

Foster Care Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

For about a year, my husband and I worked toward a goal of becoming foster parents. We learned about foster care and began volunteering as Office Moms and Dads, working with the children who come in to the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services office (DSHS) in downtown Vancouver to be placed in foster care or for other reasons; children who just need a friendly face who is focused on nothing but keeping them company. We went to a foster care orientation and learned a little about the foster care system and about different ways people can become foster parents. We went through first aid and CPR training specifically designed for foster parents, and we completed about twenty hours of intense training to become licensable. We then completed a sheave of paperwork and filled out questionnaires about our home, lifestyle, and family history. We had a thorough background check completed, had our medical records examined, and gave references of friends and family who have seen us work with children. The further into this process we went, the more anxious and excited we became to invite foster children into our lives. We met children at the DSHS office who we could easily imagine integrating into our home, and it hurt to see them being shuffled from placement to placement. At the very last stage of this journey, when we were to finally meet with our licensor and have her come inspect our home, we were informed that because I had been denied a daycare license about 16 years ago, we were not eligible to become foster parents.

This paper will go over the requirements for becoming foster parents, the challenges the system causes both foster children and parents, and how these factors affect both groups. While our state desperately needs more foster parents, today's ad style as well as the very style of the DSHS information website dangerously oversimplifies the

requirements for foster parenting at the same time as the state overcomplicates the licensing process, making it nearly impossible for honest, real parents to qualify.

Why foster care matters

The article, “Let’s Get Real About Foster Care: 6 Myths Debunked” by Malia Jacobson explains that while there were 2,577 children entering foster care in Washington State in 2017 there were only 1,350 new foster parents in the state. In addition, according to the research study report “Understanding Foster Parenting: Using Administrative Data to Explore Retention” the median length of service for foster parents in one study was only about 8 to 14 months, with an average of one in five homes exiting the system each year. (Radel, 2005) The fact is, there just aren’t enough homes to place all the children into. Jacobson noted that with the limit in Washington of six children per home, as well as the current shortage of foster homes there is often not enough room for sibling groups to stay together in foster care. As a result, children in Washington are moved from one home to another an average of 5.21 times in their first year of foster care. This is higher than the national average of 4.12 times because of the shortage of foster homes, Jacobson explains. The constant moving is detrimental to children’s well-being and academic progress, with just four moves slowing children’s progress by an entire school year. (Jacobson, 2017)

Problems with foster care in Washington

When my husband and I went through foster care training last summer, we learned that the state’s priority today is to place children permanently with blood relatives. This could mean placing a child who has been living with a family since infancy with a blood relative they have never met. As foster parents, we would be asked to begin from day one

with a child to plan for the contingency that the child would be legally separated from their birth families and be adopted into our homes. Everyone recognizes the risk of heartache for both the child and the foster parents, but the mood of the judicial system favors blood ties over any emotional ties the child may have made.

During training, the high turnover of foster homes was implied to be a result of children being adopted, or foster homes being filled with foster children. However, from the article “Washington State’s Troubled Foster Care Program Struggles to Keep a Key Group: Foster Parents” by Susana Ray, it seems that there really is another reason for the growing shortage of foster homes: turmoil in the DSHS system. “The heavy workloads and relentless turnover of social workers are major factors in driving away foster parents,” Ray reports. (2016) The extreme turnover rate among state social workers and licensors not only causes inconsistencies in the relationship between foster parents and the state, but also results in emails and calls unanswered, and potentially puts children at risk, Ray notes. Also, the lack of preparation to assist children with ever-worsening emotional or physical problems means foster parents find themselves ill-prepared to meet the extreme behaviors of the children they care for, often resulting in children being moved from one foster home to another.

Oversimplification of Style – Bethany website

When you enter “foster care” into the Google search engines, one of the first search results is for this website (<https://www.bethany.org/foster-care>), where you are greeted with a large picture of a man being hugged and kissed by two children and below that the headline, “Is there room in your heart and family for a child in need?” Below that are

some colorful boxes you can click on to learn more about foster care. As with every other site I have reviewed, the boxes simplify the requirements and gloss over the stringent requirements to become a foster parent. However, if you choose the foster care tab in the header and scroll past the large olive green box with the myth-buster teasers, you can also find the same basic information that is included in several other websites, including very general information about the requirements for foster care. The site goes on to promise that Bethany Christian Services will provide applicants with a caring social worker who will work with you through the licensing process and consider your personal needs. The website seems to promise that getting started is as easy as 1, 2, 3, as represented by the three large buttons on the bottom of the screen.

Button number one says to download this infographic, which can be opened in a new tab. This page describes the four basic steps I've already discussed. First, you attend an orientation. Then you attend training. Finally, you fill out an application so that you can get your background check completed and get fingerprinted. Finally, you begin having home visits with your licensor and soon you will be ready to have children placed in your home. Nowhere does it specifically say what the requirements are or how long it will take, although there is note* toward the bottom of the page that says "specific requirements vary by county" in a font size that is about half of what the rest of the page is written in. There is also a link even smaller when you navigate to the very bottom of the page, which links the reader to the Children's Bureau website

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb>

When you return to the main website for Bethany Christian Services, the button for step two is a link to a page where you can enter your personal information for someone to

contact you about becoming a foster parent or donating money to the organization. The information page is clear, well-spaced, and besides foster care, has several other options to request information about, from adoption to counseling, to church engagement, to post adoption support, or volunteering. As with most of the other foster care websites I've visited, it requests your name, address, and email address. Finally, in the step three button, you can enter your zip code to find the closest organization to you.

One interesting feature of this website is that there are links to video stories about foster care, from different perspectives of foster parents from around the country, as well as from adults who have grown up in the foster care system. This honestly just breaks my heart to watch, because I so wanted to be able to provide a stable, loving home for foster children. The videos highlight the need for foster care and share the stories of some of the families who have made foster care work for their families.

Style in DSHS website

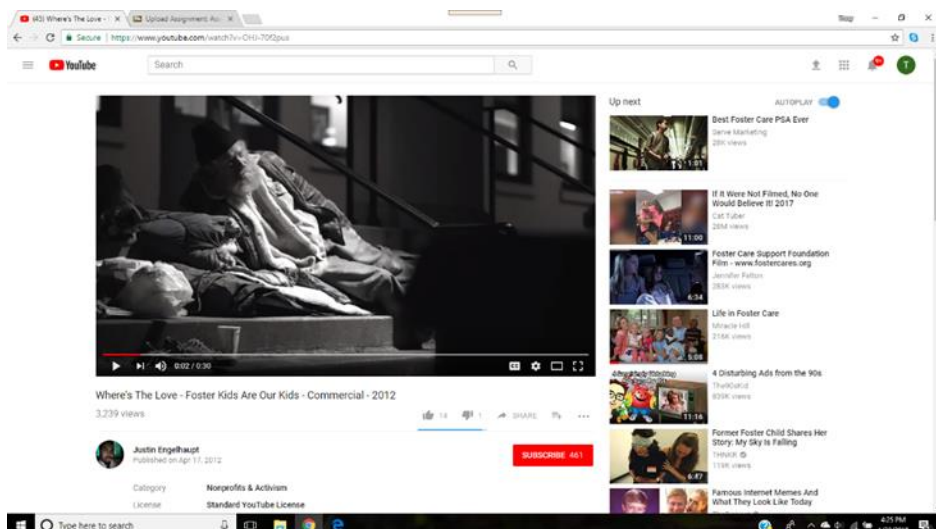
When you look at the DSHS website's informational article about foster care, "Becoming a Foster Parent," the first thing you notice about it is the very personal, friendly style. The writer chose to use a second-person voice, addressing the reader with the gender neutral "you," which Joseph Williams describes in the book, "Style Lessons in Clarity and Grace" in Lesson 2 about correctness, avoiding the problem of appearing to favor one gender over another. (Williams, p 23). The author of the website seems to declare hey, anyone can be a foster parent with the friendly, easy-to-read style. Unfortunately, the reality of becoming licensed for foster care is much more difficult than this brief article implies. The months long process is glossed over in one screen's description of

requirements. The website simply leaves out the grittier side of foster care and the licensing process.

How advertising oversimplifies the process

Similarly, advertising campaigns for foster care, such as the newer National Ad Campaign AdoptUSKids <https://youtu.be/zooSGGefdQs> idealize the ease of becoming a foster parent, emphasizing over and over again that “You don’t have to be perfect to be a perfect parent.” (AdoptUSKids ad campaign slogan) The advertising is produced in a very friendly, humorous style, focusing more on following social grammar rules than formal language (Williams, p12). While I like the style of these advertisements much better than previous ads that seemed to be trying to “guilt” American families into caring about foster children, I think it oversimplifies the issues that are really involved with adopting and fostering children. These advertising campaigns completely gloss over the difficult process of becoming a licensed foster parent, implying that all you have to do is say yes to taking in foster kids to become a foster parent.

Often, the media attempts to point out how dangerous the foster care system is to children who grow up there. One older foster care ad, from 2012, starts out with a shot



of a homeless man leaning against a pile of belongings and the statement, “Bad things can happen to kids who don’t get enough love and attention.” The next scene shows a jailor locking someone up in a cell. The creator of the ad is trying to create a sense of fear or shock about foster care. The implication is that if you don’t become a foster parent, this might happen to a perfectly good kid out there in a bad situation. The author’s standpoint is clear; we need good foster parents. The ad then goes on to show several different sad-looking youths of various ages.

While I agree that we need to improve the foster care system because kids do fall between the cracks and end up having troubled lives, even becoming homeless or being incarcerated, the way the ad focuses on the worst-case scenarios is more of an attempt to frighten the viewers about the consequences than it is an attempt to persuade logically that we need more foster parents and that good foster parents can prevent such problems.

The implied logical dispute in this ad is that while the creators of the ad think it is important to show love to all children, even those in foster care, there may be people in society who don’t think this is true, and possibly would not think themselves able to love other people’s kids. While it may be true that people often have the idea that they could not find themselves able to care for foster kids, this is not addressed in the ad. Another implied problem is that foster kids have big problems that most people could never be able to solve (which unfortunately, many of them actually do!) The standpoint of this ad is that all you must do is love kids to fix all their problems. This is probably not

completely true, and certainly oversimplifies the problems that foster kids have, but it isn't a bad place to start.

The "Where's the Love" ad doesn't really make it clear how "love" is going to fix every problem foster kids face, or how the lack of love causes problems such as homelessness and incarceration. It really doesn't provide a strong argument for foster care. More recent ads tend to cite problems such as the lack of foster homes versus the number of kids being taken into care each year, giving more of a reason why we continue to need more foster care homes, and this could be legitimate support for the argument. This ad tends to fall into the logical fallacy of red herring by emotional appeal, appealing to people's fears of homelessness and criminals that our foster kids today could become. (Almossawi, 2013).

Conclusions

There is a serious problem with our foster care system and it goes far beyond bad logic in advertisements. I find myself in complete agreement with Karly Lieb, who said

"I couldn't bear the stories of sheer incompetency and in my mind, criminal negligence on the part of the state toward these kids, who are dependent on the state. I thought, 'How do I ask people to get involved in such a ridiculously broken system? And yet, the kids – it's not the kids' fault that their parents abused them and abandoned them and that they were born drug-addicted.'"

(Ray, 2016)

We do need to produce better ads for foster care, which highlight the importance of becoming foster parents, while at the same time, showing that foster children are just

like any other kids, and while they have been dealt a difficult hand in life, they deserve a second chance with a strong family. It is unfair and unrealistic to show pictures of sad-faced youth facing a dark future ending in homelessness or jail and simultaneously, it is unrealistic to show happy, perfect families that make it seem as if foster care is easy. Raising children is never easy, even if you start with children who have not been through the terrible circumstances that foster children have often been through. Virtually every website or ad I've investigated seems basically to say the same thing, which is why I originally signed up for foster care. There is a real need, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to apply, and why wouldn't you want to sign up to love on children? The style of the ads, the websites, and the videos are all well-designed to entice new foster parents. The problem is, when new potential foster parents do sign up, there is a lot more to the job than the ads and the websites proclaim, and the reality doesn't line up well with the promises.

One serious consequence of the disconnect between these advertisements and reality is the high number of foster homes that close each year, as reported in the article "Let's Get Real About Foster Care: 6 Myths Debunked" by Malia Johnson. The article starts with a down-to-earth description of what it is like to be a foster parent in a state where there are more children entering foster care than families available to take them. About half of the families who do make it through the licensing process, which Johnson points out in her article can take "the better part of a year," quit within their first year, and for those who choose to let their license lapse, if they do decide to return to foster care, the process to become licensed starts over from the beginning again (Johnson, 2017).

Why is the standard perfection?

It is important to remember that the need for foster care is real and it is great. As an Office Moms and Dads volunteer, I have seen the reality of this carried out in person. I have seen children tearfully separated from siblings and sent to different foster homes, sometimes just for a day or a weekend. Even then, many of them are returned to the office another day, waiting for another foster parent to give in and accept them. In September this means that children are sitting in the DSHS office during school hours because they haven't got a school to start because they haven't got a home to start school from. I once spent time with a child who had been kicked out of daycare for fighting. He ended up spending about a week in the DSHS office because the foster parent couldn't find alternate care for him and the social workers didn't have any viable alternatives for the child or family either.

According to the research article "Understanding Foster Parenting: Using Administrative Data to Explore Retention," only one fifth of foster care homes licensed in most states provided care for between 60 and 72 percent of foster care. That means that four out of five foster homes are not available to take in new children. Most people who do survive the licensing process and are found to be qualified to take in foster children either don't stay involved, or only occasionally provide care. This statistic could include foster parents who become licensed to take care of their own relatives, but who really don't intend to become a full-time foster parent, as well as those who only became licensed to provide respite care for others who are providing full-time care. In other words, only about one fifth of licensed foster parents are actually available to take in the children who end up at the DSHS office. And those parents can only house up to

six children in the largest of homes. With thousands of children entering the system each year, and nowhere near enough new foster homes opening, there really is a severe shortage of beds for these children.

None of the advertisements, informational articles, and websites really stress the crisis of the foster home shortage, and the oversimplification of the process makes it seem easy to become a foster parent. Perhaps this drives away potentially-great foster parents, because that “perfect parent” doesn’t believe they are really needed, or they think that someone else will step in. Maybe it draws people who think that the reason you should become a foster parent is to get the paycheck for taking care of children.

I believe the foster care system is looking for parents who are above reproach; who can stand the intense scrutiny of the licensing process without blinking. Should these standards be lowered? While it would be terrible to remove children from an abusive home and put them with a foster family whose motives are less than pure, or who might turn and abuse them further, I find this standard of perfection frustrating. It seems logical that there would be a chance to appeal something minor that a potential foster parent could be rejected for, with enough support and witnesses that could attest to the worthiness of that person. Currently, if you have any kind of mistake in your background, or you admit to having ever done something foster parents should not do, licensors are legally bound to reject you. In my case, a decision made 16 years ago in a completely different situation of life than I’m in now cost me the opportunity to help alleviate the shortage of foster homes in Clark County, and I was not given the chance to appeal the decision.

While I would be the first to say we need to be careful about who we allow to become foster parents, I do wonder if the licensing process screens out people who would be fantastic caregivers, but who might have made mistakes in the past. When I found out that I was turned down for foster care I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach. If “anyone” could be a foster parent, as the advertising so clearly implies, what did that make me and my husband? Recently, I spoke about to this process with an acquaintance who said that she and her husband could not be licensed for foster care either, because he had once had a reckless driving conviction. While this made me feel a little better about being turned down, it also reinforces my conviction that there needs to be more flexibility in the licensing process. These were perfectly normal, honest, highly-qualified adults who had a mistake in their background that the DSHS licensor could not overlook.

The friendly, easy-to-understand style of the advertising and informational websites had led me to believe that if you wanted to, anyone could become a foster parent, but then the reality struck that without a perfect background, I was permanently disqualified from serving in this way with no way to appeal the decision. Clearly, there simply aren’t enough perfect families out there ready and willing to take on the responsibility of foster care. Instead, there is a drastic shortage of licensed homes, willing full-time foster parents, and an abundance of children who through no fault of their own have found themselves unable to continue living with their own relatives.

Resources

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