

Family First Summit: Ensuring the Success of Rhode Island Resource Families

The Summit

The Family First Summit brought together over 80 DCYF staff, child welfare agencies, foster families and child advocates to rally around Rhode Island's resource families. The summit not only served as a platform for DCYF to share our vision for a seamless system of supports and services for all families, but it served as a starting point for much needed cross-sector communication and collaboration between DCYF and all stakeholders in attendance. The summit represented a necessary next step for Rhode Island in its work to improve outcomes of children and youth in foster care.

The summit included a combination of presentations and panel discussions during which participants engaged in dialogue via a web-based tool to collect feedback. Representatives from DCYF provided participants with data on the need for more foster families and an overview of the department's vision and proposed plan to better support all families. Following these presentations, a panel of current foster parents discussed their experiences and made the case for more services and supports for all current and future foster families. To facilitate a manageable discussion with all stakeholders, DCYF staff focused the scope of this summit on obtaining feedback from participants on the following aspects of the proposed model:

- What principles of a recruitment, development, and support strategy do you think are the most important?
- What are the key tradeoffs- benefits and risks – of a geographically focused model for these services?
- Should resource families serving children with special medical needs or developmental disabilities be served through coordinating agencies or is there a structure that might better meet their unique challenges?
- To what extent should coordinating agencies be given opportunities for customization and innovation versus standardized across the state? How could evidence-based or promising practices be incorporated into the agencies?
- What tools, resources, and expertise would be needed in order to ensure success of this strategy?
- What payment structure or incentives should contracts for these services use?

A series of related questions with multiple choice and open ended text questions enabled summit participants to engage in a results/solutions based discussion(s) with their peers and DCYF.

This report provides a summary of the responses and feedback provided by the diverse stakeholders in attendance.

Section I: Welcome, Agenda & Objectives

What are you hoping to get out of today's session?

Overwhelmingly, summit participants identified the need for a clear vision and sense of direction from DCYF as their primary goal. Specifically, participants hoped to learn more about aspects of the new model:

- overview of the goals and objectives of the proposed model

- scope of work and types of services
- clear roles and responsibilities for DCYF and providers
- timeline and implementation plans

Furthermore, participants wanted to learn more about the services and structures outlined in the previously distributed Families First white paper.

Section II: Family Recruitment, Development & Support Strategy

What do you think are the most pressing areas for improvements?

31.4% of recorded responses highlighted the lack of services and supports for resources families as the most pressing area for improvement. About 16% of recorded responses pointed to the need for a coordinated system to provide ongoing supports and services to families across the state. Also, they highlighted DCYF's internal operations and communication with providers as two other fertile areas for discussion. For example, summit participants talked about the opportunity to develop and cultivate a customer and values driven culture at DCYF. Participants recommended trainings on customer service for frontline staff, evidence-based treatments, and trauma informed guidance for staff as first steps in this process.

Section III: Foster Parent Panel

What did you learn from this panel?

By all accounts the panel reinforced that Rhode Island should have a functional system to provide foster parents with the supports and services they deserve and need. Overall, participants shared their frustration with the current system including the need to continue to improve the state's current licensing process. The participants also expressed their desire to help DCYF create a system to provide services to all resource families across the state and stressed the need for new ways to acknowledge and recognize foster families.

What was your most significant take away?

51% of the recorded responses centered on the dire need for a comprehensive system that provides resources and supports for all families. In their responses, participants most commonly pointed out the following needs:

- to streamline access to tailored and universal supports
- an assigned person to help families navigate the current system
- timely and efficient communication between families and DCYF

Moreover, about 22% of the responses call for the need for DCYF to improve internal and external processes and procedures. Lastly, some participants acknowledged the need for a complete re-design of the current system.

Did anything surprise you?

The vast majority of participants responded that they were surprised to learn about the lack of systematic supports and resources currently available to resource families. Nevertheless, about a third of all participants stated that they were well aware of the current issues and problems with the current system. Other responses referenced the need for a more diverse foster parent panel, improvements to our current system and the need for ways to acknowledge and recognize foster parents for their work and dedication.

Section IV: New Vision for Rhode Island Resource Families

What are you most excited about in this vision?

A total of 55 participants responded to this question.

- Services and supports based on the needs of the child or family, not on the license type (60%)
- Access to tailored and universal services for all families (18%)
- Geographically aligned services (9%)
- Ongoing development of resource families (6%)
- Other (6%)
- Centrally coordinated recruitment (1%)

Where are the biggest challenges?

Responses covered a wide range of potential challenges. They ranged from challenges around implementation, recruitment and geography, communication and collaboration to name a few. However, most responses talked about the need for the improvement of internal processes and structures at DCYF. These responses demonstrate the concerns providers have for how the department will change its internal operations to ensure the successful implementation of this project. Additionally, participants pointed to the need for a secure and stable funding stream to ensure the long term success of the project.

What are the key tradeoffs – benefits and risks – of aligning these services geographically across the state?

Benefits

Participants most commonly highlighted ease of access to supports by families, as one of the benefits to aligning services geographically across the state. Among their responses, they also specifically mentioned more comprehensive services for youth in care and foster parents making critical connections in their respective communities.

On the other hand, participants highlighted the possibility of diluting the quality of services as a potential risk. Their responses addressed the following:

- All services are not equal and not all families will get same support.
- How will fidelity to service models and quality indicators be managed?
- Could there be better services in a different geographical area/support services area?
- Not all agencies offer the same quality of service.

Additionally, participants raised the following items as potential risks:

- Lack of family choice and voice

- Competition between large and small organizations

To what extent should agencies be given opportunities for customization and innovation versus standardized across the state?

In total 47 participants responded and the breakdown of their responses appear below:

- Standardized with some room for customization and innovation (66%)
- Services are customized by each agency with some standardization (32%)
- Very standardized across the state (2%)
- No standardization across the state (0%)

How do we address the distinct needs of kinship families across the state?

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that in order to address the distinct needs of kin families, DCYF should ensure adequate and targeted services and supports for kin families. Among the suggested services and supports, the following were the most popular answers:

- Kin support groups
- Kin peer mentors
- Kin focused advocacy groups
- Financial assistance (flex funds)

Additionally, participants highlighted that services and supports must be provided in a timely and efficient manner. Lastly, participants pointed out the need for training for DCYF staff on the unique needs of kin families and current best practices.

Should resource families serving children with special medical needs or developmental disabilities be served through geographic agencies or is there a structure that might better meet their unique challenges?

A total of 46 participants responded and the breakdown of their responses appear below:

- Yes, these families should be served by the agencies in their geographic area. (24%)
- These families should be served by a centralized, state-wide agency specializing in services for children with special medical needs or developmental disabilities. (76%)

Section VI: Wrap-Up & Next Steps

What policies, procedures, and operational infrastructure will need to be in place – at DCYF or the support centers – prior to full-scale service delivery?

Participants indicated that all major operational functions, including roles and responsibilities, should be sorted out prior to implementation. Participants proposed the following communication structures to ensure open dialogue among all stakeholders: more face-to-face meetings, leadership town halls at DCYF to inform staff of the model, and other trainings for DCYF staff. Lastly, participants suggested that DCYF further define and document a menu of services each center will provide, process map for

referrals to services, and a well- defined roles and responsibilities document for DCYF staff and providers.

Another theme surrounded data and technology. Participants pointed out the need for real time data on families and individual cases, access to a centralized data system to track and report data, and the need for a data sharing agreement between DCYF and providers to support the tracking of performance data.

Which of these leading indicators are the most important metrics for tracking the success of the coordinating agencies in recruitment, development, and support?

A total of 47 responses were recorded and the breakdown of those responses appears below:

- Family retention and satisfaction (45%)
- Recruitment of new families (21%)
- Access to supports for all families (19%)
- Decrease in placement disruptions (15%)

What other metrics are important to measure the success of an RDS strategy?

Participants indicated that permanency and child and family matching should be considered as two other important metrics. Other proposed metrics raised by some participants included re-entry into foster care, reunification, placement stability and time to licensing for all resource families.

How might this new system be piloted or implemented in stages to ensure success upon full-scale rollout?

- Most respondents answered this open text question by suggesting that DCYF should implement this plan in stages, by either targeting sub-populations first or by piloting the concept in one region initially. Some samples of their recommendations included funding a demonstration pilot with 1-3 support centers and learn from experience
- Work with agencies that have had similar programs in the past or currently
- DCYF should plan along with all agencies to ensure the model is successful
- Use foster families as the advertisement for this new system
- Prioritize each main function and establish achievable timelines with adequate resources
- Use a wraparound model with foster families

Section VI: Wrap-Up

What is one new thing you learned today?

Overwhelmingly, participants enjoyed the opportunity to learn about DCYF's vision for change and felt that the Department is moving in the right direction. Moreover, participants want to work with DCYF to address the current gap in services and supports for resource families across the state. Also, many participants commented on their admiration for foster families and their tireless efforts to provide a safe and loving home for children in care.

What specific information would you want from DCYF in order to respond to a procurement for RDS support centers?

Participants reported a need for additional clarity around the proposed model, including roles and responsibilities, types of services/scope of work for each center, funding and payment structures, transition plans for existing families, and timeline for implementation. Additionally, responders asked for demographic data on current foster families and children/youth in care, the need for a standard data collection tool, performance goals, and for a quality framework.