

# FOSTER TOGETHER NETWORK

UNITING TO GROW NURTURING HOMES FOR KIDS IN CRISIS



## OUR MISSION

We are a synergistic group of public and private partners committed to helping recruit and retain resource families in LA County.

Access to a nurturing home is essential to ease the transition and aid in the healing process as children enter foster care. In the past few years, the number of available foster homes was nearly cut in half<sup>1</sup>, putting the system into crisis. As a result, children were separated from siblings, placed hours away from their home, school, and community, and in some cases put in overcrowded shelters or institutions because no homes were available. From 2013 to 2017, multiple LA Times articles highlighted the extreme shortage of placements for children. The 2014 Blue Ribbon Commission final report similarly highlighted the “shortage of safe and appropriate foster homes.”<sup>2</sup> The Commissioners called for change, stating “on our watch, many of Los Angeles County’s most vulnerable children are unseen, unheard and unsafe.”<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing this dire situation, First 5 LA and The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation launched a collective impact effort, in collaboration with the Center for Strategic Partnership (the Center), the LA County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and various public and private partners, to make sure kids received the care they need. Forming what would soon become the Foster Together Network, these partners formed a broad based coalition of stakeholders, working to reverse the trend and increase the number of foster families in Los Angeles County. Using an innovative model, the Network has since successfully engaged new families through pilot programs and promoted lasting systems change through data-driven decision-making and collaboration.

<sup>1</sup>Wagner, J. & Garen, W. (2018). Cover Letter to Landscape Analysis of Recruitment of Resource Families for Children Ages 0-5 in Los Angeles County by Gita Cugley and Associates. First 5 LA & The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation.

<sup>2</sup>Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. (2014, April 18). “The Road to Safety for Our Children: Final Report of the Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection.”

<sup>3</sup>Therolf, Garrett. (2014, April 10). L.A. County’s child protection system in ‘state of emergency.’ Los Angeles Times.

## SPARKS & EARLY HISTORY

The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, First 5 LA, The Center<sup>4</sup>, and DCFS initiated the first sparks of the Foster Together Network (FTN) in April 2017. Recognizing the critical shortage of foster homes in Los Angeles, they convened a strong starting set of philanthropic and public sectors partners around this issue. Initial participants included Southern California Grantmakers, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Pritzker Foster Care Initiative, Fostering Media Connections, WM Keck Foundation, Weingart Foundation, and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors' Children's Deputies.

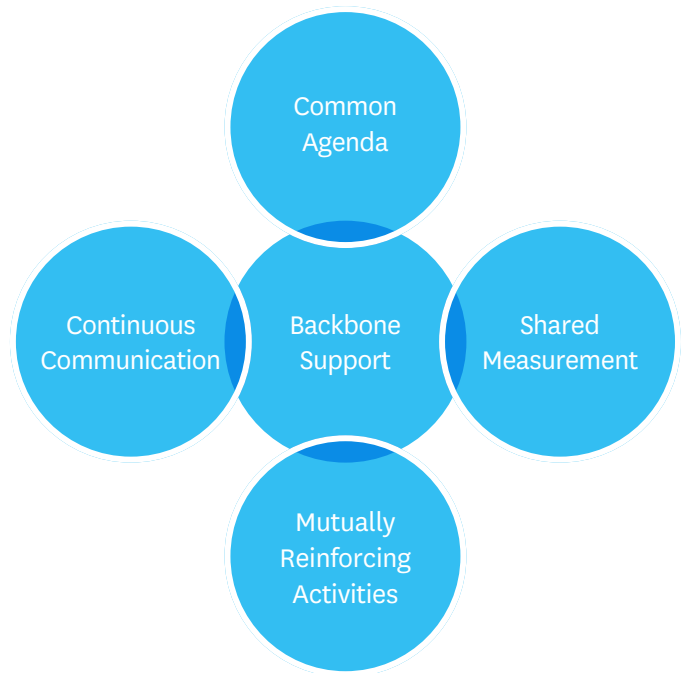
As the group convened they immediately adopted a shared commitment to address the extreme shortfall of foster parents. They embraced the DCFS Director's vision for a system to optimally match children with foster parents who can best meet their needs, there must be three foster families available for each child in the foster care system. Finally, the group committed to building a public-private network, utilizing the principles of Collective Impact Theory<sup>5</sup> — set apart from other collaborative models by its five conditions for collective success— to ensure lasting systems change in the county's foster care system.

## BUILDING A COLLECTIVE IMPACT NETWORK

In keeping with Collective Impact's call for a common agenda, FTN adopted the following mission: "We are a synergistic group of public and private partners committed to helping recruit and retain non-relative resource families in LA County." The group engaged additional stakeholders to ensure broad-based collaboration through mutually reinforcing activities, with initial backbone support provided by The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation.

FTN also lifted up the crucial importance of shared measurement systems and data-driven decision-making as foundational to their work, and to achieving optimal impact. Collecting data is fundamental to identifying gaps to effect systemic change. The Network commissioned an initial landscape analysis<sup>6</sup> by Gita Cugley & Associates, which examined the recruitment of foster families for children from birth to age five. This comprehensive analysis of the status of the foster care system in Los Angeles county and beyond identified barriers to recruitment and retention, highlighted national models from other communities to explore further, and proposed specific programs to pilot. Resulting recommendations included: creating pilots that partner with faith-based communities, partnering with agencies outside of DCFS to accommodate the needs of special populations (e.g., siblings, infants, underrepresented communities, and children with disabilities), and working with Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) to implement the Mockingbird Family Model, a peer support framework that has been applied in other communities, to much success. As a result of the landscape, the Network formed workgroups to tackle specific opportunities to improve to foster family participation. The Network formed a Faith-based Partnerships workgroup that initiated pilot programs in partnership with the faith-based community. It also formed a Data workgroup aimed at improving DCFS' data tracking systems so that leaders could keep a better pulse on foster family capacity and be more strategic in proactively addressing the recruitment needs. As a key player in this space, the Network also aimed to engage and support FFAs and identified them as a vital partner to be included in the Network to drive the increase in foster family participation.

### Collective Impact Theory: Five Conditions of Success



<sup>4</sup> The Center for Strategic Partnerships is a unique half-governmental, half-philanthropic organization whose purpose was to build public-private partnerships in support of Los Angeles governmental systems change, with a particular eye toward child welfare and well-being. One of its founding priorities included addressing the recruitment and retention of foster families.

<sup>5</sup> Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011). *Collective Impact*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Innovation Review Winter 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Gita Cugley & Associates Consulting. (2018). *Landscape Analysis of Recruitment of Resource Families for Children Ages 0-5 in Los Angeles County*. Los Angeles, CA.



## **FAITH-BASED PILOT PROGRAMS**

The Network found early success in their work with the faith-based community, building on the existing partnerships DCFS and the Center had already built in this space.

Working with DCFS, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and the Board offices, the Center helped create and establish the unique and innovative Fostering Home pilot program with initial events in Pomona and South Los Angeles. The comprehensive one-day events partnered with local churches to recruit foster families. The events not only included information on serving as a foster family, but also allowed participants to begin the approval process including an orientation, background checks, health screenings and assistance with paperwork. The initial events were jointly funded by DCFS and philanthropy using a braided funding model. Both pilot events were deemed successful.

Ultimately, between May and June of 2019 four Fostering Home and four additional similar recruitment events were produced across the diverse regions of Los Angeles in partnership with RaiseAChild, FosterAll, Daley Solutions, Probation, DCFS, the Commission for Children and Families, the LA County Board of Supervisors offices, and twenty-one FFA partners between May and June of 2019; six-hundred and fourteen prospective parents participated in these eight events and 205 of those households were moving through the approval process as of the release date of this report. DCFS has embraced the Fostering Home model in partnership with district offices to produce similar recruitment events county-wide.

South Los Angeles community leaders were so inspired by the event that they coordinated a coalition with leaders from six local large African-American churches. This effort led to the creation of the Faith Foster Families Network (3FN) aimed at foster family recruitment and support in their community. In partnership with the Foster Together Network, this group has made admirable strides recruiting and supporting foster families in the South Los Angeles community in addition to serving as a model for other similar coalitions to form county-wide.



The timing of the first Fostering Home event and the Network’s recognition of the faith-based community as a natural partner for resource family recruitment and retention aligned seamlessly with DCFS’ broader efforts to partner with the faith-based community across the county more strategically. Fostering Home successfully deepened relationships between DCFS, the private sector and the faith community through its cross-sector planning, which integrated philanthropic, faith, private nonprofit and public leaders, including Los Angeles County Supervisor Barger’s team. This success helped earn the support of Supervisor Barger’s office for strategic investment in the potential to build even deeper, broader relationships with faith communities.

In September 2018, a motion<sup>7</sup> authored by Supervisors Barger and Solis, which passed unanimously, directed DCFS to work with the Center to create a county-wide faith-based engagement strategy. The motion called for DCFS and the Center to engage a consultant in the work to create a county-wide faith-based engagement framework, and identify pilot programs for implementation in each supervisory district, including potential programs to address foster family recruitment and other priorities. The motion also asked DCFS to explore the creation of a centralized, faith-based engagement office, to be charged with coordinating and tracking all DCFS-involved faith-based partnerships and collaborations throughout the County. This work, currently underway and being led by the faith-based consultant, will build upon and leverage existing relationships between DCFS regional offices and local communities of faith; establish new partnerships; and, institutionalize a framework for sustaining ongoing collaboration and support.

Together, the Fostering Home events and promising work related to a county-wide faith-based engagement strategy have encouraged and emboldened the Network to continue their mission in this important work. This effort wove together and leveraged numerous smart stakeholders in thoughtful and successful partnership. It also provided great learning to help us continue to refine and inform future iterations.

## **GOING DEEPER AND BROADER**

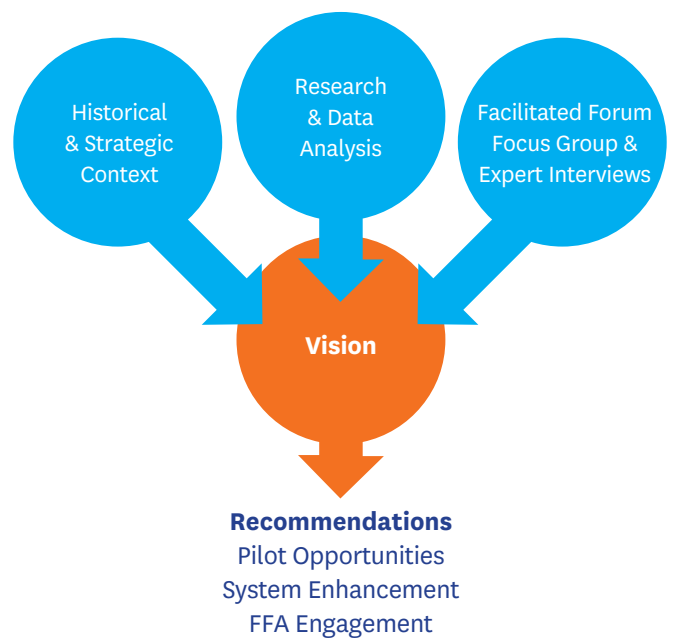
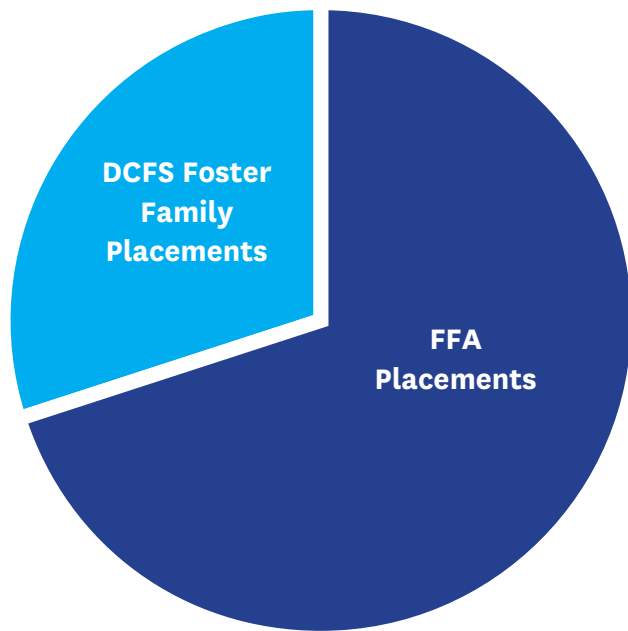
Through the early success of this collaborative and innovative model, the Network developed a deep desire to maximize the impact of their effort. The Network decided to delve deeper in the data analysis, planning, implementation, and engagement of foster family agencies as additional stakeholders in the next phase of this effort.

FTN brought in experienced and dedicated consultants to provide additional backbone support to keep the group’s momentum and buttress the next phase of data development, stakeholder expansion, planning, and integration of Network activities with key related County efforts. The Network commissioned a deep analysis of the Los Angeles County FFA industry to identify and inform opportunities to improve coordination and support. FFAs play a critical role in the foster care space, providing two-thirds of out-of-home care by non-relatives; the Network recognized the necessity of better understanding and engaging the FFA community in order to build a cohesive, effective system for children in foster care.

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<sup>7</sup> Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. (2018). Statement of Proceedings for the Regular Meeting of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Los Angeles. (p.22).

## A FOCUS ON FOSTER FAMILY AGENCIES

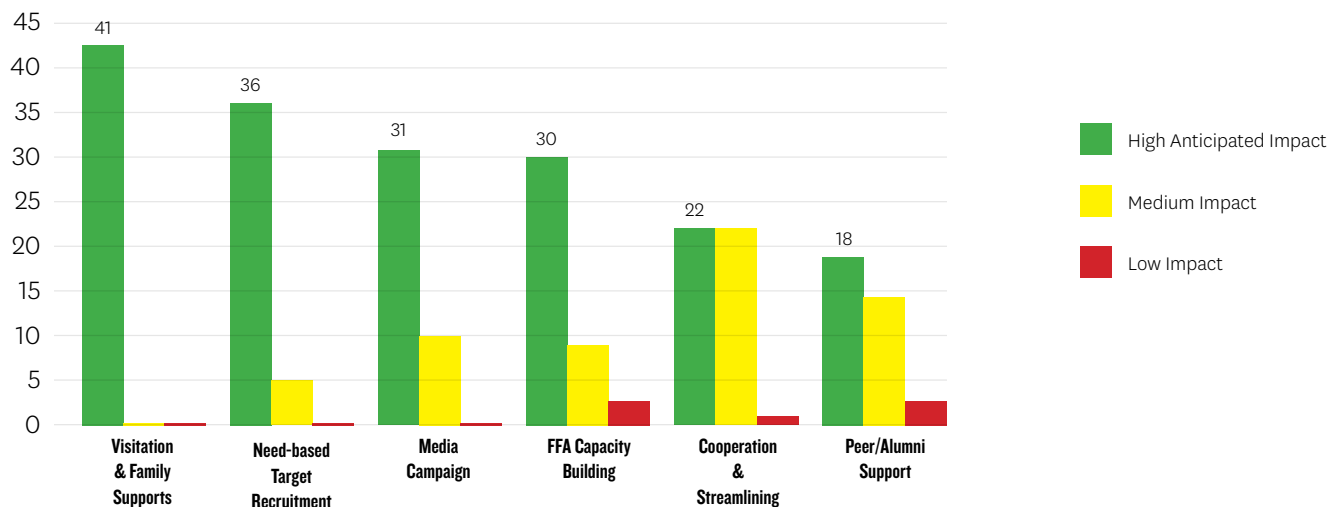


The second landscape analysis (“Landscape 2.0”)<sup>8</sup> was produced by Big Orange Splot, LLC, and dug deep into understanding the role of FFAs, establishing a baseline of the industry’s participants, recruitment practices, and dynamics. It gathered their perspectives regarding recruitment and retention challenges and opportunities, using community input forums, a thorough review of recent studies, interviews, and focus groups to gather data.

Echoing prior studies, Landscape 2.0 identified word of mouth as one the most effective assets an agency has for recruitment. Challenges facing the industry included compliance with recent requirements resulting from the implementation of the California’s new Continuum of Care Reform (CCR)— as such the newly mandated fee structure and the complexity of implementing additional accreditation requirements and administrative procedures when organizations are already operating on razor-thin budgets.

The top opportunity identified as having the highest potential to impact the retention and recruitment of foster families was increasing supports to foster families (including but not limited to visitation assistance, child care, and mental health resources). Other opportunities identified by FFAs around retention and recruitment of foster families included need-based targeted recruitment & media campaigns emphasizing short-term fostering versus adoption, FFA capacity building, improved systemic cooperation, and growing foster parent peer ambassador programs.

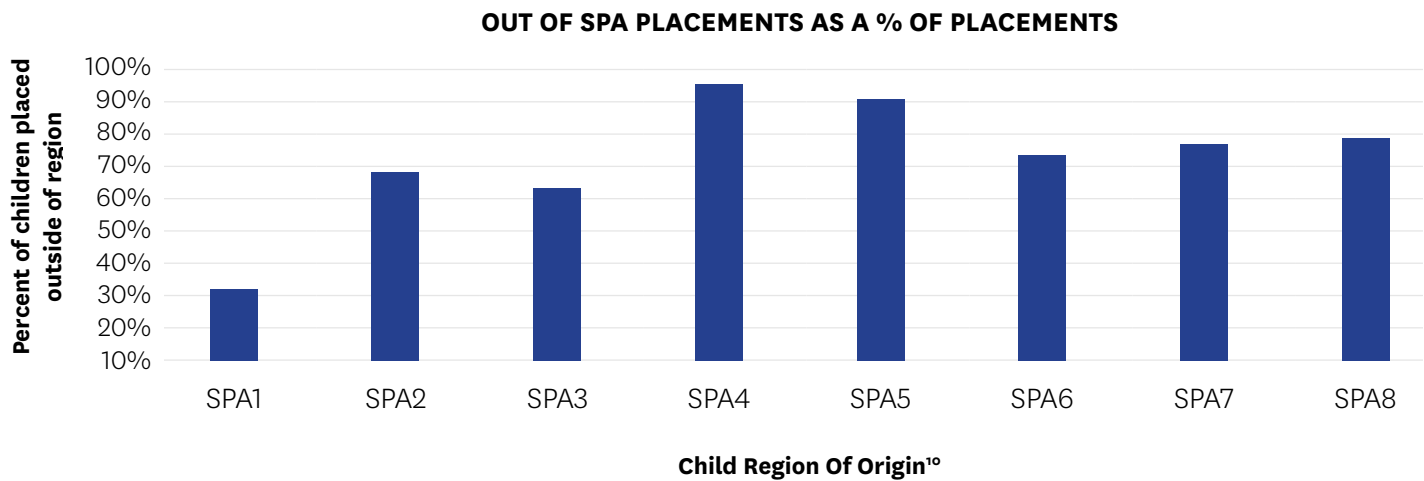
### FFA FEEDBACK ON COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



<sup>8</sup> Alley, R. & Morales, A. (2019). Landscape 2.0: FFA Industry Analysis & Strategic Recommendations. Los Angeles, CA.

## PERCENT OF CHILDREN PLACED OUTSIDE REGION OF ORIGIN, BY REGION

DATA FROM DCFS, AS OF JULY 2018



Landscape 2.0 also underscored the drastic, fundamental problems caused by the frequent placement of children in foster homes located far from their birth parents and from their community of origin. According to a 2019 study by Chapin Hall<sup>9</sup>, children in Los Angeles County foster care are placed an average of 22 miles from their parents. The issue of long-distance placement is most urgent in Service Planning Area (SPA) 6, the South Los Angeles area with the highest child removal rates. Long-distance child-family matching is a problem on many levels, including the burdensome demands it places on family visitation and bonding activities. The further a child lives from his or her family of origin, the more challenging visitation becomes for both birth and foster families. With visits occurring often 3 or 4 days a week, and foster parents often being expected to transport children to the visits, these requirements prevented many available families from taking in children and burned out other families. Furthermore, research shows that successful visitation increases the likelihood of reunification; therefore, long-distance placements can hinder reunification. Last but not least, it is suboptimal for children to be placed outside of their school environment and sit in traffic for hours a week. The Landscape lifted up the opportunity to tackle this challenge from multiple angles within our system, including through placement policy, visitation support, and recruitment efforts.

Positively, the learning from Landscape 2.0 re-enforced the value of many initiatives already underway within DCFS and among FTN partners. For example, DCFS had already partnered with philanthropy to launch a Family Bonding Initiative to increase visitation monitoring resources, identify more convenient visitation sites, and improve training for monitors. The Los Angeles Department of Mental Health and DCFS had already partnered with philanthropy to bring in several Foster America fellows to work on key mental health access issues. The Los Angeles County Probation Department and DCFS had also invested in a targeted media campaign to increase the recruitment of families for older children. The Landscape 2.0 results presented an opportunity for philanthropic and other private sector partners to leverage and augment these investments through Foster Together Network’s continued and expanding partnerships.

Landscape 2.0 provided a range of recommendations to improve the recruitment and retention of additional foster families in the county. These recommendations included (1) launching a foster parent ambassador initiative (using current or former foster parents to help recruit and support foster families, as is done in the Mockingbird and other models), (2) improving visitation support, (3) improving placement processes, (4) integrating FFAs into the growing faith-based initiatives,

The Foster Together Network has always been committed to making decisions based on the best data available.

<sup>9</sup>Weiner, D., Stiehl, M., O’Brien, J., & Patel, S. (2019). Los Angeles Family Bonding Initiative: Analytic support – Final report. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<sup>10</sup>Non-relative and non-supervised Independent Living Program (“SILP”) placements outside home Service Planning Area (“SPA”)



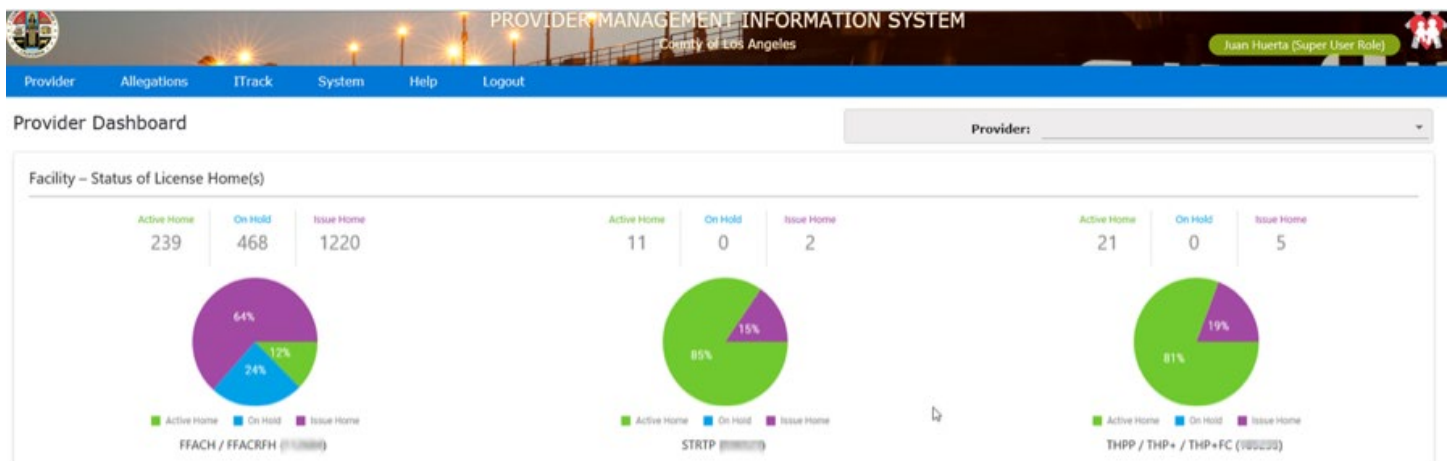
(5) enhancing data systems for tracking recruitment and retention system-wide, (6) improve targeted marketing to support recruitment of foster parents versus adoptive homes and to support geographies most in need, (7) improve teaming among departments, parents, providers and other stakeholders. It also recommended considering a SPA 6 geographic focus to near-term investments, particularly as the Network considers opportunities for partnership with the FFA community.

The discussions and facilitated feedback forums initiated to inform the Landscape analysis also gave the Network a wonderful opportunity to connect and build ongoing relationships with FFAs and their leadership and engage them as Network partners. To increase FFA engagement, the Network launched and continues to facilitate a joint FFA-Philanthropic-County workgroup that is focused on growing best-practices and coordination to ensure optimal recruitment and retention of families across all sectors.

## DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

The Foster Together Network has always been committed to making decisions based on the best data available. Together, both landscape analyses gave the Network a comprehensive picture of the current system. Through the research process, it became clear that the limitations of current data systems were holding the LA system back. The Network regularly hosts a Data Workgroup to focus on these important issues. This workgroup developed draft data dashboard metrics to support DCFS’ desire to strengthen real-time foster resource management; they also researched national best-practice dashboard models. In addition, the Network hosted a presentation and discussion with information technology staff from DCFS on the current and future state of DCFS’ relevant data systems. This joint group is now in the process of vetting ideas proposed during the meeting and intertwining their efforts, so that together they can move toward an optimal IT infrastructure for foster parent recruitment, monitoring, placement and support.

## SAMPLE DRAFT DASHBOARD CONTENT



## OUR COLLECTIVE ACTION PLAN

The Foster Together Network has a profound base of support and will continue facilitating this synergy—pooling investments to pilot model programs and ultimately achieve systems change. The Network will address the most pressing priorities both systemically (through data, placement, and quality improvement initiatives) and with a need-based lens (addressing geographic, intensive care, and other acute priorities). It will do so in lock-step with both public and private leaders, remaining flexible and nimble so that it may dynamically respond to the changing needs of the LA community.

As a group, the Network holds two long term goals for better serving the County’s children: first, strengthening foster family recruitment and retention, and second, ensuring high-quality care. It has identified metrics that align with each of these two goals, as displayed in “Our North Stars” below.

### OUR NORTH STARS:

#### Foster Together Network’s Shared Metrics

##### Long-term Goal #1:

Strengthen and coordinate the foster family recruitment and retention efforts to better meet child and youth needs in Los Angeles County

- a. Recruitment: Increase speed and rates of foster parent approval
- b. Retention: Improve retention rates of foster parents
- c. Efficacy: Reduce number of children and total days in shelter, congregate care or temporary emergency placements

##### Long-term Goal #2:

Ensure high-quality care for children who need to be temporarily or permanently separated from their birth parents

- a. Geographic Placement: Decrease average placement distance
- b. Stability: Decrease average number of placements experienced by children in care prior to permanency
- c. Permanency: Reduce length of time in out-of-home care

##### Short-term Goals to Address Current Gaps:

- i. Increase in placements of children with high behavioral support needs (Intensive Services Foster Care)
- ii. Increase in placement of SPA 6 children in homes in SPA 6

## CORE PARTNERSHIP VALUES

### Simultaneously focused & flexible:

As the County’s short term needs evolve, Network partnerships will stay both nimble and focused on ensuring quality homes for kids in care.

### Commitment to data-driven strategies:

We use data to drive our collaborative investments and work actively to support the County’s use of data to inform optimal strategic decisions.

### Bridge-building and best-practices:

We seek to activate stakeholders and optimize coordination across the public-private continuum, from DCFS infrastructure to philanthropic & non-profit institutions, to faith and individual community members, including birth and resource parents.

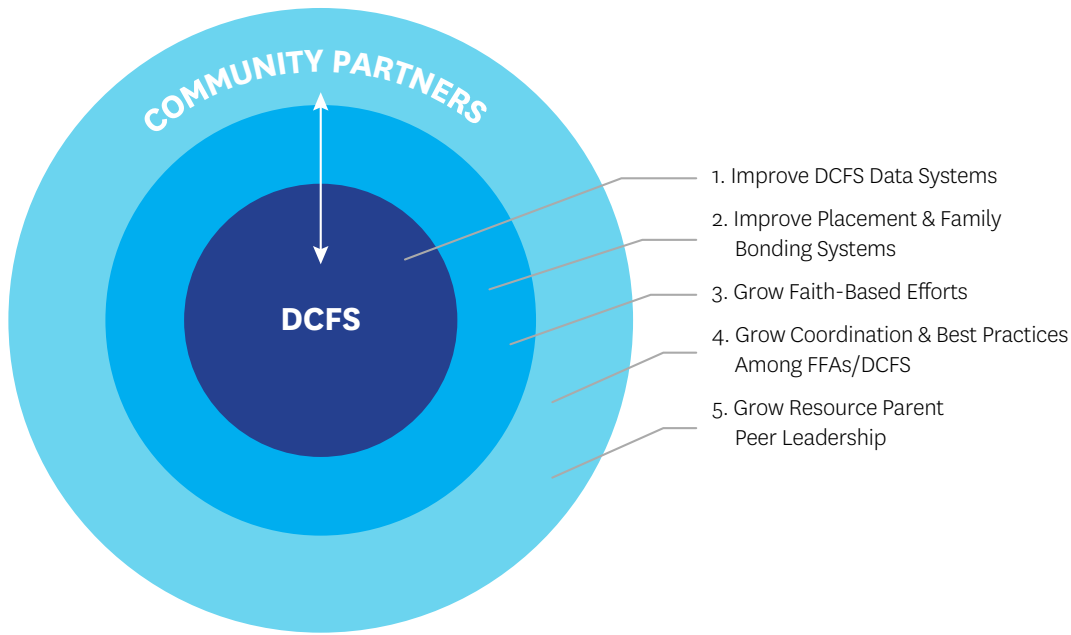
In addition to these long term measures, the Network has identified two short-term interests related to the current system’s most urgent needs: (1) improving recruitment and support of foster families in the South Los Angeles area, and (2) increasing the number of families that can accommodate children with high-level behavioral support needs. This second short-term objective is a poignant example of how the network lives out its values of simultaneous focus and flexibility. The shortage of families for children with high-level behavioral support needs was a timely challenge identified by County leadership during the CCR transition, as the department sought to transition youth out of group care settings; in response to this emerging need, the network has integrated it into its exploration and planning.

## NEAR-TERM SYSTEM BUILDING SOLUTIONS

Network members are moving forward on a range of system-building solutions, many of which are already in motion. Together, these solutions are activating new partners, improving the coordination of existing resources, and elevating best-practices across our system.



## Foster Together Network: Collective Impact System Building Opportunities



SOLUTIONS IN MOTION	LOGIC
Improve Data Systems	Effective data-driven decision-making for retention, recruitment and quality requires real-time information about needs, gaps, pipeline, efficacy, problem tracking and quality outcomes.
Improve Placement & Family Bonding Systems	With better matching, children could stay within their own schools and communities, sibling placements could increase, child needs could be better matched to caregiver skills, reunification would be better supported, and visitation would be more manageable for caregivers.
Grow Faith-Based Efforts	Faith communities represent an under-used resource for the support of foster parents and the recruitment of new foster parents. Faith institutions are providers of care and relationship builders. Expanding faith-based partnership will help ensure optimal growth, harness and support these partnerships.
Grow Coordination and Best Practices Among FFAs, County departments & others	Building a team culture and coordinated system would improve the quality of care, accessibility of the system to new parents and parent satisfaction.
Grow Foster Parent Ambassador & Leadership Programs	Engagement of current and former foster parents as peer leaders, mentors and ambassadors can improve the quality of placements-- decreasing disruptions, improving caregiver skills, and increasing retention through improved support. It can also improve the recruitment of new families by increasing word of mouth referral and peer support during the certification process.



The network already has achieved substantial traction on these solutions. In addition to the data, faith, and cross-sector coordination efforts described above, network member advocacy has enabled DCFS to adopt improving placement and matching improvement to its strategic priorities list and as of the time of this report is in the process of launching a team to focus on improving placement practices. This is a wonderful win for all collaborative members (County, philanthropic, and FFA partners alike) who each played rolls in analyzing and lifting up the inter-relationship between visitation challenges, retention of resource families, bonding/reunification challenges and the root impact that placement has on all of these areas. The Network is well poised to continue to deepen its impact as it drives forward each of these solutions, and as it keeps our ears open for additional solutions as community needs evolve.

With a coordinated effort between multiple stakeholders, the Network hopes to ensure lasting, systemic change on core child welfare issues.

## **JOIN US IN ACHIEVING SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

It is an exciting time for the Foster Together Network and the transformation of the foster family recruitment and retention system in Los Angeles. Community Care Reform, Family First, and new DCFS leadership are providing a time of challenge, strategic change and new opportunities for investments. This partnership planted deep roots, creating an evolving public-private network utilizing a Collective Impact model that values continued learning and innovation. The Network will continue to build, test and refine pilot programs that are contributing to the larger scale systemic changes that are ultimately needed. The Network strives to improve the recruitment and retention of foster parents, while enriching the quality of care available and ultimately providing the optimal environment for each child.

It is a big challenge to grow successful pilot models into systemic change. However, the Foster Together Network sees this as an opportunity to transform Los Angeles County, the state of California and serve as an example nationally for collaborative engagement in best practices advancing the recruitment and retention of foster families. This is an opportunity to be a part of the solution—to change the lives of children and improve the system that finds them a home.

Join us. For more information on the Foster Together Network and the collective partnership we have built contact the Center For Strategic Partnerships at [Rochelle@socialimpactadvisory.com](mailto:Rochelle@socialimpactadvisory.com).



## THANK YOU TO OUR CURRENT & GROWING PARTNERS

Association of Community Human  
Service Agencies

Aviva Family and Children's Services

Ballmer Group

Casey Family Programs

Center for Strategic Partnerships

Children's Bureau

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Crail-Johnson Foundation

Eggleston Youth Centers

Extraordinary Families

First 5 LA

Fostering Media Connections

Fred Jefferson

Gita Cugley and Associates

Guardians of Love

Hillsides

Invest In Kids LA

Los Angeles Commission for Children and Families

Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

Los Angeles County Department of Children  
and Family Services

Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health

Los Angeles County Probation Department

Nuevo Amanecer Latino Children's Services

Olive Crest

Pritzker Foster Care Initiative

The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation

Seneca Family of Agencies

Southern California Grantmakers

University of California at Los Angeles

Victor

Village Family Services

Wayfinder Family Services

Weingart Foundation

WM Keck Foundation

