



August 7, 2019

The Honorable Kate Brown
Governor of Oregon
900 Court Street, Suite 254
Salem, Or 97301

Subject: Introduction, Invitation and Share of Ideas for Improving Oregon's Child Welfare system

Dear Governor Kate Brown:

We are writing you today to offer our support, experiential insight and thought-partnership from a dedicated group of current and former foster parents with lived experience and passion for addressing Oregon's Foster Care System crisis.

Foster Parents Together (FPT) is an unincorporated grassroots group connected from inside the child welfare system which includes current and former foster parents, adoptive parents and guardians. We share a strong desire to get actively involved in making the foster care system better for Oregon's most vulnerable citizens. Since Summer 2018, our online presence has grown to ~270 members. We host calls, meetups, and discussions with families, professionals and leaders in Oregon. We have an email list and social media group online.

Our group has ideas to offer for system improvements with greater focus on the best interest of Oregon's children. We would like to see a system that better supports the role of foster parents and case workers, and one where parents have more choices.

Among ideas brought forward by participants, here is a sampling:

Table 1.0

Item	Suggestion	Child(ren) in Foster Care	Biological Parent(s)	Foster Parents	System
1.1	Ensure reasons for removal of child(ren) are solid (i.e. a formal written process with checks and balances spelled out). Emphasize in-home supports for biological parent(s) first unless the child(ren) are imminent danger necessitating immediate removal. Decision should come from 2 or more case managers in agreement where at least 1 is a seasoned case manager or supervisor, who have each interviewed the biological parent(s). Unless there is urgent threat of imminent harm thereby necessitating immediate removal of child(ren), a larger investigation with access to medical and school records should be conducted.		X		X
1.2	Offer information to biological parent(s) on all available options to them, immediately when children come in to care – especially if they already have child(ren) in the DHS system, and/or have given birth to another child that would likely be placed in foster care. Relative care, guardianship, open adoption, and closed adoption, should be discussed and the option for the biological parent(s) to be involved in that choice early on should be offered.		X		X
1.3	Enforce Federal AFSA law. Facilitate getting the child(ren) in care into a permanent situation within 15-18 months. Work both plans – reunification with biological parent(s), and, termination of parental rights, simultaneously.	X	x		X

Item	Suggestion	Child(ren) in Foster Care	Biological Parents)	Foster Parents	System
1.4	Identify biological parent(s) early who fail to make significant progress in moving toward reunification. Remove the loophole that allows the plan to extend timelines past federal guidelines. Define significant progress and communicate that to the biological parent(s) when child(ren) enter care.		X		X
1.5	Require DHS to review and factor biological parent(s)' patterns of behavior and past history, especially recent past history, when considering reunification; also recognize people who have made mistakes can change/improve, offer opportunity to provide evidence/explanation thereof..		X		X
1.6	Ensure fast track with a solid way for biological parent(s) to meet court demands within 3 months especially for children ages 0-5, returning child(ren) to biological parent(s) if criteria met satisfactorily. There are several models for how to do this (incl. other states). NOTE: Wait times between court appearances can be long due to overloaded system, thus child(ren) can end up spending a longer time in foster care.	x	X		X
1.7	Define "Minimally Adequate" in relation to biological parent(s) response and follow through. Currently there is no definition, and the "bar" that biological parent(s) are measured by is not clear and needs definition for the biological parent(s) and the system.		X		X
1.8	Define "Reasonable Efforts" - put responsibility on biological parent(s) to make meaningful change happen. There are times when DHS may be extending efforts too far in shoring up biological parents and returning child(ren) where reunification FAILS when supports are removed. Establish a list of requirements for biological parent(s) to complete, providing the list with resources and information to complete the list, along with a specific timeline that includes check-ins with the case worker; a reasonable effort that should be sufficient.		X		X
1.9	Allow foster parents / families to be legal parties to the case unless there is a compelling reason to exclude. Allow foster parents / families a legal seat at the table. Foster parents / families should have the opportunity, ability, training and encouragement to submit a report. This report should be given due weight as a weighted recommendation by the judge in evaluating how goals and situations are progressing with the child(ren) and interaction(s) with their biological parent(s). Offer foster parents / families the opportunity to suggest options and input for what is in the child(ren)'s best interest Link: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). Determining the best interests of the child. WA DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Last viewed at: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/best_interest.pdf	x		X	X
1.10	If/when reunification fails with biological parent(s) in a short period of time, the child(ren) may have had an attachment to the previous foster parents / family and could do better if reunited with the previous foster parents / family, but such opportunities are missed, causing further developmental setbacks and struggle; consider implementing protocols for consistency of care for child(ren)'s welfare to (re)integrate with previous foster parents / family, if all parties including the child(ren) and the previous foster parents / family agree.	X	X	X	X
1.11	If/when child(ren) are reunified with the biological parent(s), the "clock" is restarted and the ability for the foster parent(s) / family who had caretaker status to have a seat at the table for adoption ends. Consider preserving the time accumulated without resetting the "clock", keeping the current caretaker status for 6-18 months after the child(ren) leave, giving more options to resolve the case in a timely manner.	x	x	X	X

1.12	Fully fund the pilot attorney program that limits cases to 80 and pays the attorneys to specifically do their job representing child(ren) in care..	x			x
1.13	Fully and consistently fund and/or provide Child Care or reimbursement for all foster parents / families especially for child(ren) ages 0-5.	x		x	x
1.14	Provide drop-in daycare at DHS branches in every county while foster parents / families are seeking to find appropriate childcare.	x		x	x
1.15	Caseloads of 11.8 per case worker. Current caseloads do not allow minimally adequate case management and good decision making.	x			x
1.16	Have an attorney with the case worker at all hearings to present the child(ren)'s cases to the court. Some case workers do not have the experience and expertise to represent complex cases to a judge.	x			x
1.17	Fund CASA so all children have the option for a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate). Encourage judges to give CASA input due weight as a weighted recommendation.	x			x
1.18	Develop and support quality in-state facilities, programs and/or solutions to serve the child(ren) at the appropriate, least restrictive level of care based on individual need(s) and person-centered planning as able.	x			x
1.19	Improve and increase training opportunities for foster parents / families for whom more information is needed on how the system works, how to navigate and access resources, where to go and how to advocate for help if one is not getting the responses needed to assist child(ren) in care.	x		x	
1.20	Provide better supports for foster parents / families dealing with the child(ren) with challenges and/or special needs. Such supports would include paid peer / family support, paid respite and specific education and therapy(s) for child(ren) in care.	x		x	x
1.21	Provide resources and staffing to help foster parents / families develop access to a robust respite program with respite providers trained to serve the child(ren) – including teens with high CANS levels, compensated appropriately for the appropriate level of care.	x	x	x	
1.22	Allow foster parents / families to be invited to DHS meetings and have input into transitioning and case planning. Foster parents in general have lived with, provided care for, and come to know the child(ren) around-the-clock; foster parents' / families' observations and insights should be considered, given due weight. Foster parents' / families' emotional well-being should also be factored when it comes to transition planning and follow-through both for the child(ren) in care and other children in the foster home.	x		x	x
1.23	Therapists who understand trauma need to be more readily available for children. Child(ren)'s therapist recommendations for the child(ren) in planning transitions should be given due weight.	x	x	x	x
1.24	Foster Parent Ombudsman - Foster parents / families need a safe place to report difficulties or issues with caseworkers, or other issues going on in a case that they believe are not being addressed by the current worker or supervisor.			x	x

Foster Parent **recruitment and retention** happens largely by word of mouth. Sadly, many foster homes are closing and foster parenting has been dis-recommended by a number of former foster families to new people – for reasons that call attention to issues needing to be addressed in the interest of Oregon's children and families. When children are stuck in the Child Welfare system for long periods of time, even years, the impact on their development is significant and costly.

We must do better.

Below is a sampling of additional suggestions specific to recruitment and retention:

Table 2.0

Item	Suggestion	Child(ren) in Foster Care	Biological Parents	Foster Parents	System
2.1	Provide legal insurance to Foster Parents on a reimbursement basis.			X	X
2.2	Offer a State tax break for being a foster parent. This may attract more people to step up and be an active foster parent.			X	X
2.3	Any foster parent leaving the system should have an exit interview, so DHS can ensure they know why foster parents are leaving.			X	X

"Foster parents who feel isolated, without an effective voice, seem to be at risk of leaving."

- Oregon Foster Parent Customer Service Survey Lesson Learned (June 2018), page 8
<https://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/Documents/2019-APSR- Attachment-6.pdf>

Foster Parents Together community seeks an active role for improving Oregon's foster care system including but not limited to providing input and support on much needed improvements. Perhaps a few simple accommodations – such as hands-free telecommunications, remote video technology, online survey(s), and/or convenient scheduling – could reduce barriers and maximize opportunities for effective foster parent voice and participation. In addition, there may be situations where foster parents have insights or concerns that they would prefer to discuss in a confidential manner with someone outside of DHS, perhaps from the Governor's office, or a third party (i.e. survey data collection). We would be happy to assist with exploring feasible options. Direct communication to the group via social media or other means is also welcome.

We request a response from your team at the earliest opportunity, giving us guidance on how we can best connect with and support our state leadership in the transformation towards improving Oregon's Child Welfare system and more specifically, Oregon's foster care system.

Thank you for all that you are doing, your time and your consideration.

Sincerely,

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 Rosa Klein, Human Services. Policy Advisor, Office of Governor Kate Brown
 The Honorable Senator Sara Gelser
 The Honorable Representative Duane Stark

FOR REFERENCE:

Oregon Foster Parents' Bill of Rights

Or. Rev. Stat. § 418.648

A foster parent has the right to:

- (1) Be treated with dignity, respect, and trust as a member of a team, including respect for the family values and routines of the foster parent.
- (2) Be included as a valued member of a team that provides care and planning for a foster child placed in the home of the foster parent.
- (3) Receive support services, as resources permit, from the Department of Human Services that are designed to assist in the care of the foster child placed in the home of the foster parent.
- (4) Be informed of any condition that relates solely to a foster child placed in the home of the foster parent that may jeopardize the health or safety of the foster parent or other members of the home or alter the manner in which foster care should be provided to the foster child. The information shall include complete access to written reports, psychological evaluations and diagnoses that relate solely to a foster child placed in the home of the foster parent provided that confidential information given to a foster parent must be kept confidential by the foster parent, except as necessary to promote or to protect the health and welfare of the foster child and the community.
- (5) Have input into a permanency plan for a foster child placed in the home of the foster parent.
- (6) Receive assistance from the department in dealing with family loss and separation when the foster child leaves the home of the foster parent.
- (7) Be informed of all policies and procedures of the department that relate to the role of the foster parent.
- (8) Be informed of how to receive services and to have access to department personnel or service providers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- (9) Initiate an inactive referral status for a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 12 months, to allow a foster parent relief from caring for foster children.
- (10) Not be discriminated against on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age or disability.
- (11) Be notified of the foster parent's right to limited participation in proceedings in the juvenile court and provided with an explanation of that right.

Source(s):

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/foster-care-bill-of-rights.aspx>