FOSTER CARE IN MISSOURI:
Meeting the Needs of Children in the State's Custody

In 2001, approximately 805,000 children in the United States were in foster care.[1] The majority of children entering foster care have experienced prolonged and repeated abuse and neglect. Consequently, many have serious developmental, physical, and emotional problems and require numerous services to ameliorate their problems.[2,3] Research indicates that the current foster care system does not adequately meet the needs of this population.

policy brief

The Foster Care Population
In Missouri:
- in 2001, there were 57,733 reports for child maltreatment involving 89,177 children; 11,317 of these children were confirmed as suffering maltreatment.[4]
- there were 13,052 children in foster care on September 30, 2003.[5]
- a child in foster care spends an average of 25 months in an out-of-home placement and is in an average of 3 different placements.[4]
- children of minority ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in the foster care population.[7] African Americans represent 11.2% of the population in Missouri [8], but represent 43.5% of the children in foster care.[7]

Nationally:
- the number of very young children in foster care in the United States has increased at the fastest rate over the past decade. Currently, 30% of all children in foster care are under the age of five. Among young children, those under 12 months of age are the fastest growing group of children to be placed in foster care.[6]
- in 2000, 28% of children in foster care had been in care for 2-5 years and another 17% had been in care for more than 5 years.[9]
- the majority of children in foster care report that their caregivers are supportive and caring individuals with whom they have positive relationships; unfortunately, however, the majority of children in foster care will experience frequent disruptions in those relationships.[1]

The Needs of Children in Foster Care
Due to the number of risk factors experienced by children in foster care, foster children are a complex population facing multiple challenges: [2,6]
- More than half suffer from serious physical health conditions;
- More than half have developmental delays;
- One-third to one-half are reported to have dental decay;
- Almost half have serious emotional and behavioral problems; and
- Most children will be placed in more than one placement, although research indicates that the best intervention for preventing poor outcomes is having at least one consistent, caring adult attachment figure throughout childhood.

National Foster Care System
Despite their high level of need for services and supports, a significant percentage of children in foster care currently do not receive the services they need to improve their well-being: [1,6]
- 34% received no immunizations;
- 32% continued to have at least one unmet health need after placement;
- 12% were receiving no routine health care;
- Less than 10% had received special education services, though research indicates that more than 50% of children in foster care have developmental delays; and
- Almost one-third of children in foster homes are living well below the poverty threshold.

Critical Issues in the Foster Care System in Missouri

A performance audit of Missouri's foster care system indicated these concerns: [10]

- Cases of disregarded or inadequate background checks for foster parents and caseworkers.
- Insufficient attempts to retain existing trained foster parents, which likely contributes to the high number of placements children experience. Nationally, 30-50% of foster parents leave the system each year.[3]
- The Department of Social Services (DSS) was unable to determine foster parents' reasons for leaving, due to lack of exit interviews. Without this basic information, it is difficult to determine how to reduce turnover. Additionally, many parents were unaware of the grievance process. If those parents had been informed of the process, some may have had their concerns addressed and therefore, may have continued caring for children.
- Reimbursement rates for foster parents are among the lowest nationally. Compared to the USDA report that estimates the costs of raising a child, Missouri rates cover less than 50% of the total costs of raising a child.
- According to public opinion polls, 50% of the public have the misguided opinion that foster parents are motivated by fiscal rewards to care for children.[11] In reality, the performance audit reported that Missouri foster parents are not receiving enough money to cover the actual costs of the children's care and are thus using their own income to subsidize the care of children who are in the custody of the state.

Policy Recommendations

➢ **Increase financial and other on-going support of foster parents.**
Increasing the financial support of foster parents to levels consistent with the costs of raising a child will reduce the turnover rate and improve the quality of life for children in foster care.

➢ **Ensure that background checks are completed and reviewed adequately.**
The state has an obligation to ensure that foster parents and caseworkers do not have criminal records. This will improve the home environment and increase the safety of children in foster care.

➢ **Provide foster parents with extensive and on-going training in child development.**
A large number of children in foster care have developmental delays and/or behavioral issues. However, many children in foster care do not receive the intervention services they are eligible for. With better training in child development, parents may be more capable of identifying and obtaining services for children with special needs.

➢ **Ensure that foster parents are obtaining appropriate medical and dental care for their foster children.**
Children in foster care are eligible for Medicaid, yet not all children in foster care receive proper medical and dental care. Foster parents should be educated about the types of supports necessary and available for the children in their care and held responsible for ensuring that children in their care receive the services they need.

➢ **Conduct exit interviews of foster parents who leave the system.**
In order to decrease turnover, it is necessary to fully understand why so many trained foster parents leave the system each year. With this information, the state should be able to target specific obstacles that foster parents encounter.

➢ **Increase efforts to recruit and retain new foster parents.**
While the number of children entering foster care has increased dramatically over the past 10 years, the number of foster parents has decreased. Having fewer foster parents results in more children in group homes, institutions, and increased burdens upon existing foster homes. Increasing reimbursement rates and increasing recruitment efforts should increase the number of new foster parents.

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