

Allegheny County DHS Foster Care Concept Paper

Executive Summary

The foster care system in Allegheny County is experiencing pressing challenges today, including: the immediate need for culturally responsive, community-based placement options that meet the needs of children; the need for more supports for foster care families;¹ and a lack of standardized, transparent rates, levels of care and accountability measures for providers. To address these challenges, Allegheny County seeks to re-procure contracts for non-kinship² family foster care providers in order to build a shared framework and implement new strategies to improve outcomes for the children and families we serve. DHS envisions geographic regions within the county, each with community-based providers who recruit, train and support foster care families who practice cultural humility,³ cultivate relationships with birth families and provide loving homes for children and youth, including siblings. Within each region, some of the homes will be therapeutic foster care homes and every foster care home will be trained in trauma-informed care.

Introduction

Allegheny County Department of Human Services' (DHS) Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) protects children from abuse and neglect and works with families to provide a safe and loving permanent home for children. CYF is the second largest child welfare agency in Pennsylvania with an annual budget of almost \$300 million. It provides supports to strengthen families and prevent out-of-home placements, intervenes to protect children at-risk of abuse and neglect, and helps children and families swiftly reach permanency, working to reunite families whenever possible. Additionally, CYF provides specific supports for young adults who are in out-of-home care to help them transition to adulthood. Annually, CYF annually investigates approximately 15,000 calls of suspected abuse and neglect. In 2019, CYF served 8,478 children and 12,786 adults.

Over the next year, DHS plans to re-procure contracts for non-kinship family foster care providers. This procurement process is an opportunity for CYF to build on the success of its existing services, create a shared framework with provider partners and collaboratively implement new strategies to improve safety, permanency and well-being of children and families in Allegheny County. DHS seeks providers that share in the [DHS mission and vision](#) and are willing to work collaboratively to improve outcomes for

¹ The terms "foster care family" and "resource family" have been used interchangeably in the child welfare system. They refer to a family which provides temporary foster or kinship care for a child who needs an out-of-home placement and may eventually provide permanency for those children, including by serving as an adoptive family. For the purposes of this paper, we will use foster care, but would appreciate feedback about which term you would prefer we use moving forward, and specifically for the subsequent RFP.

² Non-kinship foster care is by definition different from kinship care because the caregivers are not related to or do not have a prior relationship with the child in their care. For the purposes of this paper and subsequent RFP, we are only referring to non-kinship foster care providers, parents and families.

³ Cultural humility refers to the lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique that allows for the examination and recognition of personal and cultural biases as well as the learning of other cultures and awareness and sensitivity to significant cultural issues of others.

the children and families we serve. An RFP is expected to be published in late 2020 with new contracts in place by Summer 2021.

This concept paper outlines DHS's vision for the future of foster care in Allegheny County through the aforementioned RFP process, and affords community partners the opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions to DHS in advance of the RFP. We invite feedback and input from providers, community members and other child welfare stakeholders across Allegheny County to inform this work and upcoming RFP. Please submit feedback to DHSConceptPaper@AlleghenyCounty.US no later than August 14, 2020. (As an alternative to submitting feedback via email, you can anonymously submit comments using this [form](#) prior to August 14th.) DHS will make all feedback received on this concept paper publicly available without including the name(s) associated with the submission.

Purpose of Concept Paper

This concept paper outlines DHS's goals and vision for best serving children and families involved in non-kinship foster care in Allegheny County. These are informed by over 20 years of working alongside community partners and families to understand the strengths, needs and challenges of the foster care system.

DHS's primary goal in releasing this concept paper and subsequent RFP is to improve outcomes of the children and families we serve. Our vision is a foster care system in which all children and families thrive, by:

1. Promoting placement stability
2. Reducing time to permanency
3. Ensuring foster care families and providers have the support and resources they need to deliver high-quality services and the best care possible for children
4. Creating accountability measures to emphasize service quality

Our strategies will correspond with our provider partners' aim to address the foster care system's more pressing challenges to date, including: the immediate need for more foster care homes for placement options, particularly increasing the number of culturally responsive, diverse homes⁴ and placement options within the child's neighborhood and/or school district; the length of stay for children in the foster care system; the increase in demand for more therapeutic options and resources for children with complex needs; the need to further reduce the number of children in congregate care settings (transitioning them into families); and the lack of standardized, transparent rates, levels of care and accountability measures across providers. DHS will leverage the RFP process to restructure funding for providers by supporting and acknowledging strong provider performance that best meets the needs of children and families served. This will be done through an evaluative process that tracks quality of services and outcomes across providers.

⁴ DHS is seeking homes that are diverse in race, language-spoken, religion and culture. The top five requested languages for interpretation are: Nepali, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Burmese. DHS also seeks homes that can support children with complex physical and or behavioral health needs, teenagers and LGBTQ youth.

Our vision is rooted in advancing CYF's mission and strategic priorities. The mission of CYF is to protect children from abuse and neglect; to preserve families, whenever possible; and to assure permanency, that is, to provide permanent, safe homes for children either by assuring safety within the child's own family, or by finding an adoptive home or another permanent setting for those children who cannot be reunified with their family. CYF has designated the following four strategic priorities for 2020 that tie back to the mission:

- Caseworker recruitment and retention
- In-home redesign
- Placement stability
- Diversity and inclusion

Most pertinent to this work and advancing the mission of DHS is the strategic prioritization of placement stability: ensuring children have a secure and stable family setting that provides a foundation for healthy development. DHS seeks to contract with family foster care providers that share in our goals and vision for improving non-kinship foster care.

Population to be Served

The population to be served is children from birth to 21 years old who are placed in non-kinship foster care. During 2019, 527 unique children entered an out-of-home-placement with a non-kinship foster care family. On a single day that year, there were an average of about 430 kids with a non-kinship foster care family.

Why this is good for Providers and DHS

For over 20 years, DHS has built strong relationships and worked extensively with community-based organizations and families across Allegheny County to inform and administer high-quality human services. With over 20 foster care providers, the effectiveness of the system is dependent on the strength of these collaborative relationships. Through this concept paper and upcoming RFP process, DHS encourages providers and the community to join in this effort and inform the process through feedback, suggestions and questions.

Ultimately, DHS and its non-kinship foster care providers have a shared goal: to best serve the children and families involved with child welfare in Allegheny County. By improving transparency, standardization, shared accountability and communication with providers through this process, we aim to ensure providers are well-equipped to meet the needs of the families and children served and that DHS is responsive to provider requests.

The recent challenges of COVID-19 have elevated the importance of adaptability and agility in response to rapidly changing circumstances and the need for clear communication and collaboration during this time. DHS aims to strengthen and promote that kind of working relationship with providers in order to build a stronger, more responsive foster care system for families and children.

Goals and Objectives for RFP

The RFP will re-procure the provision of non-kinship foster care families who provide emergency and regular family homes for all age groups (0-21). The primary goals and corresponding objectives for the RFP will include:

Promote placement stability

- Increase the number of appropriately trained and available foster care homes to ensure faster and fewer placements for children. Providers will develop **individual recruitment plans** to recruit and support homes that practice cultural humility to meet the diverse needs of children in foster care, to increase the number of foster care homes that allow sibling groups, and to improve the rates of placement of children and youth in and near their home communities.
 - DHS will promote recruitment coordination among providers by creating a shared data management system for outreach and improving access to resources and support, such as Allegheny County’s Core Enhanced Recruitment Team (CERT) Toolkit. This integrated recruitment approach will ensure providers are well-supported in their efforts to increase placement options.
- Providers will implement “customer service” concepts in their approach to recruitment and retention of prospective and current foster care and adoptive parents. Customer service can be defined as the manner in which agencies provide their services and treat those with whom they work. Empathy, care and respect for others are integral to **good customer service**, and how an agency is perceived by current and prospective foster care and adoptive parents is critical to improving recruitment and retention efforts.
- To improve placement stability, safety and permanency for children in care, while increasing support for and retention of foster families, providers will implement a **Mockingbird Family Model** of care. The Mockingbird Family Model⁵ institutes a ‘constellation,’ which consists of one foster care home that serves as a hub to between six and ten nearby satellite foster care homes. The specially recruited and trained hub offers planned and emergency sleepovers, respite care, advice, training and peer supports to the satellites. This reduces the sense of isolation foster caregivers can feel and ensures access to supports when needed, which ultimately improves placement stability. As a part of this effort, providers will also institute a **foster care parent support partner** program for foster care and adoptive parents to lean on for support.
- DHS will work with the state and providers to create an **expedited certification process** to remove the barriers that a long certification process creates for many children and families and ensure we are flexible in meeting the needs of children without compromising safety.
- To ensure the first placement is the right placement, and ultimately improve placement stability, DHS and provider partners will help coordinate **matching events and pre-placement visits** to ensure that children's needs and foster care family expectations align.
- In an effort to continually inform our approach based on foster care parent input, providers will regularly collect **feedback from foster care parents** through surveys, exit interviews and other means to refine processes and approaches based on their voice.
- DHS will establish **foster homes by region** to prioritize placements in a child’s neighborhood, to lessen the disruption to children and better facilitate education stability.

Reduce time to permanency

- DHS and providers will collaborate to establish a timeline and corresponding objectives/tasks to recruit, train and place children in foster care homes. Streamlining this process will help accelerate time to permanency and ensure a consistent number of available foster care homes exists.

⁵ Mockingbird Society. “Mockingbird Family.” Available at: <https://www.mockingbirdsociety.org/family-model>.

- DHS and providers will practice **concurrent planning**, a process of working towards one legal permanency goal (typically reunification) while simultaneously establishing and implementing an alternative permanency goal and plan to move children/youth more quickly to a safe and stable permanent family.
- Providers will create a **streamlined process for service referrals and warm hand-offs** to ensure children’s needs are met or exceeded while in foster care.
- In an effort to strengthen relationship building between foster care family and birth family, foster care families will **talk to birth family within 24 hours of placement**. Providers will support this effort and help facilitate connections between birth and foster care families, creating opportunities to build the relationship. The objective is for foster care families to aid in the process of reunification.
- DHS will work with providers to implement an **aftercare model to support reunification**. Having a plan for aftercare ensures the child will continue to be supported after permanency is achieved, creating continuity of care.

Ensure foster care families and providers have the support and resources they need to deliver high-quality services and the best care possible for children.

- DHS and providers will build and/or enhance their strong, collaborative working relationship so that it is quick and responsive to the needs of families and children – doing this through improved **communication channels and standardized, transparent processes**.
 - Conferencing and Teaming is DHS’s standard of practice that engages individuals, families, supports and professionals in assessing strengths and needs and developing a plan for keeping children and youth safe and healthy while continually integrating individual and family actions with professional services. DHS envisions that all DHS direct services staff and human service providers will utilize this integrated conferencing and teaming approach with consumers as their core case management practice.
- DHS and providers will establish **standardized rates** that are tied to expectations and service quality.
- DHS, with input from providers, will create formal channels and **processes for requesting rate changes** that are transparent to all and ensure a fair, effective system.

Create accountability measures to emphasize service quality

- DHS and providers will co-establish **accountability measures** that are reasonable and that will ultimately benefit the children and families served. An evaluative process will be established to track and acknowledge quality of services and outcomes across providers
- Providers will implement important **training** requirements for staff and foster care families to ensure provision of high quality services, resources that meet the diverse needs of families and children, and engagement in foster homes and with staff that respects, supports and sustains the culture of the children and their families. Examples of trainings include, but are not limited to, racial equity and cultural humility.

Proposed Program Approach

The RFP will seek to institute the following proposed approaches to enhance the non-kinship foster care system with providers that are enthusiastic and willing to work jointly to implement them.

Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC): Research and anecdotal evidence alike confirm that while fewer children enter the foster care system today, those entering have more complex needs. According to a 2018 Casey Family Strategy Brief on Placement Stability, children’s behavioral challenges are often cited as reasons for placement disruptions; however, children in care have often experienced higher levels of trauma and an increase in the number of moves only increases the risk of developing behavioral challenges. In one study, children with multiple placements had between 36% and 63% greater risk of developing behavioral challenges than did children in stable placements.⁶ DHS seeks providers that are committed to providing a full range of services to meet the needs of children, particularly those with complex needs. Therapeutic foster care requires specialized training to care for a wide variety of children and adolescents, usually those with significant emotional, behavioral or social issues and/or medical needs that span across multiple systems.⁷ Providers will be expected to provide trauma-informed training for all foster care families and phase it in for current licensed homes, to ensure foster care families are prepared and supported in meeting the needs of children, and that the first placement is the only placement.

Foster Home Recruitment: Continual home recruitment is vital to maintaining a consistent number of available, high quality foster care homes. DHS seeks providers willing to take an integrated, coordinated approach to foster care home recruitment. Recruitment efforts will occur both centrally, with support and coordination from DHS, and through each individual provider, to promote an integrated approach. DHS will seek expertise from an advertising firm and designate a DHS staff member to coordinate communication and recruitment efforts across providers. As outlined in the previous section, DHS seeks providers that will develop individual recruitment plans, implement concepts of “customer service” in their recruitment approach with prospective foster care and adoptive parents, and utilize a shared data management system across providers for outreach efforts. Additionally, providers will have access to DHS supports and resources including Allegheny County’s Core Enhanced Recruitment Team (CERT) Toolkit.

Increased Supports for Foster Care Families: DHS seeks providers that will offer additional support to foster care families through implementing the Mockingbird Family Model and matching foster care families with Foster Care Family Support Partners. As described above, the Mockingbird Family Model creates an extended network of support for foster care parents and improves protective factors for children, offering opportunities for respite care, sleepovers, peer support and partnerships to reduce the isolation that many foster care parents experience. Foster Care Family Support Partners are another added layer of peer support; these are parents or former parents that have lived experience in the foster care system and can help new foster care parents navigate resources and supports. These increased supports for foster care families will improve retention rates, decrease placement disruptions and ultimately improve outcomes for children.

Promote Birth Family/Foster Care Family Relationships: Creating a teaming approach with planned contact between the child’s birth family and foster care parents has been shown to result in a number of positive outcomes: children return home sooner, have more stable placements, experience better

⁶ Casey Family Programs. August 2018. “What impacts placement stability?” Available at: https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/SF_Placement-stability-impacts.pdf.

⁷ Child Welfare Information Gateway. “Treatment Foster Care.” Available at: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/foster-care/treat-foster/>.

emotional development and are more successful in school. Children in foster care have a more positive experience if their birth parents and foster care parents work together to ensure that the children feel loved and comfortable in their out-of-home placement. The first meeting or “icebreaker” is a facilitated, child focused meeting held shortly after a child is placed in out-of-home care. The meeting provides an opportunity for the foster care family and the child’s parents to meet each other and to share information about the needs of the child. Thus, the “icebreaker” is a starting point for establishing communication and building a relationship between families.⁸ DHS seeks providers that will help facilitate a relationship between foster care parents and birth parents, by encouraging the first contact within 24 hours of placement and creating on-going opportunities to enhance communication and relationship building, as appropriate.

One Family, One Home: The ‘One Family, One Home’ model⁹ places only one family group (one child or sibling group) in a foster care home. This approach has many advantages, including keeping sibling groups together through the trauma of removal, mitigating conflicts that can arise when other children in foster care from other families live in the same house, and ensuring the child or sibling group have the attention of the foster care parent. Advantages for caregivers include stronger outcomes for children and reduced need for coordination with multiple family visits, court dates and other obligations. DHS seeks providers willing to institute a ‘one family, one home’ model to benefit the children served.

Accountability Measures: DHS seeks providers willing to co-establish performance measures to emphasize accountability and acknowledge high-quality services. These measures, jointly agreed upon, would act as an incentive for providers to not only meet but exceed expectations for quality services, ultimately improving outcomes for children.

Foster Homes by Geographic Region: DHS seeks providers that will recruit and support homes that practice cultural humility by geography, to prioritize placements in a child’s neighborhood. This will lessen the disruption to the child’s life, assure education stability, and enable consistent connection and greater resources for the child, the foster care family, and the connection to natural supports (including birth parents, relatives and other caring adults and peers).

Conclusion

DHS appreciates the hard work and dedication of each foster care provider agency and looks forward to working collaboratively with providers to best serve children and families in Allegheny County. This concept paper captures the planning done by DHS to envision the future of foster care. We are seeking input from providers, community members and other child welfare stakeholders to inform this work and upcoming RFP. Please submit feedback to DHSConceptPaper@AlleghenyCounty.US no later than August 14, 2020. (As an alternative to submitting feedback via email, you can anonymously submit comments using this [form](#) prior to August 14th.) DHS will make all feedback received on this concept paper publicly available without including the name(s) associated with the submission.

⁸ National Center for Child Welfare Excellence at the Silberman School of Social Work. “Family Engagement: A Wed-Based Practice Toolkit.” Available at: <http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/family-engagement/partnerships.htm>.

⁹ Action Research Partners. April 2019. “Home Away From Home: Lessons for Building a One Family, One Home Foster Care System.” Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bc8f25ea9ab953f77c47204/t/5dae10195126e3702416e1f5/1571688475165/19.9.10+Hilton+Final+Report+to+Hilton+for+Release.pdf>.