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Tip Sheet

970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, Minnesota 55114 • 651-644-3036 • fax: 651-644-9848 • e-mail: mariezemler@nacac.org

Targeted Recruitment: The Most Effective Strategy

By Denise Goodman, Ph.D.

Denise Goodman is an independent consultant and trainer. This article is adapted from Recruitment, Training and Support: The Essential Tools of Foster Care, published by Family to Family: A Project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, March 1998.

Over the last several years, there has been a growing need for foster and adoptive families. More and more children are entering foster care, and many of them will never return to their birth families. As a result, agencies across North America face the challenge of finding both temporary and permanent homes for children. To meet this challenge, agencies must develop an innovative recruitment system that integrates three types of recruitment activities: general, child-specific, and targeted. Each approach has a valuable place in a well-rounded recruitment program, but Family to Family has found that targeted recruitment is the most effective in placing children.

General recruitment involves reaching mass audiences through media and public outreach programs such as public events, public service announcements on television and radio stations, billboards, foster care and adoption fairs, and booths at county fairs or sporting events. This is the most common recruitment method, but it is the least focused, commonly urging the audience to “open your heart to a child” or “save a young life.” Family to Family experience indicates that unsuitable applicants often respond to these methods, using limited staff time. Or, respondents may not be willing to take the particular kinds of children who need families.

General outreach is best when used to increase an agency's public profile and raise community awareness

of the continuing need for foster and adoptive families. Perhaps 15 percent of an agency's recruitment budget can be usefully spent on general recruitment.

Child-specific recruitment means developing an individualized plan for a particular child based on the child's background. It may include finding relatives or close friends who will provide a home for a child or teen they already care about. It is often used to find a family for a child with a disability or condition that requires special care. Cooperation from neighborhood service agencies can help recruiters locate an appropriate family. For medically needy children, support groups and associations related to the condition or disease can be an excellent resource.

Each child-specific recruiting case requires individualized planning, which is expensive. But special children deserve special treatment. Recruitment budgets might allocate 25 percent of available funds for this function.

Targeted recruitment focuses on the specific kinds of children and teens in the community who need temporary or permanent homes, as well as the pool of available families.

First, agencies must consider the age, gender, sibling status, and race or ethnic background of the children who need foster or adoptive families. Next, they must think about the children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs. What do the youngsters have in common? Can they be considered in groupings of needs? Are these groupings consistent over time? Are there trends or patterns of change? What will be required for foster or adoptive parents of each kind of child? Where is the need the most urgent? Can the population from each source be generalized in any way?

- If a majority of children coming into foster care are adolescents, for example, recruitment efforts can target families willing to foster several older children, perhaps through local schools, churches, gyms, or community centers.

- If certain neighborhoods have a high proportion of children in foster care, the agency can develop an outreach effort in those areas. Staff might send speakers to neighborhood centers, churches, public housing units, or PTA meetings, asking for help from families who can best care for the children.
- If medically fragile children are common in the community, agencies can send a speaker to a brown-bag lunch at a local university hospital, clinic, or medical school cafeteria, where prospective foster or adoptive parents already have experience with such children.

Next, agencies must assess the community. With a little research, workers can form a fairly complete picture of the community's potential to provide foster and adoptive families. Then they can tailor outreach and recruitment efforts to particular groups and areas.

Families have different financial means, religious and cultural identities, and educational backgrounds, as well as lifestyles, ages, values, housing circumstances (renters and owners), and organizational memberships. All of these can be factors in their suitability as foster or adoptive parents.

- Demographic and census information about the community can tell a great deal about the people who live in the area and where each kind of family lives. This data is available from the local library, planning department, or state census data center, and people in each place can help workers use and interpret the data. Or, the information is available online from the Census Bureau at www.census.gov.
- Does the data suggest the presence of families the agency may have previously overlooked as recruitment possibilities? These could include single-parent families, those with lower incomes or smaller homes, families with older adults, extended families, or households of unrelated people.
- What kind of families have worked successfully with the agency in the past? Are there common neighborhoods, professions, activities, organizational memberships, media choices, backgrounds? Can they be divided into "types"? Did they cite similar motivations in deciding to become a foster or adoptive family? For example, if the African American families the agency has already recruited include many two-parent military couples in their

30s, who have young children and are active in local churches, recruiters can logically target speakers for church socials, posters for military base bulletin boards, and notices for church and base newsletters.

- Recruiters can match groups with locations in the community, and then look for places with a potential for transmitting information—supermarket bulletin boards, workplace newsletters, child care centers, or churches. Who hangs out with teenagers—coaches, musicians, pizza-parlor owners? Tailored messages can reach them at the gym or the radio station.
- Agency staff should also talk to teenagers in their system about recruiting. Teenagers who have been placed successfully are likely to be vocal about who makes a good foster parent and will often recommend people they know.
- Recruiters should not wait for foster parents to volunteer again—they must ask them to do it, and to consider adopting. These parents can host "fosterware parties" for their friends and neighbors where they and agency staff members can speak persuasively about the need for foster parents and the joys and problems involved.
- Agencies must be culturally sensitive. Is the service area's demographic diversity reflected in the staff and board? Has the agency enlisted community leaders, gatekeepers, publications, places of worship, and other institutions to receive educational materials and become helpers? Are recruiting activities using appropriate messages? Are multi-lingual ads accurately and appropriately translated?

Targeted recruitment has proven to be the most effective in attracting the right kinds of families for the particular kinds of children and teens an agency has in its care. It merits perhaps 60 percent of the agency's recruitment budget.

Recruitment is full-time work that cannot be done as a sideline. It requires concentrated planning, action, and follow-up, and it requires pro-active effort on the agency's part. Agencies large and small must use all three kinds of recruitment techniques, but they should stress and invest in the targeted approach.

For more information, contact Denise Goodman at 1824 Snouffer Rd., Worthington, OH 43085; 614-436-6838; fax: 614-436-2580; e-mail: dagphd@aol.com. ✂