

# Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy—Best Practice Engagement Project

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In July 2007, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare hosted a forum to develop carer recruitment strategies involving all foster care services across Victoria. Forum attendees included staff from the Victorian Department of Human Services' placement and support units, as well as representatives from non-government placement agencies throughout the state. The forum included presentations and workshops in relation to carer recruitment. In this article, the findings from two of the papers presented at the forum are discussed:

- the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy, and
- the Best Practice Engagement Project.

## Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy

The Centre has developed the Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy to strengthen their approach to carer recruitment and retention, and redress the shortage of foster carers across Victoria. As part of the strategy, consultants from SuccessWorks were engaged by the Centre to undertake preliminary research into the current status of foster care in Victoria, including factors affecting the placement of children, and incentives and deterrents to wanting to become or remain a foster carer. SuccessWorks director Dr Tricia Szirom and colleague John McDougall gave a presentation on their findings titled "Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy". Some of Tricia and John's findings include the following.

### *Significant factors in recruiting and retaining carers*

- Retention strategies need to take effect at four points in the life of a carer:
  - the period from the time a family contacts the agency until they are approved as a foster carer/family;
  - the period of time between approval as a foster carer and placement of children with them;
  - the period of time after children have been placed in the family; and
  - end of placement support and debriefing.
- Carers are more likely to continue caring when there is a financial package, which implies they want foster care to be more professionalised.
- Forty per cent of carers surveyed would consider taking back children they have previously cared for.
- Sixty-two per cent of past carers surveyed said they would consider returning to caring if systemic sources of dissatisfaction were addressed.
- Carers stay involved because of positive changes and outcomes for the child, and positive feedback from the child, professionals or parents.
- Disincentives to care included:

- lack of information provided about the child;
- the nature of the child;
- lack of worker continuity;
- lack of respite care;
- interference with personal life;
- financial drain;
- perceived lack of trust and respect for the carer role;
- fear of meeting the child's parents; and
- assessment processes that are perceived to be long and intrusive.
- Recruitment strategies that worked best included:
  - local campaigns;
  - consistently high local profile;
  - using young people; and
  - building relationships with community groups.

SuccessWorks consultants will also work closely with sector staff over the next year to implement the Best Practice Engagement Project (see below), which is a strategy for trialling and implementing effective ways of recruiting new carers. They will also develop new promotional materials in order to achieve their aim of enhancing carer recruitment and retention. For more information about SuccessWorks go to: [www.success-works.com.au](http://www.success-works.com.au)

## Best Practice Engagement Project (BPEP)

A significant initiative of the recruitment strategy will be to implement the Best Practice Engagement Project (BPEP). The Best Practice Engagement Project is a 12-month project involving ongoing collaboration and communication between foster care services in Victoria to identify and test potentially good practice ideas in foster care recruitment and retention. The process is facilitated at both statewide and local levels, with regional areas forming teams comprising key members from local foster care agencies and departments, who will meet on a regular basis to suggest practice ideas that can then be tested in the field. Statewide and regional forums will be held on a regular basis to enable teams to share information with each other about their own practice innovations.

The Best Practice Engagement Project's strategy is based on a method for achieving systems change initiated by health care and child welfare organisations in the US, known as the Breakthrough Series Collaborative. The Breakthrough Series Collaborative works on the principle of rapidly testing ideas, strategies and tools on a small scale in pilot sites, then sharing learnings from the tests with other teams using a dedicated Internet site, phone conferences and meetings. The most successful tools and strategies are then introduced into other regions. Ideally, the Breakthrough Series Collaborative leads to broad-ranging and sustainable practice improvements.

A pioneer of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative in the family welfare field is Casey Family Programs, whose head office is located in Seattle, Washington. Casey Family Programs have implemented a range of innovations in the sector using the Breakthrough Series Collaborative approach. Innovations are implemented from the ground up by staff who do the day-to-day work. This approach, which leads to small increments of change, differs from the systemic change necessary for bureaucratic structures.

### *How Breakthrough Series Collaboratives work*

1. A specific topic in child welfare (such as foster care recruitment) is selected.
2. The organisation convenes an expert panel with understanding and experience in the area, who then develop a framework for change that will guide the work of the teams.

3. Small groups of experts (the faculty) are formed to guide the ongoing work of the teams.
4. Small teams are formed so they can work quickly and efficiently. Teams include managers or supervisors, direct service providers or case workers, community partners and representatives from other systems, and constituents including foster carers, kinship carers or birth parents.

Over the 18 months it can take to complete a project, participants attend three learning sessions—two-day meetings where teams from all regions or jurisdictions come together to exchange ideas and plan small-scale tests of change to be implemented throughout their region. Teams are persuaded to only plan tasks that can easily be accomplished in a short timeframe, and encapsulate this idea with the slogan, “What can you do by next Tuesday?”

Facilitators from the service lead the teams, while faculty members mentor and guide them throughout the planning and testing of ideas for practice improvements, and the implementation of the most successful strategies. The teams test small-scale change through a “Plan, Do, Study, Act” cycle. This cycle provides a model for implementing and testing small-scale ideas for practice improvement in an efficient, timely way.

In order to test an idea for practice improvements, the Breakthrough Series Collaborative teams follow a number of steps:

1. Form a team, identify a target site, and plan a data collection strategy for testing change.
2. Share ideas for small practice improvements among teams.
3. Test ideas through a “Plan, Do, Study, Act” cycle.
4. Document the strategy and measure progress.
5. Implement successful change in the target site.
6. Spread successful changes throughout the agency.

Information from the tests are shared via a dedicated Internet site, which enables teams to test each other’s successful ideas in their own regions.

Casey Family Programs have developed a range of successful strategies using the Breakthrough Series Collaborative model, and have published reports at the conclusion of each Breakthrough Series Collaborative to describe the successful strategies and lessons learned from the strategies. This information is available on their website at: [www.casey.org/Resources/Projects/BSC](http://www.casey.org/Resources/Projects/BSC)

**The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare’s forum provided an exciting opportunity for participants to update their knowledge on the state of foster care recruitment in Victoria, and presented an innovative model for exploring new recruitment strategies and sharing information about what works with a network of statewide professionals in the sector.**

At the time of writing, **Dr Jenny Higgins** was a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.