staff, and other stakeholders. They will be tasked with reviewing the prior work and creating a workplan going forward.

The Work Ahead

Re-building relationships and trust between DCF staff and Foster Parents (FP)

- Focus on strategies that can be used to exercise sensitivity around the uneven relationship between FPs and DCF staff
- Create and articulate a process for FPs to share safety concerns.
- Develop an anonymous method for sharing feedback.

The Work Ahead

Develop strategies to increase communication between FP and DCF

- Determine ways to include foster parents in planning throughout the case;
- Develop checklist for social workers to use with FPs to aid consistent communication
- Develop website content to support info sharing that include Frequently Asked Questions
- Review and revise existing policies to facilitate strong communication and support to foster parents

The Work Ahead

Include FP voice in current policy initiatives and discussions including

- ▶ Parent Child Contact Standards – Identified as a need by CHINS Working Group and being discussed in Justice for Children Best Practices Subcommittee
- ▶ Post Adoption Contact Agreements
- ▶ DCF's collaborative work with other stakeholders from the Child Protection System including: the Judiciary, the Office of the Defender General, the Association of State's Attorneys and Sheriffs, Guardian Ad Litem etc.

Conclusion

- ▶ The process of coming together was an invaluable one and an important first step.
- ▶ Much work still needs to be done, however, the continuing work group has met and scheduled more meetings.
- ▶ The report and its goals have been shared with DCF staff; it was met with a positive reception and interest in joining the on-going workgroup.