



September 2025

## How have some child protection agencies recruited and retained resource families?

The **recruitment and retention of resource families**<sup>1</sup> — caregivers of children who have been separated from their families (often called “foster families”) — is a critical and ongoing function for any child protection agency and its private providers.

While some jurisdictions outsource the recruitment and retention of resource families to private agencies, others take a hybrid approach. This brief profiles the strategies implemented in three jurisdictions: **New Jersey**, **Oklahoma**, and **Washington state**. These three agencies have successfully maintained over 75% rate of placement in family-based settings, over 30% in kinship placements, and are below the national average usage of congregate settings.

For more information about family-based settings and strategies for recruitment and retention across the country, please see: [What are family-based placements?](#) and [What are some strategies for finding and keeping resource families?](#)

### New Jersey<sup>2</sup>

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) [Child Protection and Permanency Division](#) used to contract with private providers for the recruitment and retention of resource parents. DCF perceived, however, that providers didn’t have a sense of urgency regarding permanency planning, and efforts to encourage providers to increase recruitment activities while also implementing new recruitment strategies fell short. As a result, DCF decided to end almost all of its resource family contracts with private providers (although the agency maintains a contract with [embrella](#) to host support services, appreciation events, peer support groups, mentoring, ongoing training opportunities, and a scholarship program for youth in foster care).

In 2022, DCF revised its resource family staffing structure, and made additional modifications in 2023 based on staff and stakeholder feedback, literature, and reviews of approaches taken by other jurisdictions. This new structure emphasizes specialized functions that offer clearly defined roles and responsibilities, manageable workloads, and individualized support for families. Each division local office has a resource family support unit dedicated to retaining kinship and non-kinship resource families by helping them through the licensing and renewal process, as well as providing ongoing advocacy. Each unit currently includes at least two resource family support workers, two home study staff, and a supervisor.

Additionally, each area office has an area resource family specialist who supervises a team of up to five resource family engagement specialists and two resource family trainers, in addition to providing resource policy and practice guidance, support, and consultation to their local office resource family support units. The team helps with the facilitation of kinship placements and maintaining sibling and kinship connections for children entering out-of-home care. If a kin placement cannot be identified at the time of placement, DCF matches the child with a non-kin resource family best suited to meet the child's needs, while continuing its search for kin. DCF also provides training to resource family applicants and works with the family to develop an individualized plan for ongoing training post-licensing.

The state office assumes responsibility for overall program management and centralized data collection to ensure consistency throughout the state in the practice of recruiting resource families, including those caring for children with specialized medical and behavioral needs. Local division offices design targeted county-level recruitment plans, as they are best suited to offer insight into the needs and challenges unique to the area. All recruitment plans are reviewed quarterly to evaluate outcomes and adjust strategies as needed.

### Recruiting families

New Jersey DCF strives to treat resource parents as valued and integral partners. The state has focused its recruitment efforts on homes capable and willing to care for children with specialized medical and behavioral needs, large sibling groups, and adolescents. The state recognized that this targeted focus required updated recruitment strategies, leading DCF to partner with Rutgers Business School to revamp its recruitment process. DCF also contracted with a marketing agency to launch a digital ad campaign which has nearly doubled the number of prospective resource parent inquiries. Other recruitment strategies the state has employed include market segmentation, which involves looking at the broad population of potential resource families, dividing them into subsets with common needs, interests, or characteristics, and then designing and implementing targeted messaging and outreach strategies to engage them.

For example, DCF partners with the [Human Rights Campaign's All Children-All Families](#) national recruitment initiative to increase the number of qualified resource families for youth who identify as LGBTQ+ by educating the adult LGBTQ+ community about opportunities to become a resource family. This is accomplished by improving the cultural competence among staff that recruit, develop, train, and support resource families. DCF also uses [Binti](#), a digital platform that connects prospective resource families to an online application portal for licensing and renewal. Binti also offers data-based reports that enable DCF to make data-driven decisions on recruitment and retention.

The state supports children and families in their own homes through prevention and family stabilization efforts, which may contribute to annual declines in children entering foster care. New Jersey also prioritizes placing children with kinship families, which has decreased the need for the utilization of non-kinship resource families. Of all children living in out-of-home placement, 48% are currently placed with kin and 37% are living with unrelated resource families.

### Retaining families

In addition to maintaining a sufficient number of resource families, DCF has emphasized that building ongoing, meaningful relationships with resource parents is vital to positive outcomes of children placed in those homes. DCF hosts annual retention events throughout the state to honor and acknowledge resource parents' dedication to the children and families in their community, in addition to quarterly town halls to

strategize with families on how best to address challenges and barriers they may encounter. DCF also has instituted a resource parent committee to recommend policy and practice changes needed to strengthen its partnership with resource families and enhance their overall experience.

Having dedicated resource family staff who are familiar with the strengths, skills, and needs of the agency's network of families, DCF can more quickly match children with appropriate families and support those resource parents over time. Resource parents are more likely to accept placement of children if they know they will be well-supported in caring for the child following placement. In New Jersey, a caseworker follows up with the child and the resource parent within five days after placement to troubleshoot any issues.

All resource families receive training using the [Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education curriculum](#) and other resources. In March 2021, members of the DCF youth council proposed improvements to the training curriculum aimed at helping resource parents offer a nurturing environment that facilitates healing. Recommendations included integrating youth perspectives into lesson topics, adding more anecdotes and case scenarios, making sessions more interactive, adding visual aids, and guiding resource parents on where to find additional educational resources.

DCF also launched a statewide initiative that provided resource families with training through the [Nurtured Heart Institute](#). The Nurtured Heart Approach training focuses on recognizing a child's strengths, reinforcing positive behavior, building resilience, and enhancing self-esteem. It provides caregivers with strategies to address challenging behaviors. In June 2021, the training was adopted as a mandatory supplement to the training curriculum for all prospective resource families and provided as a training course for licensed resource families.

New Jersey's resource families also can access [Mobile Response and Stabilization Services](#), which offers in-person, youth crisis intervention at any time within one hour. DCF expanded mobile response services for all children ages 3 to 17 entering foster care, or experiencing a change in placement, with the goal of aiding the child's transition, providing the resource parent with skills to support the child, and preventing a crisis that might cause placement disruption. When a mobile response dispatch is requested, a worker meets with the child that day or the following day, depending on the circumstances and the family's preference. The worker meets individually with the child to acknowledge the trauma the child is experiencing and discuss how they can work together to address any worries or challenges. At the outset, staff also meet with the caregivers to ensure they feel equipped to respond to challenging behaviors or circumstances. This initial visit helps to establish a relationship between the caregiver and the mobile response worker, with the hope that the caregiver may be more likely to ask for help before or during a crisis. The mobile response program can remain involved with the family for up to eight weeks, employing stabilization services and making referrals for additional treatment services as needed. The mobile response worker also can coordinate support for a child and caregiver already receiving mental or behavioral health services.

## Oklahoma<sup>3</sup>

In-house recruiters at [Oklahoma Human Services](#) (DHS) are responsible for recruiting families and guiding them through onboarding, which includes completing paperwork, contacting references, finalizing the background check, and conducting a home study<sup>4</sup> (which are contracted out to private providers). Upon approval, resource families are referred to a resource specialist who provides ongoing support services. DHS also contracts with private foster care agencies to recruit, assess, and approve some new families.

### Recruiting families

Oklahoma's faith community leads many efforts to recruit resource families. DHS partners with [111Project](#), which mobilizes churches to recruit and support resource and adoptive families. DHS also partners with [CarePortal](#), an online platform that connects caseworkers with local churches to support families in need. [America's Kids Belong](#), a grassroots movement focused on recruiting and retaining resource parents, built partnerships between the governor's office, the faith-based community, state agencies, tribal partners, and other community stakeholders to launch a statewide public outreach campaign — [Oklahoma](#)

[Fosters](#) — to engage communities and meet the need for more resource parents. Its website provides information for prospective and current resource, adoptive, and post-adoptive parents.

Data-driven reports have been instrumental in guiding Oklahoma's recruitment efforts. These DHS reports provide detailed data on placement trends, including out-of-county placements and children not placed with siblings. By analyzing placement data and identifying specific needs within counties, Oklahoma is working to reduce out-of-county placements and ensure children remain closer to their communities. This localized approach not only supports the well-being of children but also fosters stronger community ties and support networks for resource families. DHS also has hired consultants to develop targeted resource family recruitment strategies to better serve adolescents with complex needs, who often face the greatest placement challenges.

To further boost recruitment efforts, Oklahoma has introduced a monetary incentive program for current resource parents, as well as DHS employees who successfully recruit new resource families. The model grants the recruiter and the recruited family a \$1,000 bonus on the approval and placement of a new resource family. DHS also has worked to streamline the resource family approval process, which now takes 60 days, including 27 hours of training and a home study. All kinship families undergo the same process, although children may be placed with kin as soon as the background check, house assessment, and references clear — usually within a day. The [OKBenefits portal](#) allows families to upload and access documents and track their assessment progress, including outstanding steps. Among Oklahoma children in foster care, 79% are in a family-based placement. Of these, 31% are with kinship caregivers and 48% are with non-kinship resource families.

### Retaining families

The Oklahoma Fosters media campaign launched to increase awareness of the need to recruit resource and adoptive families. The [campaign's website](#), however, now is also a central tool for retaining resource families, including information related to tribal foster care, ongoing training, support groups, filing travel claims, and links to additional resources such as the [Office of Client Advocacy](#), which provides a feedback loop between DHS and resource parents. The site also offers the option to send resource families' information to the Foster Care and Adoption Support Center where they can access additional support and training. Soon, the center will offer an app that will automate benefit access for resource families.

Oklahoma began piloting the [Mockingbird Family model](#) in June 2024 to improve retention through robust and close-knit support networks of resource families. Originally developed in Seattle by [The Mockingbird Society](#), this model features an experienced resource parent who supports and mentors eight to 10 other resource families within a 15-mile radius. The initial launch consisted of two groups, with each mentoring resource parent supporting four resource families. This initiative is expected to reduce the strain on individual resource parents and increase the overall stability of placements.

Oklahoma also administers the [Foster Parent Mentoring Program](#), developed by the [Foster Care & Adoptive Association of Oklahoma](#). This program aims to retain new resource families by connecting them with experienced mentors who provide guidance and support. The mentors, who currently serve or have served as resource parents, offer invaluable insights and experience, helping new resource families navigate the complexities of foster care.

All resource families in Oklahoma receive an exclusive benefits card through DHS that offers discounts and bonuses at participating businesses. The University of Oklahoma's [National Resource Center for Youth Services](#) provides training on topics identified by resource families, as well as delivering peer support.

## Washington<sup>5</sup>

In 2021, a [class action complaint](#) against the [Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families](#) (DCYF) representing a group of children in foster care, highlighting systemic deficiencies, particularly in the care of children with behavioral health challenges and developmental disabilities. A 2022 settlement agreement set forth a plan for DCYF to improve support for children in foster care by prioritizing swift

reunification with their families, laying out specific provisions impacting recruitment and retention of resource families, many of which already have been implemented.

### Recruiting families

In keeping with these provisions, DCYF established a unit dedicated to identifying and engaging extended family members and friends of children in foster care to increase the number of kinship caregivers. The agency's licensing division created two specialized teams: one to support kinship caregivers and the other to support non-relative resource families. This ensures a more tailored approach to licensing, addressing unique needs of different types of caregivers. The non-relative resource family must meet broader child welfare standards than is required for kinship caregivers, as the children placed usually are unknown to the resource family. New kinship licensing standards went into effect July 2025.

DCYF also developed a contract and licensing category for professional therapeutic resource parents, which enables DCYF to collaborate with child-placing agencies to offer children with complex needs a nurturing family environment. Professional therapeutic resource parents are highly trained in culturally responsive, trauma-informed care. Of all the Washington children foster care, 94% are in a family-based setting — of which 59% are with kinship caregivers and 35% with non-kinship resource families.<sup>6</sup>

DCYF has a targeted recruitment specialist in each of its six regions to oversee, facilitate, and coordinate recruitment efforts, guided by the [Caregiver Recruitment and Retention Program](#). The state's [Be the Way Home](#) outreach campaign educates prospective resource families on the priorities of reunification and placement with kinship caregivers, while promoting the following aims:

- Increase recruitment of diverse, quality caregivers that can meet the needs of children in foster care and understand that foster care ideally is temporary.
- Keep children within their community and with siblings when placed in foster care.
- Engage in data-driven targeted recruitment to increase diversity among caregivers, as well as caregivers who can accommodate sibling groups, children who are medically fragile, and children with extensive emotional, behavioral, and physical needs.

DCYF also has been employing strategies that target placement for adolescents, including outreach to: school staff (teachers, bus drivers, librarians, substitute teachers, support personnel); parents who have children in middle, junior high, and high school; faith- and community-based organizations with children and family programs. The state also launched a social media campaign targeting recruitment of resource families for specific demographics, including adolescents and children with complex needs. Resource parents experienced in caring for children with complex needs guide the recruitment efforts. DCYF also developed a recruitment campaign targeting experienced resource parents to become therapeutic resource parents, including outreach to community agencies that offer services to children and families with complex needs.

DCYF contracts with several other partners to support recruitment efforts. The Statewide Foster Care Resource Information Center, provided through [Northwest Resource Associates](#), maintains a database for tracking calls, questionnaires, and inquiries, provides a case management system to support contracted service providers<sup>7</sup>, and operates a statewide recruitment hotline for resource families. In January 2023, DCYF also launched the [Washington Caregiver Application Portal](#), an online platform that simplifies the application process for prospective and existing resource parents. The portal supports multiple languages, allows for electronic documentation and signatures, and enables DCYF staff to manage paperwork, background checks, and training online. Created through Binti, the portal aims to reduce the time required to qualify caregivers, decrease placement disruptions, and increase the number of licensed kinship caregivers, ultimately improving outcomes for children in foster care.

### Retaining families

DCYF contracts with community partners for caregiver support functions, including support groups, one-on-one assistance with licensing, mentoring, and resource development and sharing. The [Alliance CaRES](#)

[Program](#) provides parent mentors, guidance, resources, and support groups on various topics, as well as learning opportunities through the [Alliance for Professional Development, Training, and Caregiver Excellence](#). Trainings and individual support sessions assist resource families caring for kin, LGBTQIA+ youth, and children with complex medical needs. DCYF also contracts with the state's Department of Social and Health Services' Division of Research and Data Analysis to conduct an [annual resource parent survey](#) to inform recruitment and retention efforts.

DCYF also has been working to [expand the Mockingbird Family model statewide](#), specifically to serve children with complex needs through more intensive therapeutic, case management, and health services.

DCYF's recent implementation of a [new seven-level caregiver supports model](#) better aligns payment rates for resource families with the specific needs of the children under their care. This model also enhances retention by offering education advocacy, health coordination, childcare, and crisis support, based on the complexity of the child's needs. By increasing access to resources and providing more robust supports — particularly for kinship caregivers — the program ensures resource families are better prepared and supported, reducing burnout and placement disruptions.

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms "resource caregivers" and "resource families" are used rather than "foster parents" and "foster families" to reflect their broader and more inclusive role. In addition to providing safe and loving family-based care, they also support reunification with the child's birth family, when appropriate. Whether relatives, fictive kin, or non-relatives, resource caregivers are instrumental in helping maintain a child's family connections and offering support to the child's biological family during the time of separation.

<sup>2</sup> Email communication with Christine Norbut Beyer, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, on August 23, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Interview in June 2024 with Oklahoma Human Services staff: Stacey Bates, Foster Care and Adoptions Programs Administrator; Lauren Tatum, Deputy Director of Placement Programs and Foster Care/Adoption Field; and Robyn Malone, Assistant Deputy Director.

<sup>4</sup> The term foster care "home study" refers to a comprehensive assessment used to evaluate a prospective foster family's home and lifestyle, determining whether they can provide a safe, stable and supportive environment that protects the well-being of children in foster care. The process includes interviews, background checks, a home inspection, and training verification to ensure the home is a suitable fit for a child.

<sup>5</sup> Interview in June 2024 with Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families staff: Codie Veitenheimer, Caregiver Recruitment and Retention Program Supervisor and Support Program Manager.

<sup>6</sup> Email communication with Ruben Reeves, Assistant Secretary Licensing Division, Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families, on June 13, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> The term private "service providers" refers to agencies that contract with State/County child protective services agencies to provide a range of support services to children and families involved with the child welfare system.

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

**P** 206.282.7300

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org

