



Foster Together Network 2020-2021: **THROUGH CRISIS TO NEW HEIGHTS**

In a community reckoning with systemic racism, political disquiet, and the compounding effect of COVID-19, we regard the road towards stable and nourishing foster care as a marathon and not a sprint. From the small Zoom squares in our homes, the past year compelled us to address, adapt to, develop and integrate best practices for navigating deeply ingrained issues. Our work is far from finished, and we look forward to digging into some BIG well-being hot spots in the months ahead.

Because of our collaborative mindset, Foster Together Network (FTN) members collectively have the power to affect change in ways we could not have done alone. With the backbone support of Big Orange Splot, we have accomplished a great deal towards embracing our vision: we took important steps to include the voices of youth and resource parents as partners in our work; we engaged in conscious efforts towards achieving culturally responsive, equitable, and competent care for all children; and we partnered with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and others to address challenges and improve processes for resource family recruitment through data analysis. Ultimately, by centering our support in community-based organizing, FTN is now more effectively positioned to drive systems change and to improve the lives of vulnerable youth and their families.

"This has been one of the hardest years for youth in foster care, their families, caregivers, and providers. The pandemic and all the racial inequity separated and divided people all over the country. I was inspired by all those individuals who came together to provide resources, share ideas, and have hard conversations that allow us to grow and learn from each other's experiences. Although change will not happen overnight, FTN is committed to the process of change and improving the current system."

- Cindy Macias, Hillsides



Co-founded in 2017 by The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, the Center for Strategic Partnerships, First 5 LA, and the Department of Children and Family Services, Foster Together Network is a synergistic group of public and private partners committed to helping recruit and retain resource families in LA County. It has grown quickly to include the Department of Mental Health, Probation, foster family agencies, community leaders, parents, and former foster youth, all dedicated to together tackling our child welfare system's greatest challenges.

FOSTER TOGETHER NETWORK'S VISION FOR 2021

The Network established the following interlocking goals for 2021:

- Raising Quality Together
- Making Data Actionable
- Increasing Equitable and Identity-Affirming Care

CROSS-SECTOR SYSTEM BUILDING



RAISING QUALITY TOGETHER

CROSS-SECTOR PROBLEM-SOLVING

FTN has grown its Quarterly Forum and Cross-Sector Workgroup to become hubs for identifying key systemic challenges and bringing together multiple partner perspectives to brainstorm, prioritize, and design solutions. For example, findings from the new DCFS-FTN Community Analysis Dashboard (see description below) were shared at the April Quarterly Forum, raising significant concerns in how children were being placed with resource families, and identifying a shortage of families available to care for youth with complex needs. DCFS leadership is now working with FTN partners to investigate and improve the technology used to match children. Meanwhile, the Network's Cross-Sector Workgroup is working to address the gap in nurturing resource homes available for our youth most in need. They also helped bridge public, private, and parent perspectives to ensure youth and parents alike were supported through COVID-related educational and socioemotional challenges.

"My time with FTN has been amazing. Working with this group has really given me an opportunity to not only share heart, but it has allowed me to share the heart of the wonderful children that we serve. Never have I worked with a group that has been so interested in the thoughts and ideas of resource parents. In this collaborative, I'm made to feel a part of the collective solution to the problems that impact our children in out of home care."

- Nicole Tremble, Resource Parent

LAUNCHING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

FTN successfully launched a community of learning that not only spread best practices throughout the field, but also provided a new space for industry professionals, public and private sector leaders, caregivers, and youth to learn and problem-solve together.

Our intended inaugural outreach - a day-long conference to build shared vision and expertise, originally slated for May 2020 - was sidelined by the pandemic, but the idea smoothly transitioned to an online format in Fall 2020. As a "silver lining," the virtual format worked better for the many attendees who otherwise would not have been able to attend in person! Entitled *Foster Together: Transforming Caregiving, Building Community*, the virtual conference was conducted over five weekly 90-minute sessions, with attendance by 500 industry professionals and parents from DCFS, foster family agencies (FFAs), and philanthropy. Topics ranged from the transition of care to a digital format, to examining racial biases, ending with an impactful listening session led by – and highlighting perspectives from – former foster youth. The conference received a 97% positivity rating and garnered many requests for deeper dives. In addition, more than half of attendees were new to FTN. Through this work, FTN raised its profile, and gained a stellar reputation as a lead convener and hub for community-building and learning.

“Each youth has their own story, their own identity, and their own needs. If we don’t know them just yet, help us figure it out. We need to feel as if there’s a person behind the clipboard that truly cares about our wellbeing.”

– **Madonna, Foster Youth**

Building off of the great energy from the conference, in January 2021, FTN launched a new three-part series titled *Spring Forward*, in partnership with UCLA and FosterMore. Attendance, knowledge, and engagement with FTN continued to increase: the sessions saw approximately 600 participants in total (including over 300 attendees for the final session alone), continuing to draw in more individuals previously unaware of FTN. Surveys revealed that over 95% of attendees increased their understanding of the topics, gained actionable knowledge that will enhance their work, and planned to share the new information with others.

We believe our high approval ratings were due in no small part to FTN members taking on formative roles in these events. Greater exposure in the community has not only bolstered the Network’s reputation for hosting events, but also inspired our partners to initiate similar offerings and further spread the learning. For example, the UCLA Pritzker Center launched a 2021 educational series for caregivers with support from the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative.

INCUBATING, PILOTING, AND SUSTAINING SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS

FTN continues to nurture faith-based partnerships, incubating and sowing new seeds of systemic change. With leadership from DCFS, the Center for Strategic Partnerships, and the Commission for Children and Families, FTN created and launched *LA County Faith in Motion* (LAC FIM), a framework for DCFS Faith-Based engagement. FTN has continued to be an integral component in the program design of LAC FIM, including efforts to increase recruitment among members of the faith-based communities. LAC FIM also led to the creation of the LA County Faith Collaborative, which convenes faith partners from across the County to deepen engagement and help faith-based organizations better connect with DCFS across its 20 regional offices.

In addition, since May 2020, Faith Foster Families Network (3FN) collaborated with FTN partners to implement three community and caregiver outreach programs:

- > Foster Our Future: a three-part TedXCrenshaw salon (May – November 2020)

- > 3FN Focus Groups with faith-based community members, sponsored by the Ralph M. Parsons and W.M. Keck foundations, designed to assess beliefs about foster parenting and inform future support and recruitment efforts (Summer 2020)

- > Education and Volunteer Engagement (EAVE) Virtual Series aimed to educate the community on all aspects of foster care from start to finish (January – April 2021)



In June 2021, FTN launched the *Resource Family Disruption Prevention and Intervention* demonstration

pilot project, which intends to decrease the movement of youth from one resource family to another—thereby reducing youth and family trauma, improving resource family retention, and improving long-term recruitment and youth outcomes. Disruptions in placements cause children and parents extreme emotional stress, and cause fostering agencies to face barriers with frustrated staff as well as deteriorating reputations. The pilot will build a new approach for disruption prevention, including early intervention and a change in the language we use to address these challenges. The Ralph M. Parsons, Rose Hills, and W.M. Keck foundations, in partnership with the Second Supervisorial District and DCFS, stepped up to sponsor this collaborative effort between Dr. Eshele Williams, Dr. Eileen Paztor, DCFS, Department of Mental Health (DMH) and five foster family agencies (FFAs). Pending positive evaluation of the pilot, DCFS and partners already have their sights on spreading these techniques system-wide.

"This is a truly pivotal moment in FTN's data work. The power of our new real-time data mapping and analytics capabilities to address inequities in care, set priorities, and allocate resources cannot be overstated. Mapping of the data already reveals that most children with a non-relative family are living outside their community of origin and the highest-need youth lack appropriate options for care. Our challenge moving forward is to tell their stories...to humanize the data. In the coming year, the Data Workgroup will begin to identify patterns, opportunities, and gaps in local, targeted communities so that appropriate resources and services are available to best meet the needs of these children."

- Anneli Stone, W. M. Keck Foundation

MAKING DATA ACTIONABLE

A great deal has been accomplished over the past year by FTN's Data Workgroup toward the Network's ultimate purpose: to support more targeted and strategic family recruitment and ensure the best quality placements for youth. The Data Workgroup launched the Community Analysis Dashboard to help DCFS and its partners more effectively use data to inform their strategic investments. **THE VALUE IS THREE-FOLD:**

1. To provide a **centralized, real-time, shared platform** for monitoring child needs and resource parent availability both system-wide and at the local level

2. To deliver a **tool for mapping and analyzing the data**, including zooming in on sub-populations and outcomes

3. To guide future strategic investments in recruitment and retention efforts so all FTN partners can **optimize resource families' capacity to meet youth needs**

This Community Analysis Dashboard brought together, for the first time, key information (such as geographic and demographic characteristics) on how the volume and attributes of resource families compare with the needs of our children. Spearheaded by partners from DCFS, the W.M. Keck Foundation and Big Orange Sploit, the team reached out to the DCFS Service Bureau Directors and the Regional Community Alliance to review the tool to ensure it was accessible and useful.

In Spring of 2020, after this trial run process, the refined dashboard was fully integrated within DCFS' main data system and launched with Regional and Programs Data Champions who are responsible for maximizing the use and impact of data systems in ensuring quality care for children.

This new infrastructure will allow FTN partners to identify and target areas to improve the quality and volume of care. It allows us to invest where it matters most, and to improve the chances of matching a youth to the best home for their personal growth and well-being, which includes increasing the probability of keeping children within their neighborhoods and school systems. It is a transformational step forward for our youth. Our LA data pilot is also poised to influence child welfare systems statewide. The DCFS-FTN Community Analysis Dashboard will be featured by the California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership in their upcoming issue of *insights* and presented at the Data committee of the California Child Welfare Council.

INCREASING EQUITABLE CARE

In September 2020, FTN cemented its dedication to creating parity within the foster care system by establishing the Equity Workgroup. Statistical analysis of LA County's foster care landscape laid bare the great disparities in outcomes for Black youth. Black youth are disproportionately placed into foster care, are more likely to be recommended for group home placement or punitive discipline, and less likely to be rejoined with their birth families in a timely manner. Qualitative discussions with youth and resource families further revealed issues of cultural bias and hurt, as well as a need to build better understanding system-wide regarding how to best support Black youth to thrive.



"2020 was an incredibly difficult year that both pulled back the curtain on the vast inequities in this nation and inspired us all to strive for racial justice within our respective spheres of influence. FTN has been courageous in its efforts to address the intersection of anti-Black bias and foster care in pursuit of well-being for children. I am proud to be a part of this work."

– Tamara Hunter, Commission for Children and Families



To that end, the Equity Workgroup is set to launch its first collaborative effort, *Courageous Conversations*, with funding from the Center for Strategic Partnerships. *Courageous Conversations* - a series of authentic discussions about the intersection of race, foster parenting, and youth experience - will allow specific focus groups, including Black youth in care and non-Black resource parents, a safe space in which to share what experiences positively or negatively impacted their journey. The learnings from these listening sessions will then be built into toolkits, curricula, peer supports and resources to better prepare current and potential parents to support Black youth. Distributed through the FTN community learning hub, *Courageous Conversations* will also shine a light on exactly where the foster care system most needs help in dismantling systemic racism within its own processes.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

These are compelling and unprecedented times for the Foster Together Network and its efforts to transform child welfare in Los Angeles. The partners have planted deep roots, creating an evolving public-private network utilizing a collective impact model that values continued learning and innovation. We continue to learn how to become true collaborators in building a more inclusive and supportive system for our youth. FTN will continue to build, test, and refine pilot programs that catalyze large-scale systemic changes in improving foster family care quality and, ultimately, youth outcomes.

In the upcoming year, our partners are committed to the following goals:

1. Improving DCFS technology and practice to better match children with resource families;
2. Investing in systemic changes to ensure sufficient nurturing care for our "hardest to place" youth;
3. Achieving equitable and culturally responsive care, so that BIPOC children may thrive;
4. Continuing a culture of collaboration that celebrates caregivers and teams working in foster care; and
5. Nurturing partnership across sectors and stakeholders to move systemic change.

We aspire not only to transform LA County, but also to serve as an example nationally for collaborative impact.

JOIN US IN ACHIEVING SYSTEMIC CHANGE.

"As I reflect on this past year and a half and all the setbacks, shutdowns, separation, and loss, I am also reminded of the power of partnership and the resiliency of humans, and that despite hardship and cruelty that exists in this world we still have the desire to do good. That goodness makes me think of hope. Hope is the universal accelerant that no matter how bleak things may look, no matter how much human suffering that happens, hope is what keeps us there to fight another day."

- Virginia Pryor, Chief Deputy Director, LA Department of Child and Family Services

For more information on the Foster Together Network, visit **FosterTogetherNetwork.net**

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