



Understanding Motivators & Barriers to Foster Parenting

WHITE PAPER PREPARED BY CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY OF NORTH CAROLINA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

North Carolina, like many states nationwide, continues to face a critical shortage of safe and stable foster homes. Since 2020, the United States has experienced a significant decline in the number of licensed foster homes. At the same time, there is little publicly available research exploring how motivations to foster and barriers to licensure may have shifted in the post-pandemic world.

For more than 120 years, Children's Home Society of North Carolina (CHS) has provided a broad range of services including foster care, adoption, parenting education, and family preservation. Over the last five years, CHS has implemented multiple internal and external initiatives to strengthen foster care operations and increase foster parent recruitment. As part of this ongoing commitment to continuous improvement, CHS conducted internal research with current CHS foster care families and explored evolving generational and community demographics across the state.

Given the lack of post-pandemic research on foster parent motivations and barriers, CHS sought an external partner to address this gap. With support from the Winston-Salem Foundation, CHS partnered with Eastcoast Research to conduct focus groups and online surveys with residents in central North Carolina.

The research indicates strong interest in foster parenting, driven primarily by values-based motivations such as making a difference in a child's life, providing mentorship, and giving back to the community. However, this interest is often stalled by persistent barriers including financial concerns, confusion about the licensing process, emotional readiness, and misinformation about eligibility requirements.

This white paper summarizes key findings from the research and presents strategic, actionable recommendations to strengthen foster parent recruitment through clearer communication, myth-busting, transparent financial education, and community-centered outreach.

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

Research Purpose

The goal of this research was to better understand:

- Community perceptions of foster care and foster parents.
- Motivators that encourage people (primarily Millennials and Gen-Xers) to consider fostering.
- Barriers or perceived barriers that prevent interested families/individuals from pursuing licensing.
- Preferred communication channels and messaging.
- Agency qualities that influence trust and selection.

Research Design

The study included two components: Online Surveys and In-Person Focus Groups

Online Survey

- Fielded between October 8 and November 21, 2025.
- 331 total responses collected; 150 selected to represent the target population of individuals open to fostering.
- Survey included 20 questions (multiple choice and open-ended).

Focus Groups

- Participants were primarily Forsyth County residents.
- Ages 30–49, diverse across race, gender, and occupation.
- All participants were open to the idea of fostering.

Together, these methods provided both quantitative and qualitative insights into attitudes and beliefs surrounding foster care.



KEY FINDINGS

Interest in Fostering Is High

- 74% of survey respondents said fostering could be a possibility in their future, indicating high potential for future engagement.
- 39% expressed direct interest in becoming foster parents.
- 45% had no prior personal experience with the foster care system, indicating interest is not limited to those already connected to child welfare.

Focus group discussions reflected strong compassion for children in crisis and a belief that fostering can be life-changing for both children and families. Focus group discussions also highlighted the influence of TV/media portrayals of foster parenting – both for positive and negative stories. Very often there is a “heroic” portrayal of foster parents that makes people feel they cannot live up to expectations or conversely, media stories focus on worst case scenarios of foster parents resulting in negative perceptions.

Motivations Are Deeply Values-Driven

The primary motivators for fostering included:

- Making a difference in a child’s life (top-ranked motivator 90%).
- Mentorship and guidance (38%).
- Giving back to the community (37%).
- Personal growth and purpose (35%).

Many participants expressed particular concern for teenagers and sibling groups, acknowledging these children often wait the longest for stable placements.

Personal motivations or connections also played a role, including:

- Family members who had fostered or adopted.
- Participants who had been in foster care themselves.
- Faith-based or moral beliefs about caring for vulnerable children.

Barriers Are Consistent and Often Practical

Despite strong interest, several recurring barriers prevent families from pursuing licensure

Financial Concerns

- Financial stability is the #1 gatekeeper; 70% say fostering feels realistic once finances/careers are more stable.

- Many were uncertain whether stipends would cover actual costs such as sports, daycare, transportation, and medical needs.

Licensing Process Confusion

- Described as intimidating, complicated, and unclear.
- Perceived strict housing/background requirements.
- Participants felt unsure where to start and what was truly required.

Emotional and Mental Stress

- Concerns about handling trauma-related behaviors.
- Fear of emotional attachment in the face of biological family reunification.
- Challenges of balancing careers, parenting biological children, and meeting the needs of children in care feel overwhelming.

Housing and Eligibility Misconceptions

- Many believed rental status, apartment living, or lack of extra bedrooms would prohibit their participation.
- Many also believed past minor legal issues automatically disqualify families.



Time and Life Circumstances

- Work schedules, young biological children, caregiving responsibilities, or upcoming moves made fostering feel unrealistic in the short term.

Persistent Myths and Knowledge Gaps

The most common misconceptions included:

- ***“You must be wealthy to foster.”***
- ***“Only older, stay-at-home parents can foster.”***
- ***“The system is unsafe or poorly monitored.”***
- ***“Only married couples can foster.”***

Across both survey and focus groups, participants repeatedly stated they did not feel well-informed enough about the foster care system to seriously consider next steps. They also noted that many websites about foster care are confusing, difficult to navigate, and do not provide enough concrete information to help them understand the process and what will be required of them to pursue licensing.

What Families Want from Foster Care Agencies

When selecting an agency, participants prioritized:

- Clear, transparent communication.
- Step-by-step guidance on the process.
- Strong reputation and recommendations.
- Personalized training and mentorship.
- 24/7 access to support and emergency assistance.
- Smaller caseloads and consistent social workers.

Focus group participants emphasized the desire to feel that they would not be alone and that someone would be available when challenges arise. Focus group participants also highlighted concerns about working directly with Departments of Social Services based on racial bias issues.

Preferred Communication Channels

Participants indicated that the most effective ways to learn about fostering include:

- Social media and podcasts (43% of respondents ranked this as number one).
- In-person workshops or meetings (29% of respondents).
- Peer-driven storytelling from real foster parents is the most persuasive approach; feels more credible than “corporate” storytelling.

Faith communities were also frequently mentioned as trusted spaces for learning about fostering opportunities. Focus group discussions also included positive responses to a foster care app as a future preferred form of communication with foster care agencies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT RECRUITMENT

While this research is grounded in North Carolina, the themes that emerged are consistent with national foster parent recruitment challenges. The findings point to systems level issues that extend beyond marketing and into agency operations, staff capacity, and community partnerships.

For child welfare agencies, this means that recruitment success depends not only on generating interest, but also on how effectively agencies convert that interest into confidence and action.

Key implications for agencies include:

- **Front-End Experience Matters:** Families often decide whether to continue after their first few interactions with an agency. Delays in follow-up, confusing instructions, or inconsistent communication can unintentionally discourage otherwise motivated families.

- **Licensing Is Perceived as a Major Barrier:** Even when requirements are reasonable, the way they are communicated can make the process feel overwhelming. Agencies that simplify and clearly explain each step are more likely to retain interested families.
- **Support Systems Influence Recruitment:** Prospective foster parents evaluate whether they will be emotionally and practically supported once children are placed. Caseload sizes, availability of after-hours help, and consistency of workers all influence willingness to proceed.
- **Transparency Builds Trust:** Financial realities, placement expectations, and reunification goals must be communicated early and honestly. Families are more likely to commit when expectations are clear.
- **Community Presence Shapes Perception:** Agencies that are visible, relational, and embedded in community institutions are perceived as more trustworthy and approachable.

These implications suggest that recruitment should be viewed as a cross-functional responsibility involving communications, licensing, case management, and leadership, not solely a marketing function.

A RECRUITMENT FRAMEWORK INFORMED BY THE RESEARCH

Since 2020, CHS has been working to address the foster care shortage from both an internal and external focus. Redesigning workflows for social workers, employing modern technology to communicate with families, and focusing on true foster care parent lived experience through storytelling all have been focuses of our work. The research completed in this project helps define a practical recruitment strategy that agencies may benefit from organizing efforts around a simple engagement pathway:

Awareness → Understanding → Confidence → Commitment

Each stage reflects what families need emotionally and practically to move forward.

Stage 1: Awareness

Goal: Help families see fostering as relevant and possible.

Effective strategies include:

- ✓ Community-based storytelling through social media, local news, and podcasts.
- ✓ Faith and civic organization partnerships.
- ✓ Visibility at schools, employers, and neighborhood events.

Messaging should focus on:

- Real families, not idealized stereotypes.

- Community need and local impact.
- Inclusion of diverse family structures.

Stage 2: Understanding

Goal: Replace fear and myths with accurate, accessible information.

Effective strategies include:

- ✓ Myth vs. Fact campaigns.
- ✓ Simple eligibility guides.
- ✓ Short videos explaining the licensing process.

Low-pressure information sessions.

Messaging should clarify:

- Who can foster.
- What the process actually involves.
- What supports are provided.

Stage 3: Confidence

Goal: Help families believe they can succeed as foster parents.

Effective strategies include:

- ✓ Peer mentorship programs.
- ✓ Foster parent panels and testimonials.
- ✓ Transparent financial explanations.
- ✓ Clear descriptions of agency support.

Messaging should reinforce:

- “You will not do this alone.”
- Training is ongoing, not one-time.
- Support is available when challenges arise.

Stage 4: Commitment

Goal: Remove friction from the decision to start licensing.

Effective strategies include:

- ✓ Fast follow-up after inquiries.
- ✓ Clear next steps and timelines.
- ✓ Dedicated recruitment or intake coordinators.
- ✓ Personalized outreach.

At this stage, operational efficiency becomes just as important as messaging.



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

The research suggests that recruitment challenges are not driven by lack of interest, but by uncertainty, fear, and practical concerns. Many families are in a “consideration phase” but lack the clarity and reassurance needed to move forward.

This creates a strong opportunity for agencies to:

- Convert passive interest into active inquiry.
- Normalize fostering as something everyday families can do.
- Build trust through transparency and relationship-based outreach.

Bust Myths and Simplify the Process

Reduce intimidation and increase perceived accessibility across all agency entry points.

- Launch coordinated Myth vs. Fact campaigns across digital and in-person channels.
- Publish clear eligibility guidelines in plain language.
- Create visual step-by-step licensing roadmaps and checklists.
- Offer brief, recurring information sessions that explain how to start without requiring commitment.
- Standardize messaging across staff so families receive consistent information regardless of who they contact.

Humanizing Experience Through Storytelling

Build emotional connection and normalize fostering for everyday families.

- Feature real foster families through video, social media, and community events.
- Highlight placements involving teens and siblings to reflect areas of greatest need.
- Share honest stories that acknowledge challenges while demonstrating agency support.
- Partner with local media and community organizations to elevate authentic voices.
- Encourage foster parents to serve as ambassadors at recruitment events.

Address Financial Concerns Transparently

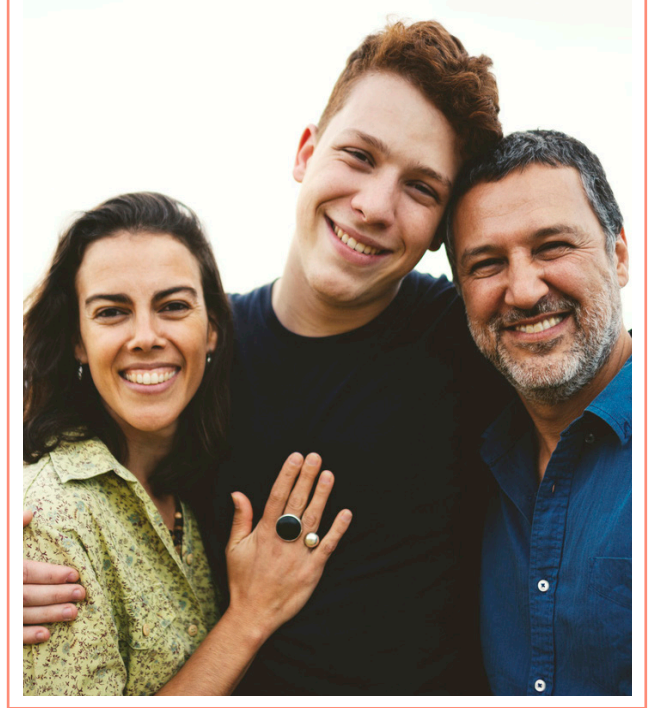
Reduce financial uncertainty and clarify what support families can expect.

- Clearly explain stipends, Medicaid coverage, and reimbursement processes.
- Provide real-life examples of how families manage typical expenses.
- Offer budgeting tools or financial planning resources.
- Communicate how agencies help families access additional community resources.
- Advocate for employer partnerships that support foster-friendly workplace policies.

Strengthening Support Messaging

Increase confidence that families will be supported beyond licensing.

- Formalize peer mentorship programs.
- Publicize 24/7 support availability and crisis response procedures.
- Share caseworker-to-family ratios where favorable.
- Highlight respite care options and community supports.
- Build community support groups and social events for foster families.
- Provide clear escalation pathways when families need urgent help.



Use Targeted Messaging by Life Stage

Make fostering feel relevant to different household types and seasons of life.

- Millennials and young families: emphasize flexibility, community impact, and family-building pathways.
- Gen X and empty nesters: emphasize stability, mentorship, and legacy.
- Faith communities: emphasize service, calling, and collective responsibility.
- Employers: frame fostering as workforce-supported civic engagement.
- Tailoring outreach increases perceived relevance and reduces self-disqualification.

Implement a Hybrid Outreach Strategy

Reach families through both digital and relationship-based channels.

- Combine paid digital campaigns with in-person community engagement.
- Develop partnerships with churches, employers, schools, and healthcare systems.
- Host recurring community information nights – primarily virtually.
- Create simple pathways from digital interest to real human follow-up.
- Track inquiry-to-licensure conversion rates to identify drop-off points.

Practical, Low-Cost Recruitment Actions Agencies Can Implement

The following actions were identified as feasible for agencies with limited recruitment budgets:

- Monthly virtual or in-person information sessions co-led by a licensing worker and experienced foster parent.
- Social media “day in the life” stories from foster families.

- Downloadable myth-busting flyers for community partners.
- Foster parent ambassador programs.
- Employer lunch-and-learn presentations.
- Faith community foster care toolkits.
- Text message follow-up after inquiries.

These approaches prioritize relationship-building and clarity over expensive media campaigns.

Systems-Level Considerations

These findings extend beyond communication and point to broader system pressures. While messaging and outreach are critical, the research also highlights structural issues that influence recruitment success:

- **Staff Capacity:** High caseloads reduce the ability to provide the responsive support families expect.
- **Process Efficiency:** Long or unclear timelines discourage follow-through.
- **Court and Placement Stability:** Repeated moves and delayed permanency affect public perception of the system.
- **Equity and Fairness:** Concerns about bias and inconsistent treatment undermine trust.

Addressing these factors will require policy and funding advocacy in addition to recruitment efforts.

CONCLUSION

North Carolina residents demonstrate strong compassion for children in foster care and a genuine interest in becoming foster parents. However, that interest is often stalled by fear, misinformation, and uncertainty about financial and emotional readiness.

By simplifying messaging, addressing myths, improving transparency, and strengthening visible support systems, foster care agencies can significantly increase the number of families willing to take the next step. Strategic, community-based outreach paired with authentic storytelling and clear guidance has the potential to transform interest into action and expand the pool of loving foster homes for children across North Carolina and across the country.

