

The effectiveness of public foster carer recruitment campaigns

The South Australian experience

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Between 2004 and 2006, the State Government of South Australia funded a foster carer recruitment service to increase the number of foster carers within the State. Based on a combination of public advertising, community consultation, and a step-by-step process of assessment, the service was successful in attracting considerable public interest in foster care. However, only limited success was achieved in recruiting new foster carers. To investigate this, a retrospective survey of 347 people who made contact with the recruitment service was conducted. The survey examined several factors that might have acted as barriers to becoming a foster carer, including: perceptions of the quality of the service, the nature of the assessment process, concerns about foster care, and personal characteristics and circumstances. The results showed that concerns about the nature of foster care (e.g. nature of the children, their families and fear of being falsely accused of abuse) discouraged around 30% of respondents, but that the majority declined to continue because of inopportune personal circumstances or a fear of failure. The findings highlight the importance of providing greater community information regarding foster care prior to large-scale campaigns, as well as undertaking more specifically targeted recruitment strategies.

In South Australia, as in other States and Territories, it has proven very difficult to maintain an adequate supply of suitably qualified foster carers to provide stable homes for children not able to remain at home with their primary carers (Australian Senate 2005; Barber & Delfabbro 2004; Des Semple & Associates 2002; Layton 2003). Despite an almost 50 per cent increase in the number of children in out-of-home care in South Australia from 1997 to 2006 (AIHW 2007), the number of foster carers has only increased at half this rate. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to provide suitable placements in a timely way when children enter care, or require a new placement. In such situations, children often experience a significant number of short-term placements because of the lack of appropriate long-term arrangements, or have to be housed in alternative accommodation until suitable placements become available.

Such disparities between the demand and supply for foster care placements are unlikely to be due to any single cause. Instead, they reflect a number of broader factors that have affected many foster care systems around the world. The first of these is the changing nature of society itself. Demographic, social or economic changes, including the increasing involvement of women in the workforce, population ageing, increases in the costs of living, and a declining interest in volunteering, have reduced the number of people able to provide care for children. Fewer people volunteer to become foster carers because they do not have the time or resources to become involved, and many leave the system for similar reasons (Hayden & McHugh 2006; McHugh et al. 2004).

A second and related difficulty is the nature of the role itself. With increasing demands for placements, governments have had to become more selective about which children and families receive assistance. The few placements that are available are allocated to those children or young people most in need of services, or where reunification is not feasible because of very significant concerns about the child's safety and wellbeing (Barber & Delfabbro 2004). As a result, there are concerns that the proportion of children with significant emotional, behavioural and mental health problems in out-of-home care has increased over the last decade (Barber & Delfabbro 2001, 2004; Osborn & Delfabbro 2006). Accordingly, foster carers are expected,

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usually without any additional or ongoing training, to undertake the same role as before, but with a greater proportion of children with more complex needs (Australian Senate 2005).

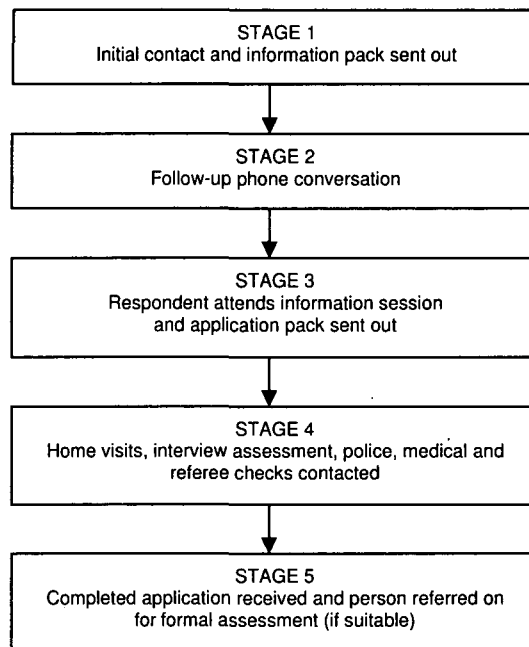
FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Although a variety of strategies (e.g. improvements in kinship or residential care) may be needed to address broader problems in the out-of-home care system that have contributed to a shortage of foster carers, there is little question that the recruitment and retention of foster carers remain essential to ensure the ongoing viability of out-of-home care systems in South Australia and elsewhere. In particular, the increasing shortage of carers has led to the need to consider more specialised, professional and innovative models for recruitment and retention.

In South Australia, in 2004, this need was recognised by the Department for Families and Communities with funding for a specialist foster carer recruitment service (SFCRS). This service was to increase the public profile of foster caring in South Australia as well as the number of foster carers. Similar programs or campaigns have been run in other Australian States, e.g. NSW (Hayden & McHugh 2006; Moller 2003), and it was hoped that a similar consolidation of recruitment services in one agency might achieve results in South Australia. The South Australian SFCRS was based within a non-government organisation, Lutheran Community Care (SA)¹, and ran from June 2004 to September 2006. The service was designed to enhance the awareness of foster care in the community, develop effective promotional materials, and to increase the number of foster carers within South Australia.

The SFCRS was not expected to conduct full assessments of applicants, but to accept inquiries, provide information, process applications, and then pass on the details of appropriate candidates (based on initial screening processes) to other non-government organisations (NGOs). An NGO would then conduct more detailed assessments for the purpose of registration of applicants as foster carers. The aim of the SFCRS over its two-year funding period was to obtain around 600 inquiries from the general public and to contribute to the registration of 80 new foster carers per year. The strategies used to promote the service included television, radio and newspaper advertising, leaflet distribution and information booths in community locations, information evenings in both metropolitan and regional areas, and the distribution of information packs and materials (e.g. mugs, mouse-pads, flyers, brochures).

Figure 1. Simplified summary of SA recruitment service processes



The recruitment process involved a series of five stages. A simplified version is provided in Figure 1. In Stage 1, people who contacted the service for information about foster caring were invited to attend an information session and were sent an information pack. At the initial contact with SFCRS, respondents' contact details as well as their responses to a series of questions about foster care were entered into a database. Those who expressed ongoing interest at the initial contact point then received a follow-up phone call (Stage 2) that gave them an opportunity to ask questions about the information pack. The information pack contained a clear description of the recruitment process, including the various screening processes required, as well as information about the realities of becoming a foster carer. If respondents were still interested after the follow-up phone conversation, they were invited to attend an information session (Stage 3) where they were given an application pack. This application pack asked a respondent's permission to undergo a police check, sought details from the person's health provider, and asked for two referee reports to be sent to the service by people familiar with the applicant. The two referees were asked to rate the applicant's suitability in terms of their ability to provide a safe and nurturing household, and their ability to relate to children. In Stage 4, SFCRS staff conducted a home visit to inspect the safety and suitability of the applicant's home. They also conducted two detailed interviews with applicants to obtain details of their family history and structure, and their understanding of the role of a foster carer, and administered various measures of individual and family functioning. In Stage 5, a person whose application fulfilled all specified criteria and provided

¹ Lutheran Community Care (LCC) is a church-based, non-government organisation in South Australia.

endorsements from referees, medical providers, and the police, was considered suitable and was referred on to another non-government agency for formal assessment and possible registration.

In its two years of operation, the service exceeded expectations in terms of the number of enquiries from the public. Over 900 calls were received, 357 received a follow-up phone call, and 255 people (168 households) attended the information sessions. However, by the end of June 2006, only 55 of those who attended an information session agreed to be referred to other agencies for formal assessment, and only 16 carers were eventually registered (< 2% rate of conversion based on initial enquiries). Some additional referrals were made after this period.

EVALUATION STUDY

In light of these findings, the University of Adelaide was engaged to conduct an evaluation of the SFCRS in order to obtain more detailed insights into the operation of the service, how it had been received by people who had contacted it, or interacted with it during the previous two years, and what implication this had for future recruitment strategies. In brief, the evaluation involved detailed qualitative and quantitative research into the operation and outcomes of the service. A telephone survey was conducted with the target population being all respondents who had made at least initial contact with the service during its two years of operation. This survey requested personal information such as respondents' demographic characteristics, their family circumstances, and experience in providing care for children. Another section asked them to describe their perceptions of the recruitment campaign, and how these recruitment campaigns might be better conducted in the future. Respondents who had proceeded beyond the initial contact point were also asked to rate the quality of the different stages they experienced, and to indicate what factors had led them to continue or not continue with the recruitment process.

In this paper, we summarise the principal findings from this study and its implications for the value and design of future recruitment campaigns. The particular focus of this paper will be on the factors that appear to have acted as barriers to people proceeding through the recruitment process. Why did so many people make contact with the service, but so few eventually proceed to the final stages of assessment? Although the research project examined a wide range of variables, four principal hypotheses or potential areas of analysis were identified and explored. These hypotheses were based on anecdotal views of the service by other stakeholders (e.g. other non-government and government organisations in South Australia), as well as international and national research.

- Recruitment was limited because of the quality of the recruitment materials, the effectiveness of the promotion, and the quality of services provided to people who made contact with the service.
- The nature of the recruitment and assessment process itself (e.g. how long it took, the intrusiveness of the processes, and its bureaucratic nature) led to a loss of interest.
- Poor perception of foster care due to child abuse allegations in care and fear of investigations and other negative outcomes, or concern about the child's family (e.g. Haight et al. 2002; Lawrence 1993; Richardson, Bromfield & Higgins 2005; Sinclair, Gibbs & Wilson 2004).
- The people who contacted the service were unsuitable or unready to become foster carers due to their personal attitudes or circumstances (e.g. impact on lifestyle and family, ability to cope, *see* Moslehuddin 1999; Pugh 1996).

Characteristics of the respondents to SFCRS

Not all people who made contact with the service completed the initial contact interview. As a result, overall background information was only available for 796 respondents. Around 90% of these respondents were female, with the most typical enquirer being a woman aged between 30 and 50 years of age. Nineteen per cent were aged 20-30 years, 37.8% were 31-40 years, 27.3% were 41-50 years, 11.5% were 51-60 years, and only 4% were 61+ years of age. Most households were relatively small with an average of 1-2 children already in the household and between 1-2 other adults. Around one-third had no children, 54% had 1-2 children, and only 15% had 3 or more children. Thirty-two per cent of households had only one person usually living there, 65% had two adults, and only 3% had three or more. In terms of education, it was found that 22.8% had a university degree, and 22.8% had TAFE diploma or similar qualification. Only 35% had completed Year 10 or primary school only. Around 40% of the sample wanted to provide only temporary, emergency or short-term care, and the remainder were happy to provide a variety of different forms of care.

These characteristics did not appear to differentiate between those who completed applications as opposed to those who only made initial enquiries. However, more educated people, in particular those with a university degree, were more likely to proceed through the service (45% of returned applications came from people with a university degree).

PROCEDURE

Attempts were made to contact all of these people by telephone during September-October 2006. Telephone calls were made between 10 am and 9 pm with five call-backs. A total of 347 of the 796 (44%) were contacted and asked to

complete an interview over the phone. Of this 347 who were successfully contacted by the research team in 2006, 181 had also received the follow-up conversation, 77 had completed the follow-up conversation and also attended an information session, and 33 had done all of these things and also returned an application form.²

All 347 respondents were asked to provide additional demographic information, including their age. They were also asked to answer a number of general and specific questions relating to foster care, their views concerning each stage of the recruitment service, and the extent to which it had influenced their decision to persist (or not) with submitting an application to become a carer. A full summary of these questions is provided in Delfabbro, Borgas and Vast (2007). Almost all questions were provided in an open-ended format and then recoded subsequently into common themes and categories.

RESULTS

This section contains a selection of material drawn from the full evaluation report (Delfabbro et al. 2007) that is relevant to the four broad hypotheses described above; namely, whether the diminishing retention rate in the recruitment process was due to: (1) the failures of the recruitment service itself, (2) the nature of the assessment process, (3) the poor image of foster care, or (4) the characteristics of the individuals that contacted the service.

(1) Perceptions of the recruitment campaign and services provided

There was no question that the campaign had been successful in terms of attracting enquiries in that the number of calls received had been greater than expected. Moreover, it appeared that each promotional strategy had yielded some success in attracting interest. People who contacted the service reported becoming aware of it through a variety of sources. Records maintained by the agency for all contacts ($n = 796$) showed that a third had attended a promotional talk given by staff in their local community, 22% had read about it in a newspaper, 13% had found information on the Internet, 13% had become aware via television or radio advertising. The remainder had read bulletins, or seen posters and displays. However, to assess how well the program was received, it is important to consider respondents' views concerning the contact and services they received. As indicated in Figure 1, for some respondents, the only service received was a follow-up call to provide further details about the application process, whereas for others, who proceeded further, there was also an opportunity to

attend an information session to learn more about foster care.

The 181 people who received a follow-up call (Stage 2) and responded to the phone survey in 2006 were asked to describe their perceptions of the follow-up call, to report whether it had provided adequate information, and whether it had influenced their decision to continue with the process. Thirty-nine per cent could not recall the nature of the follow-up conversation, 42% experienced very positive views about it and found it informative and friendly, 12% had already decided to withdraw so that it made no difference, and no respondents expressed any negative views. When further questioned about whether it had provided them with sufficient information, two-thirds indicated that this was the case, 14% felt that the information had been insufficient, and the remainder were unsure. Another 33 (18.2%) were discouraged from continuing as a result of what they had learned from the follow-up conversation, and 55.2% were not 'put off' by the information provided to them. Of these 33, a third (or 11) said that the drawn out application process had discouraged them from taking the matter any further. Other factors were identified by only by two people.

Similar questions were asked of the 77 people who attended information sessions and also responded to the survey. The most frequent responses from these people are summarised in Table 1. As indicated in Table 1, the majority of respondents (65%) expressed positive views about the information session. Respondents were asked if the information session had provided them with sufficient knowledge. Two-thirds (79% or 61/77) said 'Yes' and only 4 (5%) said that insufficient information had been provided. Just over a third (36%) said that all of the information provided had been useful. Around a quarter (23%) found the sessions involving stories and presentations from previous carers to be most useful. All other points were mentioned by fewer than 5% of respondents. Fifteen (19%) were discouraged by the information session (50, or 65%, were not 'put off'). Those who were discouraged gave a variety of reasons ranging from concern in having to deal with difficult children to contact with biological families. More generally, when respondents were asked whether their knowledge of

Table 1. Perceptions of the information session provided

	N (%) N = 77
Positive, inviting, encouraging, friendly conversation	15 (19.4)
Useful information obtained from previous carers	14 (18.2)
Didn't make any difference	10 (13.0)
Very informative/a lot of information/answered all questions	10 (13.0)
Had already decided to proceed/withdraw	6 (7.8)
Repeated/confirmed all previous information	5 (6.5)

Note: Ns do not sum to 100% due to non-responses or missing data

² These numbers are overlapping and will not, therefore, sum to 100%. The retention rate for each stage in the recruitment process can be calculated using these figures, e.g. $181/347 = 52\%$ for follow-up, $77/181 = 43\%$ for the information sessions, and $33/77 = 43\%$ for completion of the application form.

foster care had increased as a result of attendance at the information session, 36% reported some increase in knowledge, 41% reported a lot of increase, and only 13% reported little or no change in knowledge.

In summary, therefore, there was little evidence to suggest that people had failed to proceed through to the final stages of the application process because of dissatisfaction with the information sessions. The vast majority of respondents had found contact with the sessions to be informative, friendly, and professionally conducted.

(2) Nature of the recruitment process

The respondents' reactions to the assessment process were not specifically targeted by the survey, but the importance of this issue can be inferred from the responses provided to other questions. For example, all survey respondents ($n = 347$) were asked what concerns they had about becoming a foster carer. The most commonly reported responses are summarised in Table 2. Only 12.7% of the 347 respondents referred to the rules and restrictions and drawn out nature of the application process. Similarly, when people were asked why they had not continued beyond the initial contact, only 13.5% of respondents identified the nature of the assessment process as important (Table 3). Although, as indicated above, one-third (or 11) of the 33 people who had been discouraged by the follow-up conversation identified concerns with the assessment process, this 11 represented only 14.2% of the total number who received a follow-up call and who responded to the survey. In other words, the results provided only limited evidence that the nature of the recruitment process itself was a significant barrier for the

Table 2. Principal concerns about becoming a foster carer ($n = 347$)

	N (%)
Impact on biological family	63 (18.2)
Difficult family background of foster child e.g. misbehaviour, drugs, violence	52 (15.0)
Too many rules and restrictions, application process too difficult and long	44 (12.7)
Fear of emotional attachment	40 (11.5)
Horror stories of difficult children and allegations of abuse in the press	37 (10.7)
Lack of financial support/lack of government support	31 (8.9)
Fear of not having the skills, fear of not being good enough and not coping	28 (8.1)
Too busy, don't want to over-commit, working, couldn't handle full-time care	27 (7.8)
Lack of permanency, having to give children back to biological parents	26 (7.5)
Fear of contact with biological parents	22 (6.3)

Note:
Multiple responses allowed, so numbers should not be summed to 100%

vast majority of people who did not proceed further through the service.

(3) Perceptions of foster care

A third factor investigated in the research was the extent to which respondents were worried about the realities of foster care; for example, the potentially difficult behaviour of the child, false allegations of abuse, and fear of contact with the child's family. When all respondents were asked to indicate whether they were concerned about these factors, 15% referred to the difficult family background of children and their potentially violent behaviour, 11% had concerns about allegations of abuse, but only 6% were worried about contact with the child's family. A further analysis based on the number who had expressed concerns about at least one of these factors, showed that 30% fell into this category. In other words, just under a third expressed concerns about the nature of foster care itself. However, when asked what factors had been decisive in their decision not to proceed beyond the initial contact, such factors were identified by less than 10% of respondents.

(4) Individual characteristics and attitudes of respondents

It was also possible to gain insights into the extent to which the personal factors created barriers to applicants' involvement in foster care. A number of issues emerged in the broad question relating to their principal concerns about becoming a foster carer. Of those who made initial contact and responded to the survey, 18.2% were worried about the impact of foster care on their family, 11.5% had a fear of forming an emotional attachment with a fostered child, 8.1% did not feel that they had sufficient skill, and 7.8% said that they were too busy (see Table 2). Other factors around the nature of fostering (e.g. difficult children and birth families, allegations of abuse, and rules and restrictions) were identified by around 45 per cent of the respondents.

Individual factors similarly emerged strongly when people were asked why they had not proceeded beyond the initial contact (Table 3). A count of this more comprehensive list of factors indicated that 77% of people who did not continue after the initial inquiry did so for at least one personal reason. As indicated in Table 3, the most frequently mentioned of these was that the person had other commitments, was in a state of transition, was unable to do so because of housing or health issues, or due to a lack of family support for the decision. However, it is also clearly evident from Table 3 that a wide range of specific personal factors act as barriers rather than a few highly prevalent factors.

Prior knowledge and motivational state

The impression from these findings is that many of the people who did not continue were probably not in a position to provide foster care at that time. For this reason, it may be

Table 3. Reasons for not proceeding beyond the initial contact

	N (%) N = 166
PERSONAL FACTORS	
Too busy, working full time, can't transport	28 (16.9)
Moving house; travelling, renovating	20 (12.0)
Putting needs of biological children first	18 (10.8)
Current family relationships and commitments (avoiding conflict with them)	16 (9.6)
Partner declined	13 (7.8)
House not appropriate e.g. size	13 (7.8)
Health reasons	13 (7.8)
Money, costs, financial reasons	13 (7.8)
Decided to have biological children e.g. IVF, pregnant, just had a baby	10 (6.0)
Respondent's age	9 (5.4)
Change in circumstances e.g. tough life experience, death in family	7 (4.2)
Not the right timing	7 (4.2)
Fear of emotional attachment and children going back to biological parents	6 (3.6)
Fear of not having the skills, fear of not being good enough and not coping	1 (0.6)
OTHER FACTORS	
Perceived characteristics of foster children e.g. age	6 (3.6)
Perception of a lack of financial support/lack of government support	4 (2.4)
Declined by agency	4 (2.4)
Issues with foster care agency e.g. no follow up, not enough information, confusing information	3 (1.8)
Horror stories of difficult children and allegations of abuse in the press	3 (1.8)
Fear of allegations of abuse, being scrutinised by social workers	2 (1.2)
Fear of contact with biological parents	1 (0.6)

Note:
Multiple responses allowed, so numbers should not be summed to 100%

instructive to consider people's self-reported knowledge or state of mind prior to making contact. Respondents were asked to state how much knowledge they believed they had about foster care prior to their contact with the service. Around 30% of the sample knew almost nothing about foster care, and around a third knew very little before making contact with the SFCRS. A further 24% knew something about foster care, and only 13% said that they knew 'a lot'. Nevertheless, when asked about whether the decision to call had been made because of the campaign or had been considered for some time, 92% of respondents reported that they had been thinking about foster care for some time (possibly several years). In other words, in a motivational

sense, these people were still contemplating foster care and wanting to obtain further information about the processes involved, rather than being in a position where they would be able to make a commitment at the present time.

Interestingly enough, when these people were asked whether they would consider foster care in the future or recommend it to others, 86% said that they would consider it again, and 75% would pass on information to others.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to investigate why the recent South Australian foster carer recruitment campaign achieved only limited success in converting a large number of inquiries into completed applications. Four broad statements framed as hypotheses were investigated:

- 1) the quality of the services provided
- 2) the intrusive and drawn-out nature of the assessment process
- 3) poor or negative perceptions of foster care
- 4) the individual circumstances and attitudes of those who made the enquiries.

On the whole, the results provided little evidence to support hypothesis 1; namely, that the nature of the service itself was responsible for the poor retention rate. Most were impressed by the quality of different components of the service, and found it informative and professionally conducted, and still had positive attitudes about foster care despite not continuing to proceed through the other stages. Most were, in fact, willing to recommend fostering to others.

In terms of the nature of the assessment process (hypothesis 2), there was some evidence to suggest that the long, drawn-out application process involved as well as the various rules and regulations associated with foster caring were potentially unattractive to a number of respondents. Around 15% of respondents indicated that this had been the principal reason why they had not continued.

Some support was also obtained for hypothesis 3. Around 30% of the sample expressed concerns about the nature of foster care itself, and many of these statements made by respondents appeared to reflect broader negative images of foster care commonly conveyed in the media. These include the behavioural problems of many children placed into care, the difficulties associated with dealing with very troubled biological families (e.g. during contact), and a fear of being falsely accused of abuse after assuming the responsibility of looking after children in care. Despite these concerns, however, only around 10% of respondents indicated that these factors had been influential in their decision to discontinue with the application process.

Much stronger support was obtained for hypothesis 4. Almost 80% of the sample who had not continued beyond

the initial inquiry (Stage 1) identified some personal reason why they were unable to proceed further. As Table 3 indicates, these factors ranged from concerns about the effects of foster care on their families to home circumstances (e.g. house changes) that made becoming a foster carer not possible in the short term. Although it is possible to group these factors into more general categories (e.g. stability of the household, family support, and attitudes of the foster carer), a frustrating aspect of these findings for the designers of recruitment campaigns is that the range of specific factors is quite extensive and idiosyncratic, making it difficult to develop strategies that would help large numbers of potential carers overcome these barriers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RECRUITMENT PRACTICE

An important implication of these findings is that general public recruitment campaigns may not be the most effective or efficient way in which to recruit foster carers. A principal reason for this is that the vast majority of people in the community who have an interest in foster care know relatively little about it either in terms of the challenges involved or the recruitment process. As a result, many respondents will tend to use recruitment campaigns as a way to obtain information for future reference, rather than as a way to become registered as carers. Thus, very large sums of money will be spent in a recruitment campaign to create awareness of the need for carers, but the campaign may not necessarily result in an increase in carer numbers.

To address this problem, more efficient ways to recruit foster carers are required in South Australia. The first way in which efficiency can be enhanced is to provide better information about the nature of foster care to the general public through various forms of communication. Despite the existence of links to foster care services through larger government websites, it may be that awareness could be enhanced by dedicated, stand alone websites that could be promoted in their own right. Some states and territories (for example, the Northern Territory) have stand alone websites that allow people to gain access to application forms and other relevant information without having to wade through complex government websites. In other states (e.g. New South Wales and Queensland), the State Government has developed comprehensive information packages that can be obtained by prospective carers. Similarly, in Western Australia, information sessions relating to foster carer recruitment are held on a regular basis in various community locations, so that members of the community can find out in advance when a session is going to be held in their local area. All of these strategies make it easier for prospective carers to find out about foster care before formally making contact with the relevant recruitment service or foster care agencies. By making information more consistently and widely available, people will find it easier to obtain

information on an ongoing basis. It may also increase the proportion of enquiries from people who are in a realistic and informed position to become foster carers when a formal recruitment campaign is undertaken.

A second issue relates to the appropriate target population for recruitment. It is well established from a number of previous national and international studies that certain people are more likely to become foster carers than others (Delfabbro, Bentham & Taplin 2002; McHugh et al. 2004; South Australian Department for Family and Community Services 1997; Victorian Department of Human Services 2003; Volard, Baxter & Da Costa 1993). Those who have a genuine interest in children, previous experience working with children's services, or who live in a community group where children's interests are important, are more likely to become foster carers. Thus, it has been suggested that recruitment could be enhanced by a greater focus on local community recruitment, word-of-mouth recruitment via existing foster carer networks, or contacts with organisations where people already have a capacity and an interest in looking after children (e.g. schools, child care centres, children's hospitals) (Sellick & Howell 2003). Admittedly, some of these procedures are already used by a number of recruitment agencies around Australia. Indeed, in the recent South Australian campaign, foster carers were used as advisors and presenters in information sessions for prospective carers. However, the critical issue is the extent to which these networks are engaged as part of the broader promotional phase of recruitment in addition to using them *after* people have made contact with recruitment services.

An important implication of these findings is that general public recruitment campaigns may not be the most effective or efficient way in which to recruit foster carers.

McHugh et al. (2004) have shown that up to 30% of foster carers are recruited via word-of-mouth, presumably with some influence from existing carers in the system. However, given ongoing deficits in the numbers of foster carers being recruited, it would appear that reliance on existing carer networks may not be sufficient, especially if carers are increasingly dissatisfied with their roles. Although state government departments with different responsibilities do not always work easily in tandem, it would be useful to consider the extent to which foster care recruitment services (usually funded or managed by human services departments) might forge stronger linkages with education departments. School communities, by definition, have a strong interest in

children's wellbeing, and have experience in coping with children with very different needs, often under difficult circumstances. Using school communities and their associated networks as a means to recruit foster carers (particularly when some teachers or parents might already be familiar with the children) may have many advantages in that prospective carers may have more realistic expectations and understanding of children's needs.

Finally, a notable observation in this current research was that many applicants wanted to provide short-term care, rather than become long-term carers. Although this is problematic in terms of being able to attract long-term carers, the successful experiences of several volunteering services in Victoria (*see* Delfabbro, Borgas & Vast 2007 for a review, or visit www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au) indicates that this situation could still be used to advantage. Some programs, e.g. Friends of Kids in Care run by Anglicare Victoria, or Pathways to Fostering (Waverley Emergency Adolescent Centre), have shown that it may be possible to relieve some pressure on the foster care system by making recruitment more flexible. If many people do not become foster carers in the short-term, it may be possible to get them involved in other roles such as mentoring, day-care, and respite care. Using the recruitment service for filling a variety of roles may attract a larger number of people who ultimately, through their short-term involvement with caring for children, may wish to become foster carers. In other words, the strong interest in short-term care could be used to advantage through flexible arrangements. Even if many of these people do not take on foster care full-time, but make themselves available for a form of respite care, this may greatly reduce the stress on existing long-term carers and therefore increase retention rates.

In summary, the principal focus of this paper has been upon the problems associated with using expensive, large-scale, recruitment campaigns to recruit prospective foster carers. However, despite emphasising the particular problems associated with identifying and reaching the right people in such campaigns, it is recognised that there are many other factors in the specific design of the campaign and recruitment process (e.g. its messages, promotional format, the quality of information, mentoring, advisory services, training and follow-up services) that need to be taken into account to enhance the success of these programs. The aim of future papers, therefore, will be to consider the implications of other aspects of our findings for the design of the assessment and recruitment process itself, once people have formally made contact with the service. ■

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