

Children's System of Care Division

Calling all Educators! Sheltering Foster Children

OVERVIEW: Placer's child welfare emergency system was overwhelmed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Targeting and recruiting new caregivers, specifically educators, helped fill the gap.

CHALLENGE: The COVID-19 pandemic has placed tremendous strain on institutions and communities and has impacted the most central pillar in our community, families. Early in the pandemic, there was a decrease in calls made to report suspected abuse and neglect, however, there were sharp increases in requests for substance use services (increased 155% over the same time period in 2019), requests for adult mobile crisis services (increased by 40%), and calls to the Placer County suicide hotline (volume increased by 32%), which contributed to an 17% increase in child welfare cases being opened in March of 2020 and a 45% increase of children coming into the custody of Placer County's Children's System of Care. While the Placer community has had many caring homes to place children in custody into, the sudden increase coupled with fear and anxiety of being exposed to COVID-19, threatened to overwhelm emergency placement options. Placer County foster children needed immediate help.

SOLUTION: Placer County Office of Education had educators and administrative employees at schools and on staff who were sent home to distance teach or perform administrative tasks under statewide closure orders and public health guidance. These educators and administrative support staff were well-positioned to become a possible source of emergency placement homes for children and youth needing short-term placements. School staff are already trained and work with children and youth, and have undergone background checks to work in schools, a critical element when the state system for emergency background checks was slowed by pandemic closure orders. Thus, the Children's System of Care partnered with Placer County Office of Education to directly recruit educators in the county system. Together, the two agencies sent a letter to Placer educators with a streamlined process for becoming a temporary care provider, which consisted of a home environment inspection, a criminal records check, and completion of an updated Live Scan background check. An on-line form was created for those who were interested in becoming a temporary care provider with an email link for submission.

INNOVATION: This project demonstrated creativity through its recruitment and process improvements that made it easier to become a temporary care provider. First, our two agencies targeted recruitment to educators who were already background cleared, willing to work with children, and at home due to the pandemic and school closures, which in turn opened up capacity for short-term, emergency foster placements. Second, we streamlined background clearance for emergency placement, resulting in more timely placements.

RESULTS: The letter, sent via email, went out on April 13th, 2020. The CSOC and PCOE was hoping to generate ten responses from this effort. By April 16th, there were already seven solid leads. One school district posted the letter on their Facebook page, which caught the attention of local media stations. Two stations produced stories in print about the need for foster care families and reached out to PCOE, CSOC, and local foster family agencies for interviews and quotes. KCRA Channel 3 and FOX 40 ran evening stories about the recruitment efforts on April 21st. By April 24th, over 100 interest forms had been sent in for review. With the response being so massive, the team then created a thank you letter to post on the website and closed the recruitment with a link to other Foster Family agencies in the area if the inquirer still wanted to proceed. CSOC placed a priority on responding to families who indicated that they were interested in becoming an emergency family for a teenager or a child/youth with special behavioral or medical challenges, as this is always a need in foster care. To date, four families have proceeded through the process to become emergency foster families and have taken children in emergency situations, including one with special medical needs. One family has become a long-term foster family for a child and is considering a full adoption.

REPLICABILITY: While a similar pandemic may not happen again, the stay at home order that resulted from COVID-19 compelled us to consider resources we had not previously tapped—in this case, educators—that could meet the needs of Placer’s most at-risk children and youth. Moreover, putting out a call for help on social media generated interest among those seeking to lend a helping hand, a call which was further amplified by local broadcast media. Other communities looking to expand placement options should consider questions that drove our local innovation: Who are the people who have not been tapped to their full potential? How do you alert people to immediate needs and what processes can you simplify to make it easy for them to help out?

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OPTIONAL SUBMISSION: [Links to](#) two local news media features.