

Improving the Embrace Families Caregiver Experience: Report & Recommendations

OVERVIEW

Embrace Families is Central Florida's lead child welfare network provider, and a national leader in progressive child welfare systems. The organization believes every child deserves a safe, loving and nurturing home, and works to strengthen families while ensuring loving protective care is provided when needed. For children who are temporarily removed from their biological families, a key to maintaining stability is ensuring that foster parents and caregivers have the support they need to in turn support the children in their care. Embrace Families commissioned this report to explore how this caregiver experience could be improved to ensure that children experience greater stability and normalcy in their day-to-day lives.

Embrace Families is a visionary and innovative leader. But it is not immune to the problems that plague child welfare systems nationwide. Laws, policies and practices that are designed to protect children can have negative unintended consequences in real life. A system designed to ensure accountability can be unrealistically rigid when addressing the realities of everyday family life. And an overburdened and underfunded oversight system can mean that paperwork takes priority over people.

Commitment to Change

Embrace Families has made a commitment to address these challenges. As part of that commitment, Embrace Families commissioned this report, which is based on a 3-month research process that sought feedback and insight from key stakeholder groups, including foster parents, caregivers, licensing specialists, case management workers, provider representatives, and Embrace Families staff. Two consensus-building workshops were organized to bring these stakeholder groups together to develop a shared understanding of priority problems and potential solutions.

This report is designed as a high-level roadmap toward a better and brighter future. The report begins with high-level recommendations, followed by a series of potential solutions that emerged from the research and consensus-building process. While the Marketing for Change research team brings independent and impartial insight to this process, our outsider's view also has limitations. The recommendations contained here are designed as a menu of possibilities. Embrace Families will need to prioritize next steps based on the availability of resources and what can be done within legal and regulatory frameworks.

The research team at Marketing for Change would like to thank Embrace Families for your unflinching willingness to dig into root problems. We are grateful for this opportunity to provide an evidence base for the choices ahead — and we are inspired by Embrace Families' extraordinary openness to feedback, your determination to listen deeply, and your resolve to roll up your sleeves and make real change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIORITY AREAS OF FOCUS

1. **Increase emotional and practical supports for caregivers.** This includes improved onboarding and training; more timely access to mentorship, community and mental health services; more opportunities for respite; and a better balance of power between caregivers and “the system.”
2. **Increase emotional and practical supports for caseworkers.** This includes more professional development for new caseworkers; access to mentorship and community; restructuring job duties to separate paperwork duties from relationship building with caregivers and children; and restructuring assignments to help them better manage their caseloads.
3. **Improve communications between all elements of the system.** This includes developing ways to share information more efficiently and in a more timely manner; using technology, training, and new staffing structures to reduce the paperwork burden so foster parents and case managers can focus on their relationships with each other and with the children in their care; and gathering ongoing feedback to spot and identify problems as they crop up.
4. **Put the “Reasonable and Prudent Parent” standard into action** so that it is widely understood and broadly applied.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

These practical solutions arose from the research and consensus-building process.

1. Increase emotional and practical supports for caregivers.

- **Improve the onboarding process for new caregivers.**
 - **Offer caregivers the same level of training and support** as foster parents. Relative and non-relative caregivers, who often are put in charge of children suddenly and during a family crisis, need opportunities for training on how to

access resources, handle paperwork, and parent their new charges. Training should include understanding trauma and de-escalation techniques.

- Consider follow-up refreshers via webinars or at caregiver gatherings.
- **Make mental health counseling automatic.** Families need help adjusting, and many foster children need, and are eligible for, mental health services. But currently it can take months for the paperwork to process so children can access services. By providing mental health services as an automatic part of the onboarding process, families can receive the help they need immediately until longer-term services are put into place.
- **Provide a welcome basket.** Celebrate the formation of a new family with practical help for settling a child in a new home. The basket should include items required for licensing (such as a fire extinguisher) as well as gift cards for food, clothing and amenities. Empower and respect caregivers' new responsibilities by allowing them to choose what to buy rather than having these items purchased by others.
- **Provide mentorship and community.** Assign a caregiver advocate and/or mentor before (whenever possible) or immediately after children are placed in the home. Make sure new families know about and are welcomed to organized caregiver meetings.
- **Develop an easy-to-update, user-friendly list of resources,** including support and services available to caregivers and information on how to access them. This list could be housed online or could be included as part of the welcome basket.
- **Increase respite care options.** Caregivers need better and more timely access to other licensed caregivers who can step in during an emergency or give them a much-needed break. Potential solutions include:
 - Develop a program that uses families who are waiting to adopt. These families are already background checked, in the system, and ready to welcome children into their home.
 - Develop "foster flocks," which are faith-based communities who can provide licensed and trained respite care.
- **Increase transparency about children's needs at the time of placement.** Caregivers need a holistic view of the child coming into their care, and should not feel like information is being withheld in order to make a "difficult" placement. One potential solution is to provide caregivers with a standardized list of key information before

children are placed, including an assessment of their behavioral issues and psychological needs, as well as information about their likes and interests.

- **Treat caregiver families as families.** Support normalcy in as many ways possible, including treating foster and caregiver families as the family unit that they are. Some potential way to encourage this approach:
 - **Develop family teams of caseworkers** so caregivers with multiple children don't have a different caseworker for each child.
 - **Keep foster families together when possible.** When foster children with behavioral disorders improve, their classification changes and the child may be moved to a new home. This is potentially destabilizing, and also encourages children to act out if they are afraid they will be moved.
 - There may be a need to build up the number of families who are licensed for more difficult placements.
- **Work to surface and prioritize practical supports that foster families most need.** Caregivers face many real challenges, from finding adequate child care, to buying safety equipment, to coping with transportation issues and emergency respite care. Engage caregivers in an ongoing process that incorporates their perspective as problems are identified and solutions are prioritized.
- **Make more use of 3- and 5-year licensing renewal options** to help caregivers feel like a more permanent part of the system rather than asking them to re-evaluate their commitment each year.

2. Increase emotional and practical supports for caseworkers.

- **Increase professional development and mentorship.** New caseworkers, many of whom are recent college graduates in a new job, need help with time management as they learn to juggle multiple cases — each with multiple deadlines and requirements (such as monthly home visits). They also need safe places where they can ask questions and unburden themselves on tough days. Some potential solutions include:
 - **“Tier” staff job requirements**, so newer staff have fewer and more focused responsibilities, and they are supported by more veteran supervisors who can provide a bigger-picture view.
 - **Balance the assignment of “tough” cases** so newer staff have time to build their field skills.

- **Consider introducing online project management systems** that could help staff juggle multiple deadlines.
- **Provide regular opportunities for professional development and skills training**, such as monthly Lunch & Learn webinars or conference calls.
- **Consider creating a peer mentor program, or an anonymous online forum.** This would allow caseworkers to safely discuss situations they've encountered and ask others how they would have handled it.
- **Provide more recognition and emotional support.**
 - **Increase and normalize access to mental health supports.** Casework can be tough. All staff should have access to counseling and mental health services to cope.
 - **Recognize good work.** Recognize case workers who go above and beyond, and prioritize the wellbeing of children. Rewards could include a choice of incentives, such as a special parking spot for the month, an extra vacation day, or a gift card.
- **Reduce the amount of time case workers spend driving.** This could be accomplished in a number of ways, such as:
 - **Assign caseworkers by geographical area**, so their cases are not so spread apart.
 - **Develop other options for transporting children to supervised visits.** Trained staff who could transport and supervise children during visits with biological parents would free up caseworker time for other tasks.
- **Reduce the paperwork burden on field staff.** The sheer amount of paperwork leaves caseworkers feeling like they can never catch up, and it shifts priorities away from relationship building to processing paperwork and "checking boxes." Some potential solutions include:
 - **Assign some staff to focus solely on paperwork** and allow others to focus solely on field work.
 - **Develop tools that improve communications** (see below).

3. Improve communications between all elements of the system.

- **Work to change the current last-minute, reactive culture to one that expects proactive planning.** This will help both caseworkers and caregivers have more control over prioritizing their time, which will lead to more positive relationships. Leadership can enforce the use of time management and shared calendar tools mentioned below and remind employees to be always planning ahead (making sure to model this behavior themselves).
- **Create an online document vault for caregivers and caseworkers** where all case records are uploaded. This would allow caregivers to find all documentation pertaining to a child's case, including court transcripts. This would alleviate caregivers' need to constantly request information from their case team, and their frustration when busy caseworkers don't respond. This would also help in onboarding new caseworkers to a case. All the documentation could be centralized in an online vault, ensuring it does not get lost during personnel changes.
- **Develop a shared online calendar** between caregivers and the case team. This will allow the caregivers to know about upcoming appointments or court dates, and will help caseworkers schedule home visits more efficiently and around caregivers' availability.
- **Consider monthly conference calls with the caregiver / case team.** This would help all team members involved in a child's wellbeing provide and receive timely updates, flag areas that need attention, and schedule home visits around the caregivers' schedule. This will also reinforce a shared understanding that caregivers are a valued and essential part of the case team.
- **Develop a process to increase communication across counties and agencies** to ensure updates and standards are communicated and discussed in a more consistent manner.
- **Gather ongoing feedback.** This will allow leadership to identify bright spots and potential problems, and provide insight into what both staff and caregivers need logistically and emotionally to feel supported and improve retention. Potential ways to gather feedback include:
 - **Conduct an anonymous survey** bi-annually or annually to both internal staff and caregivers.
 - **Conduct exit surveys** when staff or caregivers exit the system, to identify pain points for each group.

- **Develop a clear process for caregivers to appropriately escalate concerns or complaints.** This could be folded into the Embrace Families Normalcy Line (see below), or it could be a separate process. This process would be an additional step to the feedback button on the website.

4. Put the Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard into action.

- **Create a Normalcy Line** that caregivers and the case team can call to determine if something falls under Florida's reasonable and prudent parenting standards. The Embrace Families staff member answering the Normalcy Line would serve as the final authority, assuming responsibility for the decision to alleviate caregiver and caseworker liability fears. Staff answering calls would need to be trained on how and when to respond to particular concerns. For example, calls could be triaged so those requiring an immediate response are answered after hours and on weekends, but less-urgent requests are responded to in a timely manner during normal business hours. This would help avoid undue burden on staff and unnecessary overtime and burnout.
 - **Normalcy Line questions should be tracked** as part of ongoing collection of feedback in order to build a database of situations and circumstances that regularly arise with the aim of creating clear protocols for a standard that can often feel vague.
- **Increase communications around the "Normalcy Policy."** The Normalcy Policy is designed to signal leadership support for the state's reasonable and prudent parenting standards. However, many caregivers and caseworkers do not understand the nuances of the policy, if they even know it exists. Some solutions include:
 - **Embed information** about the normal policy in caregiver and caseworker training.
 - **Develop a short overview** of the policy that provides the rationale and legal justification to help alleviate fears of liability. The overview could be placed on the Embrace Families website and distributed at meetings.
 - **Use social media** to provide examples of what the Normalcy Policy looks like in practice.
 - **Track hotline requests** to spot trends that can be addressed during ongoing communications.