

Faith and Fostering
Nurturing Faith Based Involvement from Call to Care

The Need for Faith Based Development and Partnerships

Developing and maintaining relationships with community based organizations plays a critical role in making our department's programs and initiatives vital and successful.

“Positioning local communities to be their own change agents is essential to the success of shaping a new future that serves the public today – and more importantly – is faithful to our shared commitment to the power of public-private partnerships.” (*Strategic Vision*, 2012)

The power of these partnerships lies in the following realities:

- Communities understand their problems better than government.
- Government offers “services” while communities offer “care”.
- Communities are more creative and flexible.
- Communities enforce positive social norms more effectively than bureaucracies.

Along these same lines, partnerships between our department and the *faith community* – churches, ministries, outreach organizations, faith based non-profits – are crucial to effecting true and lasting change. Faith based institutions and organizations will be a critical resource in achieving our mission.

- They have established trust and historic relationships built organically throughout the community.
- They are able to respond to crisis, needs, and issues on the ground with help that is rooted within the community. They stand in ‘moral and ethical proximity’ to the needs and problems of the local community and are readily able to share resources to meet these needs.
- They are typically linked with their own broader faith networks throughout the state and at a national level. They are often partnered with other faith communities, along with neighborhood and city coalitions/efforts seeking to provide a local continuum of care for individuals.
- They have accessible and visible positions throughout a given community; along with recognized leadership and opportunities for communication.
- They offer structures of leadership and accountability that are trusted yet unhindered by bureaucratic and governmental red tape.

In order for such faith based partnerships to thrive, it is imperative that leadership understand the varying cultural dynamics within our faith communities; creating systems, materials, and practices that are sensitive and efficiently utilized by the communities all along the faith spectrum.

The Process of Effective Faith Based Partnerships in Fostering

To this end, DCF leadership views the faith-based community as a partner in helping transform child welfare in Florida, and in helping recruit quality foster homes within their congregations. Community-based Care agencies (CBCs) are responsible for recruiting quality foster homes and facilitating training and licensing. The Director of Faith Based Development proposes increasing the faith-based community's involvement/participation in the foster care system by initiating the following actions through the Regional offices and CBC/agency licensing specialists:

- Identify several key churches in the state with an interest in partnering with the department, and an engaged leadership and congregation willing to embrace the department's standards for out-of-home care.
- Contact the CBC in each area and request their support and assistance in identifying the contracted agencies that can assist with providing information to the church.
- Conduct foster parent information sessions prior to or after church activities/services; evaluate whether the congregation's interest level in fostering merits on-site pre-service training.
- Intentionally link churches and faith based organizations/ministries with faith based providers for training, licensing, etc. CBC's and providers intentionally involve church staff, ministry leaders in the process in appropriate ways.
- If on-site pre-service training is appropriate, work with the contracted agencies and the church leadership to establish parameters and timeframes for conducting the trainings.
- Create and develop training materials and provide trainers that are sensitive to the needs of faith based communities and congregants.
- Consult with the Office of Child Welfare (OCW) as needed for technical assistance during the training and licensing process.
- OCW will work with the CBC and contracted agencies to streamline the licensing process as appropriate through the faith-based site(s).
- Work with faith based communities through the entire process of foster parenting from recruitment call, training, home study and inspection, approval/licensing, placement, and ongoing care. Intentionally involve congregational leadership in the process from the beginning to placement.

It is crucial in partnering with faith communities that they are entrusted with ownership in each stage as they walk with families in the fostering process. This brings not only individual foster families into the world of a vulnerable child and family, but an entire community of care. This approach broadens the network of resources that would cause the foster care system to be more efficient and effective.

The Steps – Faith Communities Involvement from Call to Care:

Here are more specific and intentional ways faith communities can be brought into the process of fostering in each step:

- 1. Recruitment:** create awareness of the need through foster parent testimonials, encouragement from leadership; utilize varying mediums such as bulletins, website, blogs, newsletters; utilize varying gathering opportunities in life of faith community for contact and awareness.
- 2. Connection:** create opportunities for education and understanding regarding the process of fostering and adoption through Florida's child welfare system. Connect faith community with leaders of their lead agency and other child welfare providers in the community.
- 3. Orientation and Training:** develop creative ways to hold orientation and informational meetings on site with faith community; pursue creative options for foster training in the context of that particular faith community; utilize the resources of the church, synagogue, or mosque to provide childcare, classroom space; conduct training with sensitivity to the needs and worldview of the faith community (if at all possible, provide trainers from that faith community).
- 4. Screening and Fingerprinting:** utilize the faith community's resources to streamline this process from the beginning.
- 5. Home visits, home studies, home inspections:** allow the faith community to help meet needs if there are issues in the process (calling on the broader faith community to provide beds, make improvements, etc.).
- 6. Licensing and Placement:** placement of a child/children can happen in the broader context of the faith community. As placement occurs, call the entire community to be a part of the process and enlist their help in transitions.
- 7. Ongoing services and care:** develop 'foster/adoption care ministries/programs' in the faith community; foster/adoption support groups; ongoing education and training in faith community to help with struggles, trauma, etc.; utilize faith community for respite care, relief, support.