Refocus on Title IV-E: Agency/University Partnerships That Train Foster Parents

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The Training Resource Center at the University of Kentucky offers the following statement about Title IV-E Partnerships:

> "Title IV-E Child Welfare Agency/University Partnerships have been developed around the country to develop programs in social work education which prepare undergraduate and graduate students for work in public child welfare, as well as to provide high quality in-service training to practitioners in public child welfare agencies. These partnerships have been formed to guide the use of Title IV-E funds in creative ways that bear the intent of the federal legislation while meeting the unique needs of each state." (www.uky.edu/SocialWork/cswe/)

This is most certainly true, however, what is often missing from this discussion is the corresponding development of IV-E Agency/University Partnerships that provide training and education to foster parents, adoptive parents and other providers. A fair amount of research has examined and extolled Agency/University social worker training (Jones & Okamura, 2000); (Fox, Burnham, Barbee & Yankeelov, 2000); (Tracy & Pine, 2000); (Hopkins, Mudrick & Rudolph, 1999); (Rose, 1999); (Briar-Lawson, Schmid & Harris, 1997); (Breitenstein, Rycus, Sites & Kelley, 1997); (Fox, Burnham, & Miller, 1997); (Risley-Curtiss, McMurtry, Loren, Gustavsson, Smith & Faddis, 1997), yet although there is some research on the impact, importance and effectiveness of foster parent training (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000) (Burry, 1999); (Fees, Stockdale, Crase, Riggins-Caspers, Yates, Lekies, Gillis-Arnold, 1998); (Lee & Holland, 1991); (Boyd & Remy, 1978), far less attention and inquiry has been directed toward the use of IV-E Partnerships that train foster parents.

We know of course that today in the United States, there are hundreds of thousands of children who have been removed from their homes due to reasons of abuse and/or neglect, and it is foster parents who are given the immense task of living with, and caring for, these children. Bear in mind:

> "foster parents are a valuable but often neglected resource, both for child welfare agencies and the children they serve. They are increasingly being asked to fill a variety of roles – including nurturer, disciplinarian, therapist, case manager, recruiter, mentor to birth parents, member of the permanency planning team and potential adoptive parent – and to care for children with increasingly complex and deep-seated emotional, behavioral and medial problems." (Christian, 2002, p 8)

Although not new news to child care professionals, the US General Accounting Office (1989), has notably "found a consensus among foster care professionals…that a lack of support services and positive recognition of foster parents are major factors causing difficulties in recruiting and retaining foster parents." (p. 14). One of the items cited was insufficient foster parent training. Again, "children in foster care spend more time with foster parents than with any other representatives of the child welfare system, yet foster parents are the least trained, prepared, and supported." (p. 17) The GAO continues by stating, "social service agencies need to treat foster parents with respect and accord status to the foster parent role…[and] social service agencies need to establish a working partnership among foster parents, birth parents, potential adoptive parents, foster children, and themselves." (1989, p. 14) Left unsaid is the role and importance of other partnerships, namely, opportunities available through Title IV-E. Fifteen years after the GAO report, which interestingly was more a call to evaluate training practices as much as it was a call to identify training practices, a great deal of work is still needed to both illuminate foster parent training, and discuss the contributions of these partnerships.

Considered collectively, child welfare training has similar goals: fundamentally, both social worker and foster parent training seek to improve recruitment and retention, promote optimal practices in public child welfare, and improve systems and the lives of children and families. Just like training is construed by social worker training partnerships as an important avenue for professional development, the training of foster parents can likewise be conceived. Similarly, the limitations experienced by social worker training partnerships with respect to challenging work environments, burnout, the importance of supervision, and other variables are likewise faced by foster parent partnerships, which have their own unique set of limitations. These include, the relationship between foster parent and agency employees, family and work obligations, inclusion in case planning, foster child behavior, and working with biological families (Denby, Rindfleisch & Bean, 1999); (Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka & Russell, 1998). Taken together, these are all questions that Title IV-E programs, be they social worker or foster parent focused, can and should tackle together.

Focusing for a moment on IV-E Agency/University Partnerships that train foster parents, there are a number of basic questions that should be answered before a place is set at the collective IV-E table. These include:

> Collectively in the US, which states, counties or local catchments provide training to foster parents, adoptive parents and other providers through a Title IV-E Agency/University Partnership?
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> For those IV-E Agency/University Partnerships that train caregivers, are both pre-service and in-service training provided?
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> Who are the partners, and with particular emphasis on the University portion of the equation, what types of colleges/universities are involved? Are schools of social work partnering, or perhaps local community colleges?
>
> In what form does this training take place: are college credits as well as continuing education units (CEU) extended to participants?

What training, if any, is offered via alternative delivery or distance learning for participants that are unable to attend training due to work, family and other constraints?

Case Study: New Hampshire

Foster parent training in the State of New Hampshire is provided through a contract between the College for Lifelong Learning (CLL), and the New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). This collaboration is entitled "The Education and Training Partnership" (E&TP). CLL is a four-year higher education institution geared toward adult learners and is a member of the University System of New Hampshire. DCYF is the child welfare arm of the New Hampshire State Department of Health and Human Services. The Education and Training Partnership provides competency-based training with the goal of "enhancing the quality of care for children in placement through education of foster parents, adoptive parents and staff."

Funded through Title IV-E of the US Social Security Act with a match from the College for Lifelong Learning, education and training opportunities are extended statewide to foster and adoptive parents, DCYF staff, and staff at residential childcare facilities and private agencies that serve children in placement. These agencies include over 30 IV-E eligible residential childcare facilities throughout the state, as well as Casey Family Services, Lutheran Social Services, Easter Seals Society of NH, and NFI, North, Inc.

There are currently three programs that encompass training available to New Hampshire caregivers through this partnership. Foundations for Fostering (FFF) is a 21-hour pre-service curriculum for prospective foster parents, NH DCYF Adoption Essentials (AE) is a 24-hour pre-service curriculum for prospective adoptive parents, and Caregiver Ongoing Training (COT), is an in-service training program available to all caregivers and eligible staff. All trainings are competency-based, and in the case of COT, trainings are a mixture of both continuing education units (CEU) and college credit courses, and distance-learning courses including online/interactive options are available.

Some important considerations: FFF and AE are taught primarily by individuals with training skills and often with experience as a foster and/or adoptive parent. As an adult-oriented college with adjunct faculty, CLL is uniquely positioned to ensure training is balanced toward the needs of older learners, without being too academic, while also ensuring courses are relevant, experiential, and with measurable outcomes. In the case of Foundations for Fostering, formal program evaluation remains ongoing. Pre/post surveys have been given to a sizable sample of prospective foster parents, and follow-up interviews are conducted with those individuals that become licensed and have a foster placement six-months from the conclusion of training.

Conclusion

At a basic level, it is important, for universities in particular, to ask are "they contributing to the public good, [and] using their vast knowledge and expertise to improve the health and well-being of children and families." (Deutsch, p. 14) In essence, the question begs colleges and universities to consider how they are responding to the needs of their states and communities (Rahmeier, 1998), and Title IV-E Partnerships, in all forms, are an excellent collaboration to be celebrated. An interesting focus for these questions is the recent Federal Child and Family Service Review, conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. A noteworthy question was posed to States during the Self Assessment (D2, Question 7), asking for information about the "process for ensuring that the State's trainings for staff, foster and adoptive parents, and providers convey the same messages and practice principles, and encourage staff, parents, and providers to work in partnership." The question can likewise be posed to the community of Title IV-E Partnerships: how can we improve the process for ensuring communication between social worker and foster parent partnerships? There is much to be done in this arena, and I would encourage more discussion and collaboration between and amongst social worker and foster parent training partnerships

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