



Church Centered Engagement in Foster Care

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PURPOSE:

This project's aim was to engage churches and faith leaders in foster care initiatives, identify barriers to engagement, and develop a framework for deeper, church-centered involvement. This report compiles background information, highlights steps taken in the project, discusses outcomes, and suggests pathways moving forward.

BACKGROUND:

In 2024, Welborn Baptist Foundation (WBF) released the *Foster Care in Southwestern Indiana White Paper*. This White Paper was the result of community members, agencies, and the Transform Consulting Group (TCG), coming together to understand the landscape and needs of foster care in Gibson, Posey, Vanderburgh, and Warrick counties. This report was used as foundational understanding and guidance of how this project could further explore faith community involvement, specifically in Vanderburgh and Warrick Counties. The following are their recommendations for faith communities:

Convene Faith Communities for Collaboration

1. Local churches are working in various ways to support foster care. By convening a group of representatives from the faith community, these efforts can be coordinated. SWIFT: Southwest Indiana Foster Team is already convening four organizations and is willing to expand.
2. SWIFT may act as a backbone collaboration among the faith community and other nonprofit organizations serving children in foster care and foster and kinship care families. As a backbone collaboration, SWIFT can be the convener, ensuring regular meetings with agendas and consistent communication. If SWIFT is not able to serve as a backbone collaboration, another organization should be identified. Over time, the organizations can all pay into the backbone organization to hire a facilitator to oversee the group and move the needle on foster care efforts.
3. Create a strategic plan with goals and strategies so the faith community and other nonprofit organizations can move foster care efforts forward together. Include a regular meeting cadence that allows members to address and monitor action steps in the plan.

Create and Expand Programming that Offers Families Support

1. Programs that strengthen families can decrease the cases of neglect. Providing programming such as Strengthening Indiana Families Family

Resource Centers can help provide families the resources they need to get through the tough times in life, decrease stress, and prevent neglect.

2. Help create a village for a family through programming like Safe Families for Children. Wraparound care for families who do not have others to turn to can mean the difference between a successful or a struggling family.

3. Support foster and kinship care families through training and community. Giving foster families the network they need to foster children successfully, may lead to retaining foster parents.

Create and Expand Concrete Supports in Southwest Indiana & Identify strategies to address barriers such as limited service availability and staffing shortages

1. Assist Hands of Hope's efforts with CarePortal. Work to increase the number of churches and business partnerships.

2. Identify and support nonprofit organizations and churches that offer concrete support to families. Concrete support has the potential of preventing a child from foster care placement.

3. The community may find ways to support and encourage child welfare staff, which can help them feel less burdened and increase retention.

Narrowing this down further, there were three main recommendations:

1. **Develop a Strategic Plan for Coordinated Efforts:** Coordinate efforts of faith-based organizations and churches by developing a strategic plan that focuses on clearly defined goals and strategies to positively impact foster care efforts with a designated convening entity.
2. **Provision of Family Support:** Creating activities and programming that strengthens families through access to tangible resources and supportive relationships that “wrap-around” biological, foster, kinship, and adoptive families.
3. **Meet Tangible Needs (Families and Stakeholders):** Expand efforts to more fully engage the faith community to meet concrete needs of families as well as child welfare staff.

From these recommendations, a review of the literature and existing models of faith community involvement in foster care were explored.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE/PROGRAM MODELS

MORE THAN ENOUGH MODEL

The Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO) is an organization formed due to the shared vision of many different church leaders to mobilize churches to care for orphans (2025). This organization has grown over the years and brings together many of the leading ministries that are working to support children and families. This coalition has become effective in collaborating, supporting, and making a positive impact in the lives of children across the globe. One area in which CAFO is engaged is the child welfare and foster care space. The More Than Enough Model Initiative provides churches, organizations, and advocates with resources and a shared space to work toward a shared vision where there are more than enough resources for children and families before, during, and beyond foster care. Members of the More Than Enough community believe “there is more than enough (resources) already, because there is more than enough. We’re just not fully engaging in it” (CAFO, 2025b).

The More Than Enough model has four specific goal areas. 1) every child has an ideal placement 2) availability of adoptive families for every child waiting for adoption. 3) stabilize and reunify biological families 4) provide wrap-around support from the church to each of those families (CAFO, 2025b). The More Than Enough website (CAFO, 2025b) provides access to several different resources to encourage church leaders and interested community members to get involved in foster care. They provide several online and live courses to help individuals get started in mobilizing their church and community. These courses can help equip churches with tools to communicate the More Than Enough vision, provide a guide to discover the strengths and gaps in the foster care system of your geographical location, and create a workshop to help tell your story with care and confidence. The website also provides a list of videos, podcasts, and books to equip and mobilize your church and community.

Jason Johnson is the National Director of Church Ministry and Engagement with CAFO and is an author of four books related to foster care ministry. His book titled *Everyone Can Do Something* (2020) embraces the More Than Enough model and is a field guide for helping churches determine how they can uniquely step into a ministry that works for their church in making a positive impact on vulnerable children and families. Stepping into the foster care space can be overwhelming and intimidating, however, this book communicates that “we’re not all called to do the same thing, but we’re all certainly capable of doing something” (p. 34). The More Than Enough Model provides a framework for churches, organizations, and individuals to find their “something”, linking the resources they already have in a collaborative way to make a difference.

1-1-1 PROJECT

The 1-1-1 Project is a non-profit organization based in Oklahoma (n.d.). Their goal is to have more foster families available than there are children who are in need of foster families. They state their program “exists to mobilize the local church so every child has a family. One church, one family, one purpose can change everything” (1-1-1 Project, n.d.). The project hopes to bridge the gaps between resources and opportunities by equipping local churches to engage directly with the issues of foster care in an easy and accessible way. They partner with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS), local businesses and agencies, as well as churches. The 1-1-1 Project is funded through a combination of private donations, grants, and partnerships.

Their website contains a wealth of information on foster care, with statistics of needs in their local communities, as well as resources and simple ways in which anyone can get involved (1-1-1 Project, n.d.). There are options for individuals to pledge to take actions, through prayer, pledge one or more individuals at their church to regularly engage with the project, and/or pledge their church to the purpose of the 1-1-1 Project. Easy access for individuals and churches to commit to several different levels of support through their website allows churches and individuals to conveniently provide as much support as they are able and easily understand how they can help.

The 1-1-1 Project runs the Oklahoma implementation of CarePortal—a tech platform that routes real-time needs from child welfare professionals to nearby churches and partners. This tech platform was developed in 2015 as part of the Global Orphan Project (1-1-1 Project, n.d.). It is used in several states across the US and allows churches and agencies to see the needs of families in their geographic area in real time. In 2024, there were over 5,000 churches actively using Care Portal. The ability for churches, caseworkers, and agencies to connect and communicate helps families access resources in their area.

Public reports show substantial throughput (needs met/children served), county expansion, and organized recruitment/support efforts, and the 1-1-1 Project has encouraged over 780 churches to be involved in foster care and has served over 44,000 children in Oklahoma (111 Project.org, n.d.). The number of children in foster care placement in Oklahoma has been reduced by almost half, going from approximately 11,500 in 2015 to under 6,000 children in care in 2024 (Barnett, n.d.; 111 Project.org, n.d.). This has been attributed to the state’s focus on prevention services, additional family finding initiatives, and the collaboration with 1-1-1 Project’s implementation of the Care Portal. There are other states that suggest associations between CarePortal activation and reduced out-of-home placements, but these are descriptive case studies and not research based causal studies.

PROMISE 686

The Promise 686 Network is a nonprofit organization that has evolved over the years from providing adoption grants to families to now creating a nationwide coalition of churches and organizations dedicated to fulfilling God's promise in Psalm 68:6—placing the lonely in families (2021). They believe that true impact comes from unity, collaboration, and shared resources. By working together as members of the body of Christ, they strengthen their efforts and expand their reach to serve children and communities more effectively. They work towards mobilizing local churches to make a collective impact on children and families in their respective communities. The Promise 686 organization provides different pathways for their partners to mobilize and equip churches to raise awareness on the needs of vulnerable children, prevent children from going into foster care by supporting biological families, recruit and support foster and adoptive families, and create supportive communities for at-risk children.

To equip churches in helping at-risk children, Promise 686 created a step-by-step model called Family Advocacy Ministries (FAMs) (Promise 686, 2021). The organization provides different types of training at different levels for those volunteering. They also offer resources such as videos, guidebooks, and literature to assist in creating these ministries within the church. Their guidance empowers churches to set up and maintain successful FAMs. Promise 686 can equip a church to get involved in a small or large way depending on the church's interests and resources. In addition, Promise 686 offers the Promiserves software platform that can serve as a tool to coordinate volunteers, manage relationships with families in need, and try to reduce the administrative burden on ministry leaders through the facilitation of data management. Overall, Promise 686 has created options to provide the needed training, resources, and guidance to empower church leaders and volunteers to help families in the foster care system.

DC127

DC127 was founded in 2013, originally under the District Church, it was given its name to reflect the James 1:27 scripture, which mandates believers “to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (2025.). Pastor Aaron and Amy Graham, of the District Church, co-founded this non-profit organization to respond to the needs in Washington, DC to preserve families and safeguard children. When discussing his vision for DC127, Pastor Aaron Graham said, “the dream that God gave us is that one day there would be more families that are waiting to foster and adopt children than there are children that are on the waitlist waiting to be fostered, or adopted, or cared for”. They also desired this to be a collaborative effort with several different churches in the community.

According to their website, the District Church brought people together from across the city around the core belief that church communities are uniquely equipped to support families whose children are at risk of entering foster care (DC127, 2025).

At DC127's inaugural meeting in 2013, "more than 400 people joined the mission to build a community network to protect and sustain vulnerable children and at-risk families, regardless of faith or background".

Currently, DC 127 is funded through multiple sources with priorities of:

- Church mobilization, working with local churches to carry out their mission
- Organizational sustainability
- Communities for families, working one-on-one with families to minimize risk factors that could potentially disrupt a family
- Foster care support, providing needed resources to kinship, foster, and adoptive families (DC127, 2025).

DC127 has several resources for families interacting with the child welfare system. To support their kinship and foster families, they offer family fun days, community events with other kinship and foster families, prayer check-ins, a tangible resource closet with hygiene, children's, and household items, family workshops, one-on-one services to connect caregivers to community resources and information, foster parent information sessions, and child care events allowing kids a fun day out while caregivers get some free time.

In addition to the above-mentioned resources, the DC127 program offers a wraparound model of care specifically for at-risk families (2025). Their website states they create Communities for Families in which they "mobilize church volunteer ministry teams, to work upstream to provide holistic support to preserve families who have one or more risk factors that may increase their potential for family disruption, leading to a child(ren) experiencing foster care".

DC127 also has options on their website allowing interested churches to get involved in their mission through multiple ways, making it easy for those interested to say "yes" to becoming involved. Overall, DC127 works to connect families and churches in the community to provide resources and support to families in the child welfare system and prevent family disruption.

CRADLE-TO-CAREER SYSTEM

The Cradle-to-Career (C2C) system's goal is to provide children with wrap-around support to meet their social, medical, and educational needs from birth through college and career (All-In Cities, 2022). Current systems that are using the Cradle-to-Career system in the United States of America are Promise Neighborhoods and the Harlem Children's Zone.

There are several goals of the Cradle-to-Career model that align with the vision of creating the most opportunities for children, providing them with all the needed resources to meet their needs. Some of those goals are to: meet families where they are at, bring in community partners (i.e. teachers, school administrators, elected officials, and community leaders that can bring in resources) to effect change, to focus on the children, and to embody one's values (All-In Cities, 2022).

The C2C system was started in 2015, in Harlem, New York City, by Geoffrey Canada (an American educator, social activist, and author) in just one preschool classroom at Live Oak Elementary School (Cradle to Career [C2C], n.d.). The classroom's teachers and parents meet monthly to identify three goals from C2C for the children: good health, good education, and good character. The C2C system started by greatly valuing the connection between teachers, parents, and community resources to create the best opportunities for their children. C2C has continued to grow its cohort every year and is now in all four Live Oak School District sites.

There are several successful communities and school systems that use the C2C model. The first Cradle-to-Career system, Harlem Children's Zone, started serving one block of families, grew to nearly 100 blocks by 2007, and serves 25,000 youths today (Harlem Children's Zone [HCZ], 2025). Since the founding of Harlem Children's Zone, they have "helped more than 1,700 scholars graduate from college, earn their degrees, and build bright futures".

Another example is a Promise Neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas where educational and medical success has greatly increased for the students. Since becoming a Promise Neighborhood, the number of children under age six that have a consistent medical provider has grown by 17 percent, caregivers who regularly read to their children has doubled to 50 percent, and 77 percent of caregivers with children in high school helped their children plan for college and/or career (a nearly 25 percent increase since 2013) (All-In Cities, 2022).

Lastly, Webb Middle School and Reagan High School in Austin, Texas have utilized a model similar to C2C. Both schools were on the verge of closure in 2007 due to poor performance (All-In Cities, 2022). They began by implementing a community school model, redesigning school discipline policies based on restorative justice, introducing mental health programs, providing day-care programs, and providing clinical care for student mothers. Webb Middle School is made up of 98 percent students of color and 93 percent of students that are economically disadvantaged. After they began operating a family resource center with community partners in 2015, the school became one of the highest performing Title 1 middle schools in Austin, Texas. Reagan High School has become a middle college, offering students concurrent college credits, and has "almost doubled its graduation rate from 43 percent in 2003 to 85 percent in 2011".

Evansville, Indiana has two organizations that utilize the C2C model, the Dream Center and Potter's Wheel. The Dream Center serves Delaware Elementary School as well as the Jacobsville neighborhood (Dream Center Evansville, n.d.). They have multiple core values that support their vision. They are Christ-centered, value nurturing dignity among their community members, and value excellence in supporting one and another.

The Dream Center offers several resources for their neighborhood. They offer wrap-around-care for children in the Jacobsville Kids Zone that supports children and families by providing access to resources, developing problem solving skills to

navigate roadblocks, and academic development through targeted tutoring (Dream Center Evansville, n.d.). Wrap-around-care is provided to prepare children for life readiness as young adults. One interesting aspect of the Dream Center is they provide school integration through “peacemakers”. These peacemakers are full-time staff members who spend half the day at school and half of the day in the Dream Center’s after-school program. They provide continuity between the school day and after-school program, where they provide extra support for teachers and students. This service provides additional attention for students that may struggle with behavioral issues. Lastly, the program has an after-school program, summer day camp, and a Neighborhood Revitalization program where they work to meet and grow relationships with as many neighbors as possible in the Jacobsville neighborhood.

The second organization that utilizes a similar C2C model in Evansville is Potter’s Wheel. The organization’s mission and vision states that “through Christ, Potter’s Wheel exists to love, equip, and empower neighborhood families to thrive. It is our vision at Potter’s Wheel to revive the neighborhood, one family at a time” (Potter’s Wheel Ministries, n.d.). The organization uses the C2C model in their South Side Kids Zone Pipeline serving children from their four neighborhood zones of Goosetown, Tepe Park, Culver, and Glenwood, following a child from birth through schooling and beyond as they prepare them for life readiness. Potter’s Wheel has several programs, such as a clothing bank, food pantry, soup kitchen, and parenting classes that enhance their wrap-around model of care. Through their wrap-around-care model and other programs, they ensure children reach their goals and build a strong foundation for their future.

The Cradle-to-Career model values communities working together and promises to support a group of children from birth until they have reached their career goals and are successful adults. This model tethers people, churches, and organizations together for the betterment of their children and overall promotes the success and growth of local communities. Although the Cradle-to-Career model is not specific to foster care, it is vital for the Evansville Community and other communities like it. The system brings coordinated, long-term structural support to neighborhoods that have historically faced systematic poverty, limited access to educational opportunities, and social instability. This model is meant to support children at every stage of development, from birth through career readiness, which is essential for breaking cycles of generational poverty and creating thriving families and neighborhoods. Because families in poverty and social instability are disproportionately more likely to become involved with the child welfare system, using the C2C structure in our community is a successful preventive method.

SUMMARY OF MODELS

A common thread throughout the models explored is the foundational belief that strong, connected communities can radically transform the lives of vulnerable children and families. Each initiative underscores the power of collaboration between churches, nonprofits, government agencies, and local volunteers. Whether the focus is on preventing children from entering foster care, supporting families during foster care, or empowering children from birth to adulthood, these programs emphasize wrap-around support, early intervention, and intentional resource coordination.

Key elements of success found in all models include church and community mobilization, real-time resource delivery platforms (like CarePortal and Promiserves), individualized family care, and accessible training or advocacy tools that lower barriers to involvement. While each model varies in strategy, they all aim to build resilient systems that prevent crises and preserve families. For Southwestern Indiana, these approaches offer a roadmap. The Dream Center and Potter's Wheel already reflect the C2C principles in action, reinforcing the idea that holistic, Christ-centered support systems can disrupt cycles of poverty and child welfare involvement. By integrating aspects from each model: such as technology-driven needs assessment, volunteer coordination, and church advocacy, local churches can strengthen our community's existing efforts, ensuring that every child and family has access to more than enough support to thrive.

METHOD

Through review of the literature and exploration of other program models, the need to listen to our local faith leaders and churches was apparent. The goal of these listening sessions was to identify: the level of understanding of foster care ministry opportunities, interest in pursuing this ministry, experiences of working with NPOs with different models, as well as identifying strengths and barriers to engagement in foster care ministry.

A list of churches was provided by Welborn Baptist Foundation as churches potentially involved in foster care in some capacity or may have expressed interest in some way for engaging in foster care ministry. In addition to this list, reviewing the Indiana Kids Belong Foster Families app with identified faith communities supportive of foster parents was consulted. This resulted in a list of 16 churches in the Evansville and Newburgh area. A questionnaire was developed and emailed to these churches to gather preliminary information, with the goal of a personal follow up meeting with church leaders to better understand unique needs of congregations, experiences, and desire for engaging in foster care ministry. There were three churches who provided in-depth information through interviews, and three

additional churches that provided feedback through email or online questionnaires. Through community collaborations, the survey was then sent to a list of sixty-four faith-based organizations and/or churches working in the community in some capacity. The email asked church leaders to complete the survey, or if it was a faith-based organization to forward it to someone in their congregation who might be able to complete the survey. Unfortunately, there was only one response to this email survey link. Although there were several emails sent, and personal messages left for church leaders, gaining direct feedback from the churches was a challenge.

In addition to listening to churches, we engaged in conversations with individuals at the director, case manager, and supervisory levels at Vanderburgh County DCS, as well as some of the non-profit ministry organizations. The goal of these conversations was to learn more about their experiences in working with churches in the community, as well as help identify any potential opportunities for church engagement in the child welfare system.

FINDINGS

CHURCH LEADERS:

While there weren't as many responses as desired, the feedback from church leaders provided quality insight regarding their involvement, motivations, aspirations, and challenges in foster care ministry. A common thread was a genuine desire to be involved (even those who weren't involved yet) in this ministry. When churches were asked how they got involved or why they were involved, it centered around personal experiences.

Motivations: Many churches are motivated by the passion of individual congregation members who bring awareness to church leaders or the church leaders themselves are involved with foster care/adoption. Often, there is a consistent alignment with the church's existing desire to serve children and families. This foundational commitment often makes foster care a natural fit and can help with sustainability. Another commonality with motivation to enter foster care ministry is a general passion for local outreach and an awareness of the dire need for children in care. Churches often express a desire to "show the love of Christ with our hands and feet" to fulfill a calling to serve others.

Current Involvement and Models: Churches who are involved in foster care ministry are partnering with various foster care agencies, including Isaiah 1:17 Project, Borrowed Hearts, Hands of Hope, Indiana Kids Belong, CASA, and Isaiah 1:17 House. Experience with these agencies are generally positive, with collaboration seen as beneficial. Many churches focus on foster care awareness and appreciation, providing literature, hosting agency information sessions, and highlighting during May (Foster Care Awareness Month). There is a wide range of involvement from offering space for agencies to host events to

tangible resources, as well as full wraparound programs designed to support families as they are fostering/adopting. This has included families both inside and outside their congregations. The main way in which churches provide resources to families is through the Care Portal platform that is facilitated through Hands of Hope. The feedback related to the use of this portal is that it is only sporadically used by DCS and this can be a struggle with having a church volunteer to coordinate meeting tangible needs. Many churches use the Jason Johnson (2020) model that “everyone can do something” to mobilize collective action in foster care.

Aspirations and Desired Outcomes: Church leaders were asked why they chose to become involved in foster care ministry or why they feel there is a need for involvement. Those who are child welfare aware, overwhelmingly stated there is a need to increase the number of foster and adoptive families, as well as provide family support. They want to be a part of ensuring children, parents, and caregivers feel supported, loved, and valued, ultimately helping them to provide stable homes for children. There is a desire to help provide support for children to remain in care and families to know they are supported in their calling to be a foster parent. Beyond practical support, churches aim for a spiritual impact, with stories of children coming to Christ and biological families connecting with the church community. There's also a hope to see congregation members use their spiritual gifts to serve others, help with tangible resources, and increase overall understanding of trauma and empathy for those around them. Ultimately, the goal is to see families reunited and the "next generation thrive."

Barriers and Challenges: The most significant and frequently cited barrier to sustained involvement is the lack of a dedicated point person or leader within the church staff or congregation to spearhead, organize, and coordinate foster care initiatives. Without such a role, sustained engagement becomes difficult. Churches also reported difficulty motivating their congregations for deeper engagement or sustaining partnerships, sometimes leading to the cessation of programs. This is sometimes due to a lack of bandwidth for use of volunteers, but also, there is some fear of stepping into the unknown of foster care, viewing it as a significant commitment to open their homes, not realizing there are other ways of engagement. One church with a well-established ministry stated they often have volunteers willing to support foster families; however, they struggle to get families to say "yes" to becoming foster parents themselves. There seems to be an unawareness of the dire need for foster families. Another common theme was finding balance in ensuring volunteers are equipped to serve in this ministry with the busy schedules of volunteers and their ability to meet any training requirements. One last challenge noted is that churches sometimes have deeply rooted community passions, such as serving seniors or engaging in prison ministry, which may limit their capacity for new ministry opportunities. One other potential barrier not mentioned, but worthy of consideration, is ensuring there is no cost barriers to church participation in any programming, as this can be a challenge for smaller congregations.

FAITH-BASED MINISTRY NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (NPO):

There were a few in-depth interviews conducted of faith based nonprofit organizations that serve Vanderburgh County and the surrounding areas. Along with these in-depth interviews, this information was derived from experiences with other organizations and individuals in the child welfare community who utilize their services. The overall goal of these organizations is to support the child welfare system and increase church awareness and involvement in foster care and child welfare, ultimately making a positive impact on the system in local communities. In addition, they desire to support foster and kinship families with both tangible resources and emotional support. Some also explicitly aim to share the Gospel through these relationships.

Programs and Services Offered: These organizations provide a range of support and opportunities for church engagement, including trainings on various topics, immersive experiences such as “Life in Limbo” to help raise awareness, tangible resources (clothes, meals, beds, back-to-school items, Christmas gifts, etc.), wrap-around programs to provide support to families who are fostering or providing kinship care, support groups, space for children to sleep or wait for placement, Foster Parent Night Out for an evening reprieve, etc. In addition to these programs/services, the Care Portal was mentioned as a platform utilized to connect church resources with specific needs of children and families. In addition, there are some organizations using technology platforms called Promise Serves to provide training and meet administrative needs. There was mixed feedback on the success of this platform.

It should be noted that in discussion with the various agencies, there was similarity, yet differences in how they approached the wrap-around care model of supporting foster families. Hands of Hope relied heavily on equipping the churches using the Promise 686 curriculum to form the teams to “wrap-around” the foster families. Isaiah 1:17 Project created their own training and equipping curriculum and while they are trying to more fully engage the churches to create the wrap-around teams for each family, the organization has utilized paid staff and some volunteers to provide support in various fashions with the goal of the churches stepping in to form these more organic teams.

Effective Approaches: Organizations have discovered several key approaches for fostering church involvement. Personal connections and relationships are the most effective way to engage churches, proving more success than general outreach methods like social media, calls, or email. Consistent follow-up over time is essential. Gaining church commitment and engagement takes time. Another commonality is offering a variety of ways in which a church might get connected in foster care ministry. This allows individuals and congregations to determine what works best for them. Those with personal experience with the child welfare system (foster parent, adoptive parent, worker, etc.) also enhance the ability to explain “the why” behind engaging in this ministry. One approach being utilized is sharing information

with various groups (e.g., women's events, small groups, Sunday School classes) to get more than one person excited and ready to take the lead in pursuing stepping into the ministry.

Barriers experienced: While organizations have seen much success in engaging churches, the sustainability and expansion of their programming can be difficult. The slow and challenging process of initiating and maintaining conversations with churches and identifying and securing a passionate, creative, and committed "point person" has been an obstacle. There are many who are interested but struggle with the commitment to spearhead initiatives as a volunteer. Other noted barriers include churches having an overall decrease in the number of volunteers across all their ministries or having churches/individuals disengage if there is a lull in serving within the ministry. For example, if the Care Portal isn't used regularly, some will just stop partnering with this option. Another example was if a church provides wrap-around care for a family but then doesn't have any families for a while, they become disengaged. Additional struggles shared that not all organizations experienced included staff turnover, coordination of volunteer training to serve in the ministry, and difficulty partnering with churches with varied commitment levels.

DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SERVICES:

The interviews with the Department of Child Services employees included all levels of local Vanderburgh County DCS workers. These interviews indicated there are clear strengths in current church engagement and significant opportunities for future collaboration within the child welfare system.

Strengths of Current Church Engagement: The use of the CarePortal system for meeting tangible needs of families has been much appreciated with no needs going unmet. Beyond CarePortal, there have been some churches that have actively provided valuable tangible items such as bedding for children entering new foster homes, as well as churches who have organized food drives, and even stepped in to help pay for a funeral and provide emotional support to family members and DCS workers during the grieving process. Many churches possess resources that DCS may not have access to, which can be immensely helpful to families. Churches are also recognized as a vital channel for recruiting foster families with the licensing division actively seeking to partner with churches for recruitment events, as individuals with Christian beliefs are often seen as aligning with the core values necessary for successful foster parenting. Many foster parents choose this role due to a calling rooted in their faith. DCS workers also highlighted the support they have received from faith-based organizations, such as Isaiah 1:17 House and Hands of Hope. The workers have been appreciative of these agencies helping the children and families and see them as partners. They have also felt supported through appreciation efforts (snacks, breakfast, goodie bags, etc) that have been provided to the office.

Opportunities for Further Engagement with Churches: While there is some foster parent recruitment occurring, all of those interviewed agreed there remains significant potential for churches to further expand their efforts in recruiting foster parents. One area in which there was also significant agreement is the fact that with education, the church can play a crucial role in dispelling myths related to DCS, such as “they just take kids away from parents”. There is opportunity to educate their congregations on how DCS assists families in providing safe environments to raise their children. Educating others can help reduce public fear and encourage greater engagement.

There was consensus that Vanderburgh County has a lot of providers, therefore creating new agencies or services was not recommended, yet promoting increased collaboration to leverage services and programs. One way to increase use of current agencies along with encouraging those who might be hesitant of a full commitment to becoming a foster parent is volunteering with these organizations as a way to get to know more about child welfare. In addition, lack of childcare options was identified as a barrier for foster parents and those considering fostering. Developing a system or structure in which churches could connect those needing childcare with providers, would remove a major barrier for potential kinship placements and encourage more individuals to become foster parents.

Some final suggestions for how churches can engage in meaningful, smaller-scale ways include supporting DCS-hosted events for children—such as trick-or-treat gatherings or Christmas parties—and offering more consistent, personalized encouragement to DCS staff. This might include regular meals or snacks to boost morale, or small tokens of appreciation or recognition of their hard work. Being mindful of the separation of church and state was identified as a potential barrier to keep in mind.

RESOURCES

In listening, we identified several different resources relevant to child welfare, specifically child welfare and ministry involvement. Asset mapping is a process of identifying, inventorying, and visualizing a community's resources and strengths. This approach emphasizes the positive aspects of a community and helps to leverage existing assets for positive change. Vanderburgh County (including Newburgh) has a lot of resources available, which is a huge benefit as there are several rural counties in Southern Indiana that are not as fortunate. There are also several faith-based agencies that serve the child welfare community, which can be a benefit in engaging the faith community in this ministry. Several of these agencies serve multiple counties as well, which can help bridge the gaps in these outer lying counties.

In addition to asset mapping, we looked at how we could map opportunities for enhancement or growth. One area of need that became apparent was identifying all of the assets and resources available in a way that can be easily updated and utilized by those needing the resources and support. Through listening to DCS, it was clear staff genuinely desire to support both biological families and foster families, however, they also have higher than desired caseloads and often lack the time to fully support families as they would like.

A review of the literature was conducted in 2021 by Hanlon, et al., in which they looked at existing literature on factors impacting foster parent retention. The top two factors were related to the relationship with the child welfare system as well as material resources, with peer support being in the top five. Resources and support can come in many forms but feeling as if you know who to call for help with tangible needs, who to connect with when emotional or social support is needed, or what church might be welcoming to your foster family, can really make a difference. (see appendix A for a list of resources)

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Every church, congregation, and faith community are unique, and despite their theological differences, they share strikingly similar values when it comes to serving the community. Nearly all major religions emphasize compassion and care for the vulnerable and service to others. Many include improving not just spiritual health but also physical, emotional, and social well-being, along with a call to serve “the least of these.” Regardless of the varied church size, the organizational structure of the faith community, or the differences in leadership, most churches align closely with community development goals. How churches approach having a presence in the community, or their level of involvement within the community, is going to vary significantly. However, when listening to the churches in Evansville and researching the needs of foster care and child welfare in our community, there is most assuredly a need and opportunity for church engagement.

There are many needs in our community and none greater than another. It is not reasonable to think that all faith communities would feel called to engage in foster care ministry, however, consider the impact if even a small percentage of the churches in our community engaged in some capacity to positively impact the child welfare system. The barrier then becomes how do we provide information to the faith communities in a way that will increase awareness of the need, the opportunities that exist to engage, and ways in which they can discern if this is in alignment with their congregational mission for community engagement.

In comparing other areas of the country to our local community, the overarching themes include the need to provide clarity, simplify processes and access, and develop and enhance supportive communities for families, DCS, child welfare workers, and churches. The following recommendations are made for mobilizing

and equipping churches to provide holistic support for children, families, and workers impacted by the foster care system.

- 1) Simplify! This can be overwhelming, especially if unfamiliar with the child welfare system. Many options and terms are used that complicate the process. The more we can simplify next steps, the more likely the church is to engage in foster care ministry.
- 2) Approach churches from the lens that they are the best authority on their own communities and missions. We are here to collaborate with them and help them identify their inherent strengths and how those can organically translate into foster care ministry. Our aim is to empower churches to find authentic ways to contribute to foster care without having to fit into a specific non-profit organizational model.
- 3) Utilize a Church Centered Engagement Framework (see appendix B) to share the mission, vision, and opportunities for engagement.
- 4) Utilize a centralized webpage or platform that can be updated regularly with current resources, organizations, webpage links, and current points of contact. This space can be valuable for foster/adoptive parents, biological families, churches, and case workers.
- 5) Maximize the utilization of the Care Portal. This already exists in our state, and there is evidence that it has been an integral factor in other parts of the country in lowering the rates of children in foster care and making a positive impact on families.
- 6) Elevate the ability to tap into personal experiences. This can be done through shared videos, a database with individuals willing to share their story, or potentially a mentor list of those who are willing to be a support at either an individual level or church organizational level.
- 7) Identify and equip a designated entity (person or agency) to spearhead collaborative efforts.
- 8) Enhance the resources and organizations that currently exist, highlight their unique services, and help them collaborate effectively to avoid duplication of services.
- 9) Develop a comprehensive strategic plan for implementation and evaluation.

Additional considerations for ongoing success include regularly listening to foster families and child welfare agencies to understand their most pressing needs. Regular collaboration of churches and faith-based organizations is important to maximize impact. Highlight the value of personal experience in sharing the “why,” recognize that this process takes time, that the development of relationships with other entities is important for sustainability, and celebrate the impact of churches involved in foster care ministry.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

To create an impactful program, metrics should be established to evaluate effectiveness of the program's ability to increase church engagement, simplify processes, build capacity, and improve outcomes for children and families within the foster care system. It should also reflect the "church-centered" philosophy by assessing how well the initiative meets churches where they are and empowers them to find their unique "yes." Possible evaluative measures/outcomes to be considered are:

Short Term:

- 1) Development of a strategic plan
- 2) Increased numbers of churches expressing interest and seeking information about foster care ministry
- 3) Increased numbers of churches committing to any form of foster care engagement
- 4) Increase the number of family needs entered in CarePortal system by DCS
- 5) Increase in the number of churches actively involved in CarePortal
- 6) Clear communication channels established with decreased duplication of services and positive feedback on effectiveness of having a specific point of contact
- 7) Increased availability of essential resources and support services for foster children, foster families, and kinship caregivers

Long Term:

- 8) Increased numbers of churches with sustained involvement (i.e. active for 6+ months)
- 9) Churches reporting a higher understanding of foster care needs and understanding of how to get involved
- 10) Development of and increased traffic and engagement with a centralized webpage/platform. Positive feedback on its utility and comprehensive nature
- 11) Increased reported sense of partnership and trust between churches and the foster care system
- 12) Churches report feeling their voice is heard and valued in the child welfare community initiatives
- 13) Increase in the number of foster/adoptive parent inquiries and licensed families who indicate church influence in their decision

- 14) Development of a way to utilize impact stories in outreach, leading to greater emotional connection and understanding of the need
- 15) Foster families report feeling more supported by the community. Reduced burnout and increased retention of foster families
- 16) Increased number of families who have access to a wraparound support team and report feeling valued and supported through a church
- 17) Feedback from case workers on the impact of church support on child well-being and improved stability for children in foster care due to enhanced support
- 18) Caseworkers report increased support by the community, less feelings of being overwhelmed, and identify the value of church partnerships

SUMMARY

This report underscores the transformative potential of church-centered engagement in foster care, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for faith communities to make a meaningful impact. By drawing on proven models, listening to local stakeholders, and identifying actionable strategies, it becomes clear that churches—regardless of size or denomination—can play a vital role in supporting vulnerable children and families. The priorities for church engagement are 1) Recruitment of foster and adoptive parents, 2) Provisions for families of both tangible items/resources, as well as childcare, 3) Support (sense of community) for families, and 4) Encouragement and support for child welfare workers. Through collaboration, simplification, and empowerment, the faith community can help build a more resilient and compassionate foster care system in Southwestern Indiana. The path forward is one of shared vision, intentional partnership, and a commitment to ensuring every child has the support they need to thrive.

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