

## Building Relationships with Child Welfare

This is the first step and here are some helpful hints for you as you begin your Church Engagement journey. As in most of life, relationships are the most important thing!



### Overcoming (Mis)Conceptions

Your church has to work with the government if it wants to help kids in foster care. One misconception is that this might be a breach in the "separation of Church and State," don't worry; it's not. Think of it like two divorced parents who have decided to be respectful and cooperative with each other so they can do what is best for their children.

Another misconception is that "Church People" and "Child Welfare Workers" come from two different worlds. It's true that they have different systems and distinctive roles, but they have similar goals, namely kids in safe and caring families. When we have asked Child Welfare workers what they would want the church to know about them, we've mostly commonly heard something like this: "We are real people. We got into this work because we care about kids who are hurt. We are overworked and overwhelmed. We need help."

#### **There also are some misconceptions about the church that are common.**

Some of the more usual ones are:

- *Arrogant: not willing to learn from child welfare workers*
- *Flaky: not dependable; quit when it gets hard*
- *Shallow: only care about meeting tangible needs not relational needs*
- *Naive: well-intentioned but not necessarily well educated; not trauma informed*
- *Selfish: only care about adopting not reunification or only care about younger kids*

## Building Trust

In order to seamlessly and successfully engage your church in recruiting foster and adoptive families for your local county, you will need an established relationship and permission from the County you are working within.

### Step 1:

Learn who you need to meet. Reach out to someone with the county who will be able to instruct you in the county's foster care and foster care adoption requirements and processes. Many counties offer a foster care orientation or informational meeting that is a first step. It can be helpful to Google the county name and "foster care" to locate this information. You might also look for their volunteer information and initially connect with the volunteer coordinator, if they have one. If we have an America's Kids Belong state chapter in your state, please contact us! We'd love to assist however we can.

### Step 2:

Ask for a meeting. Call or email requesting a meeting letting them know you want to learn, want to help, and want to do this well. Never assume that your contacts with Human Services are also faith-based persons. Maintain professionalism and do not speak with them using Christian-ese type language.

### Step 3:

Find out what they need. Make it clear that you are willing to learn what you need to learn to really help them. They may only tell you of some tangible needs (e.g. backpacks), but let them know you want to know about their greatest needs (presumably foster, adoptive, and support families). Get specific stats if you can:

- *How many kids are in care in the county and certain cities in that county?*
- *How many foster families are there?*
- *How many more do they need?*

You'll need to learn the county's specific needs, processes, and clear next steps that you can use to engage people. It's a good idea that you, at least, attend their informational meetings or orientation and read their informational pamphlets and documents that they recommend. If they have upcoming recruiting events that you can go to in order to shadow them, do it. Always make sure that you are working within the set guidelines and permissions so that you are helping and not hindering. To build trust, meet some of those tangible needs if mentioned.

### Step 4:

Pray about what your church can and should be a part of.

## Under-Promise, Over-Deliver

In many places around the country, the church disengaged in helping kids in foster care. In some cases where they have engaged, the church over-promised but under-delivered. Your church can go from overcoming skepticism, to building trust, to having earned trust by humbly under-promising and boldly over-delivering.

## What This Can Look Like

Here's an example of church leaders and child welfare workers that began working together.

### Church Leader:

*We started having conversations with local child welfare and the conversations were very meaningful and honest. We had to look at the faith community as a whole and how we were serving. Honestly, we had not always done a great job. We could be inconsistent. The perception from child welfare was that we were in it until it gets hard; then we get scared. Our church wanted to change that and had to have some honest conversations about that. We also had to let child welfare know that we were not in this work and partnership to just to share our faith. We desired to actually serve alongside these families and workers to change the outcomes for kids and families. We had to build trust through listening. We strived to do the small things with excellence to build a trust-based relationship.*

### Child Welfare Worker:

*I've been in child welfare work for over 20 years. I kept trying to convince myself we can do this work on our own, but it was just not working. So, I trusted a church leader. I was cautiously optimistic. I've been surprised at how easily and naturally we partnered. We often see a clear delineation between government and faith most of the time, but its working so beautifully because the church is open. I've never had anybody ask us what we need in child welfare—what do social workers and foster families need—and then follow through with getting it to us. This church really listened! It's been helpful that those we work with in the church have their own foster and adoption experience, but they aren't just relying on their own experience. They are asking, "What does the agency need?" They listen and follow through. I thought about the vast difference that people believe exist between government and faith and the overwhelming consistency is that we are all called to this service for kids and families. Why you are called or motivated to do this might be different, but we can ALL do this work.*

## Here are just a few practical examples of this church and child welfare partnership:

- *A grandmother took in two of grandchildren so they didn't have to go into foster care. The kids just needed transportation to and from school for two weeks. Within two hours, the church had responded to the request from a child welfare worker.*
- *With some extra babysitting help and some furniture needs met, a young mother was able to keep her job and her children from entering foster care. All this was coordinated through the child welfare worker and the local church.*
- *Churches are hosting Parents Night Out so foster parents can have an evening of free babysitting and respite by trained volunteers in a safe and fun environment.*
- *Churches are working on recruiting flexible and compassionate foster families!*