FOCUS: Celebrating National Foster Care Month

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May/June 2012

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In 2004, foster care in Florida was in crisis. Children were sleeping in offices and conference rooms or moving from one home to another every 24 hours. Foster homes were over-capacity and urged to take even more children. Shelters were turned into placements and assessment centers were turned into shelters.

The Youth Law Center with the clinical program at Florida State University brought suit against the State of Florida and the Tallahassee child welfare agency to stop the abusive practice of having special needs teens sleep in the conference room of the Department of Children and Families. By 2007, that case was settled and the administration had changed. The new Secretary of Department of Children and Families, Bob Butterworth, met with the Youth Law Center and Jane Soltis of the Tampa-based Eckerd Family Foundation to discuss solutions to the problem. From that meeting the Quality Parenting Initiative, or QPI, was born.

Now almost five years and two secretaries later, QPI is a way of life in Florida and has been adopted by 18 counties in California. In Florida in particular, QPI represents a culture shift in the way that foster families work with other professionals as well as in the responsibilities foster families are expected and allowed to assume.

The principles behind QPI were simple.
- Foster parenting is a brand which creates a clear image and set of expectations in people's minds. That brand is neither positive nor reflective of reality.
- The negative connotations of the brand make recruitment and even retention difficult.
- To change the brand all participants in a child welfare system have to agree on what foster parents are expected to do and what they can expect from the foster parenting experience.
- This agreement should be summarized in a short, clear “brand statement” that can be easily shared.
- Once there is agreement, the system must change to be sure it supports those expectations rather than undermining them.
- These changes should be identified and implemented by the people whom they affect — foster parents, investigators, case managers, licensing workers, court staff and even, if possible youth and parents rather than only by administrators who, for all good intentions are removed from the process.
- The initial changes should be made as quickly as possible so that participants see results.
- Change is a continuous process.
- Only after substantial practice changes are accomplished can meaningful recruitment occur.

Unlike other initiatives, for better or worse, QPI did not prescribe a specific set of expectations or brand, nor did we suggest specific practice changes. The local child welfare community makes all of these decisions. Nevertheless, all of the QPI sites have identified similar characteristics of...
Caseworkers and foster parents don't have
in many areas foster parents were frustrated
example:
Changes in policy and practice range from
the small details of social worker — foster
parent interaction to major policy shifts. For
example:
In many areas foster parents were frustrated
by calls that weren't returned, voicemail
boxes that were full and supervisors who
seemed inaccessible. These communities
have required that all voice mail boxes
be cleared out regularly and developed a
standard message saying "If I do not return
your call within 24 hours or in time to help
you, please call my supervisor at xxx-xxxx."
The simple change from "you can call my
supervisor" to "please call" gave foster
parents permission to go to the next level
without fear of alienating caseworkers.
Now, several sites have gone farther and are
having foster parents and case managers
provide each other with phone numbers,
emails, supervisors' information, preferred
method of communicating and schedules at
the first visit. This saves time and frustration
for everyone and allows each person to get a
glimpse into the other's life.

Caseworkers and foster parents don't have
a chance to get to know each other or
understand the pressures that each faces.
Several sites have hosted QPI kickoffs
for staff and foster parents that include
games and other social activities. At one,
a foster parent and a caseworker each
read "a day in my life." Participants were
moved to tears by the thought of how much
responsibility each partner faced. At others,
foster parents recognize a case manager
who has been an outstanding partner while
case managers recognize a foster parent.
Both receive congratulatory letters from
top administration and one has even been
featured on the local news.

Foster parents feel frustrated when they
are asked to care for a child and work with
his or her parents, but told that all case
information is confidential and won't be
shared. In Florida and California, legal
opinions provided to foster parents and
agency staff clearly explain that almost all
information can be shared with a foster
parent. These opinions gave foster parents
access to the records they needed while
alleviating case managers' fears of invading
families' legally protected privacy.

Across the country children in foster care are
arbitrarily prohibited from participating in
"normal" activities for fear of regulations
or liability. In Florida, the current Secretary,
David Wilkins, had his staff review these
regulations to explode urban myths and
give foster families more freedom to include
these children in their families' plans. See
www.qpiflorida.com for the Secretary's
memo.

Foster parents get many hours of training
before they are licensed, but limited training,
when they most need it, after children
are placed in their homes. Florida QPI
developed a site that provides live web-
based training to foster parents when they
request it and that broadcasts local trainings
throughout the state. Because foster parents
are the best teachers of other foster parents,
the site has many video clips of foster
parents explaining how they meet common
challenges like making a new child welcome
or working with birth parents.

QPI Families
Secretary Wilkins and his wife Tanya, have
embraced the QPI principles whole heartedly.
In addition to the Secretary's policy changes,
Tanya Wikins is chairing a campaign to bring
statewide attention to the new brand. A
partnership between Department of Children
and Families and the Community Based Care
Agencies, assisted by the Youth Law Center
and the Eckerd Foundation, the campaign
encourages the whole community to work
together to support outstanding parenting for
children in out of home care.

We are lucky that George Sheldon, who,
as Department of Children and Families
Deputy for Operations and then Secretary
championed the creation of QPI is now
the Acting Assistant Secretary of the
Administration for Children and Families
in U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services. He has consistently been supportive
of the movement to recognize foster families
as full professional partners in the child
welfare system.

These are just a few of the dozens of
innovations developed and implemented by
QPI teams or at their suggestion. QPI shows
that equal and respectful partnership among
state and local child welfare, foster parents,
advocates, and youth and families can change
the lives of children.

For more information, visit www.qpiflorida.
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