

## How Churches Can Help Foster Families & Families in Crisis

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No one doubts that the family as an institution is in serious trouble. One result is that our foster system is overloaded and children are falling through the cracks. Churches are in a unique position to fill the gaps and minister to families in crisis and local foster families. We can help either a church or by encouraging individual members to provide support.

### **I. Extent of the Problem**

#### A. Here are some sobering statistics about foster care:

- From <https://www.fostercarecapacity.com>:
  - U.S. has almost 400,000 minors in care
  - Almost 85,000 children live with relatives
  - Most states lost foster homes from 2021-2022
- Only 58% of foster teens live with a family, compared with 95% of kids 12 and under, according to recent report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- “In Kentucky, we have around 8,500 children in out-of-home care. Around 4,000 are teenagers,” said Bratcher. “It’s not always easy to say ‘yes, I want to take a teenager into my home’ or ‘I want to take a teenage boy into my home purposefully.’ It feels like sometimes we have the lost boys of Louisville who are living over in our residential facility that people don’t realize are waiting for homes.”  
<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2023/02/02/dire-need-for-more-foster-parents>
- There are more than 4,200 kids in the foster care system in Nebraska. 38% of them are teenagers and are less likely to find a stable foster home.....According to data from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office, teens in the foster care system have on average 6.6 placements in their lifetime. That’s more than double the average of 3.7 placements for kids 6 to 12 and more than triple the average for kids under 5.  
<https://www.1011now.com/2023/01/19/young-adults-share-experiences-struggles-find-foster-homes-teenagers/>

#### B. Government programs have not helped.

- The federal government in 2018 enacted the Families First Prevention Services Act, which reprioritized federal spending. The new rules encourage states to spend money on family-based foster homes and prevention services for families to keep kids out of the system.

- Unfortunately, FFPSA does not allow spending on congregate care for kids, with the result that the availability of residential mental health facilities and specialized group homes has contracted.
- C. Some argue that the FFPSA has made foster care, particularly for teens or children with complex trauma, much more difficult. See, e.g., <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2019/06/20/finding-foster-families-for-teens-is-a-challenge-in-many-states> ; <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/five-years-on-the-family-first-act-has-failed-in-its-aims/>
- D. Some experts argue that FFPSA has led to an uptick in “hoteling” foster kids because there are not enough placements for them, e.g., <https://childwelfaremonitor.org/tag/foster-youth-in-hotels/>
- E. Children aging out of foster care pose a particularly hard challenge.
- A 2021 study by University of Chicago researchers found that young people who remained in extended foster care in California through age 21 had more stable lives compared with their peers who left government custody at age 18. Two years later, they had \$650 more on average in their bank accounts and were 19% less likely to have been homeless between the ages of 21 and 23. They also had greater odds of completing a high school credential and attending college. <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/21/texas-foster-care-extended-age-out/>
  - [https://www.fosterlove.com/blog/2021/07/02/what-happens-when-kids-in-foster-care-turn-18/?utm\\_medium=ppc&utm\\_source=adwords&utm\\_term=aging%20out%20of%20foster%20care%20policies&utm\\_campaign=&hsa\\_src=g&hsa\\_kw=aging%20out%20of%20foster%20care%20policies&hsa\\_mt=b&hsa\\_acc=2425172426&hsa\\_grp=146342306632&hsa\\_ad=647102616953&hsa\\_cam=19646440706&hsa\\_tgt=kwd-327424554684&hsa\\_net=adwords&hsa\\_ver=3&gclid=CjwKCAjwov6hBhBsEiwAvrvN6LBbJCl0Ho83GrzAnvQjzK4UXST0Gx5ubSt8H04JG34cVCL9K1kA8RoCJaMQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.fosterlove.com/blog/2021/07/02/what-happens-when-kids-in-foster-care-turn-18/?utm_medium=ppc&utm_source=adwords&utm_term=aging%20out%20of%20foster%20care%20policies&utm_campaign=&hsa_src=g&hsa_kw=aging%20out%20of%20foster%20care%20policies&hsa_mt=b&hsa_acc=2425172426&hsa_grp=146342306632&hsa_ad=647102616953&hsa_cam=19646440706&hsa_tgt=kwd-327424554684&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&gclid=CjwKCAjwov6hBhBsEiwAvrvN6LBbJCl0Ho83GrzAnvQjzK4UXST0Gx5ubSt8H04JG34cVCL9K1kA8RoCJaMQAvD_BwE)
  - In 2019, more than 20,000 kids aged out of foster care — if they do not find a foster family by age 18, they are emancipated from the foster care system.
  - Kids who age out of foster care are less likely to graduate from high school and are less likely to attend or graduate college than the average population. By age 26, around 80% of kids who aged out of the foster system earned at least a high school degree or GED compared to 94% in the general population.

- By age 26, 4% of kids who aged out of foster care earned a college degree, while 36% in the general population had earned a degree.
- An average of 1 out of every 4 kids in foster care will become homeless within 4 years of aging out of foster care.

## II. Challenges of Foster Families

- Child welfare agencies are government organizations, with opaque, conflicting, and cumbersome rules.
- Foster care stipends cover limited items, and the funds are never enough for the child's needs (e.g., sports teams, tutoring, therapy).
- Fostering can be a lonely task because few people understand the challenges.
- Anyone supervising children in the system has to be cleared by the state agency. That clearance usually means, at a minimum, criminal records check and some level of parenting. The net effect is that foster children cannot go on a weekend visit with friends or go along on a trip to Disney World.
  - The federal government adopted the Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard for states, to encourage more freedom for foster parents. FAQ available here: <https://wifostercareandadoption.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/promoting-normalcy.rpps-frequently-asked-questions-4.27.16.pdf>.
  - Most states have still opted for protection from liability and kept restrictive standards.
- Most foster children have suffered some level of trauma that makes caring for them extremely challenging.
  - Overview - <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/foster-care/mental-and-behavioral-health-needs-of-children-in-foster-care/>
  - Adverse Childhood Experiences — <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>
    - By definition, children in the child welfare system have suffered at least one ACE.
    - Recent studies have shown that compared with the general population, children in the system are far more likely to have experienced at least 4 ACES (42 percent v. 12.5 percent).
  - Up to 80% of children in foster care have mental health issues. <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/mental-health-and-foster-care>
  - A significant mental health concern among foster youth is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); researchers have reported that 20 percent of abused children in foster care experienced symptoms of PTSD versus the 11 percent that remained in their original home (Bartlett & Rushovich, 2018). A study conducted in 2005 reported 30 percent of foster youth alumni met the conditions for this disorder, compared to less than 8 percent of the normal

population (Bartlett & Rushovich, 2018). Youth in foster care have increased rates of trauma exposure; rates have been estimated to reach 90 percent; among trauma forms, foster care youth have an increased risk to have experienced abuse and/or neglect compared to the general population (Dorsey et al., 2012). <https://www.csp.edu/publication/trauma-children-in-foster-care-a-comprehensive-overview/>

- Child welfare systems currently lack decent mental health services for children in care, particularly with the loss of funds for congregate care.

### III. **How Churches Can Help Meet Challenges for Foster Families**

- A. Sure, it'd be great if every church had a foster care ministry, but for the average member of a congregation that's like asking for volunteers to quit their jobs and become missionaries to the Middle East. It's a huge jump, it's unknown, it's scary, it requires great personal sacrifice. So, most church members will write a check instead.
- B. The best way to build a foster care ministry for your church is to give members of your congregation a way to dip their toes into the shallow end of fostering while meeting individual needs.
- C. Research foster care needs in your community. For example, few agencies need foster parents for healthy babies. Teenagers and medically fragile children are high-need populations.
- D. Be careful about some popular initiatives — honoring foster parents at church services, for example, can make foster kids feel like charity cases and implicate confidentiality laws.
- E. Aim for sustained effort, not periodic grand gestures. For example, foster parents need more than once-a-year toy drives. Kids have birthdays or want to be in the band, or parents need a date night or weekend away. Lots of small gestures will provide more support.
- F. Encourage and support individual volunteers, such as CASA and mentoring.
- G. Low-impact church contributions:
  - Foster care support ministries such as Promise 686.
  - Look at sponsoring CarePortal or other services that connect caseworkers/foster parents/biological parents with necessities (beds, car seats, etc).
  - Mentoring Programs such as Connections Homes for kids who have aged out of care.
- H. Support centers for foster care programs:
  - Create a visitation center at your church for children in care.
  - Provide parenting classes for families involved with child welfare
  - Clothes closet
  - Host support groups for foster parents.

- Have a “children’s services day” on a regular basis and invite child-serving nonprofits to set up booths and have speakers (e.g. sermons) related to the issues.
  - Host a Sunday school class specifically devoted to issues of child neglect, trafficking, foster care, etc.
- I. Serve foster families in the community by partnering with child welfare agency or local ministry and planning events, such as:
- a date night for foster parents where the church gathers the kids together and has a nursery/events for them, depending on age
  - provide cleared & trained babysitters for foster parents
  - invite caseworkers to church and have a special recognition of them
  - do laundry, fix meals, provide other support for foster parents
  - create and host a Bible study specifically for foster parents.
- J. “Wrap around” foster families in the church — all of the above plus
- learn from programs such as FaithBridge, Wellroot
  - have families in the church get licensed as respite parents
  - provide financial resources
    - Never money — better to give gift cards or pay provider directly
    - Sports teams
    - Tutoring
    - Mental health care
    - Legal services for conflicts with agencies
  - help provide transportation
  - mentors in the church to provide sounding board and emotional support
- K. Legal Issues to Keep in Mind
- Confidentiality: Working with the agency/foster provider to ensure you are able to provide these services without breaching confidentiality. Your program will need to educate providers and everyone involved in the ministry.
  - Working with state agencies: MOUs, religious freedom rights to offer services without sacrificing values. This will be easier in some states than others, and you may need to provide legal help in negotiating with those agencies.
  - Legislative advocacy: Room for religious freedom, meaningful foster parent bills of rights, adequate training for foster families, adequate mental health care for children in foster care
  - Mandated reporting: Know your mandated reporting law, train your volunteers and church staff, know the parameters of the clergy privilege in your state (some states are doing away with the privilege in child abuse matters).
  - Liability coverage: Be sure your church has good coverage for general liability, abuse claims, and defamation (for claims that church made mandated reports in bad faith).