

INFORMATION BRIEF

Summary

Although there are over 1,000 beds available in family foster homes, there are over 1,500 foster children in group homes and shelters. Matching the children to foster homes in terms of geographic locations, and the types of children the homes will accept, including older children and children with behavioral problems and special needs, is challenging. However, even if more matches can be made, the Division will still not have enough family foster homes and will need to continue recruiting more homes.



2005

Family Foster Homes and Placements

Division contracts with licensing agencies to manage the State's family foster homes and works with them to place children into these homes when needed—

Foster care is intended to be a short-term or temporary solution when abused or neglected children who are removed from their homes cannot subsequently be placed with a relative. Ideally, these children will ultimately be returned to their families or be placed into a suitable adoptive home. The Division contracts with outside providers to perform family foster home recruitment, study, and supervision services. These providers, also known as licensing agencies, recruit potential foster families, provide training, and assist them as they apply to be licensed with the Department. They then supervise the family foster home and provide mentoring, counseling, family support, support groups, and specialized training as needed.

When a child is removed from his/her home, federal law requires that the child's health and safety be the paramount concern when making placement and permanency planning decisions and when providing services. The child may initially be placed into a shelter or a foster home suitable for immediate placement while his/her needs and available care options are identified. Federal law also requires that a child be placed in the least restrictive, or most family-like, setting possible. Therefore, the case manager will attempt to place the child and any siblings with a relative or another family friend who generally remain unlicensed foster parents. If no relative or significant party can ade-

Family Foster Home Licensure Requirements

To become licensed, a potential foster parent must meet numerous requirements, including:

- Be at least 21 years of age;
- Have sufficient income to meet the needs of the foster parent household;
- Be free of conviction or indictment for, or involvement in, certain criminal offenses, such as sex-related, drug-related, theft-related, violence-related, and child-neglect offenses;
- Not have any serious physical or mental health conditions; and
- Be a responsible, stable, emotionally mature individual who can exercise sound judgment.

In addition, the home must pass life and safety inspection.

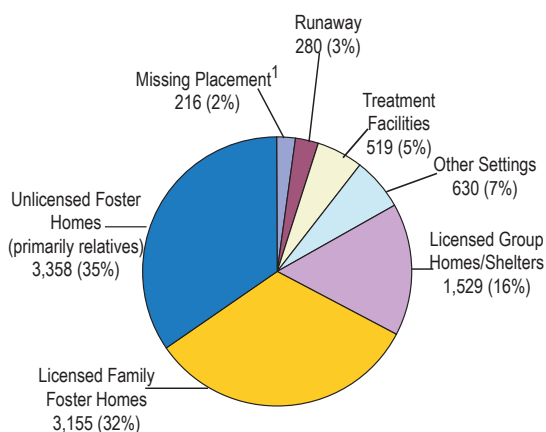
Family Foster Home Payments: \$21.87 to \$39.72 a day, depending on the age and needs of a child in care. For example, a home caring for a 13-year-old child would receive between \$24.13 and \$39.72 a day, depending on the child's needs. Clothing and personal allowances are added to the daily rate. Special Allowances for expenses associated with educational supplies, special school tuition, graduation, and day and overnight camps are also available.

quately care for the child, the case manager will attempt to place the child in a family foster home. If a suitable family foster home cannot be found, the case

manager will then place the child in a licensed group home or shelter.

Nearly 10,000 children in division custody as of March 31, 2005—According to the Department’s data, as of March 31, 2005, the Division had 9,687 children in state custody.¹ As shown in Figure 1, two-thirds of these children were placed in unlicensed foster homes (generally with relatives) or in licensed family foster homes. However, over 1,500 children were placed in group homes or shelters.

Figure 1: Placement of Children in Division Custody As of March 31, 2005



¹ The Division’s case management computer system, known as CHILDS, did not have a placement setting or the correct placement setting recorded as of April 23, 2005, for 216 children in out-of-home care due to case managers not yet having entered the data into CHILDS.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Department of Economic Security.

Twenty-one percent of licensed beds available for foster care placement—As shown in Table 1 (see page 3), according to department data, as of March 31, 2005, the State had 2,121 licensed family foster homes with 5,082 beds available for foster children.² Of these beds, 1,086, or 21 percent, were available to accept a foster child. Because there are over 1,000

family foster care beds available, some if not many of the 1,529 children placed in group homes or shelters could potentially be placed into family foster homes if a suitable match were found.

Barriers to placement—Division and licensing agency staff identified a number of barriers to placing these children into family foster homes. These barriers may impede or prevent a child from being placed into a specific family foster home. Some children may face multiple barriers that make apparently suitable beds inappropriate for placement. Additionally, some beds may be unavailable because the licensing agency has reserved some beds for respite care or the beds are “on hold” for various reasons, such as the foster parents have personal or family problems or are on vacation.

The following barriers were identified:

- **Shortage of family foster homes in certain areas**—When a suitable family foster home is not available in a child’s neighborhood, the caseworker must move the child out of his/her neighborhood to place them in a family foster home. However, some division and licensing agency staff indicated that case managers are hesitant to place a child outside the local area because of concerns about treatment service disruptions, transportation for parent/sibling visits, and monthly case manager visits. For example, one licensing agency staff member indicated that case managers are reluctant to place a child from Glendale into a family foster home in Mesa. Instead, that child would likely remain in a group home or shelter in or near Glendale.
- **Sibling groups**—The Division’s policy is to make efforts to place siblings together when removed from their home; however, division and licensing agency staff indicated that many family foster homes do not have enough beds for sibling groups with three

¹ The number of children in out-of-home care was determined from data provided by the Department on April 23, 2005. Because of delays in data entry, the number may differ from numbers cited in other department reports, which used data obtained on a different date.

² The Department’s Office of Licensing, Certification, and Regulation maintains the central registry of licensed foster homes. This registry showed that, as of March 31, 2005, 2,371 homes were licensed as family foster homes and could care for 5,941 children. However, 139 homes with 336 beds were licensed only for kinship care or relative placement, and 111 homes with 523 beds were licensed and used for higher levels of care; therefore, auditors excluded these homes from the analysis.

Table 1: Family Foster Home Vacancies and Potential Placements as of March 31, 2005

	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	Total
Family foster homes	1,095	522	202	101	81	120	2,121
Licensed beds in homes	2,469	1,278	545	270	209	311	5,082
Vacant beds available for placement in these homes	553	267	82	66	41	77	1,086
Vacancy rate ^a	22.4%	20.9%	15.0%	24.4%	19.6%	24.8%	21.4%

Number of Children Who Could Potentially Be Placed in Vacant Beds							
Children in group homes or shelters	954	455	17	19	67	17	1,529

^a The vacancy rate is calculated by dividing the beds available for placement by the licensed beds.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Department of Economic Security.

or more children. The Department's data showed that as of March 31, 2005, it had 114 sibling groups with three or more children in group homes or shelters. Although the Department's data indicated that 163 family foster homes had three or more licensed beds for sibling groups, some of these beds may have been unavailable for placement consideration.

- **Child's age**—A child's age often makes it difficult to place the child in a family foster home. Division and licensing agency staff specifically identified older children, especially teenagers, as difficult to place. As of March 31, 2005, the majority of the children in group homes or shelters were between 13 and 18 years old. Although the Department's data indicated that 613 vacant beds in family foster homes could have accepted some of these 824 children, some of these beds may have been unavailable for placement consideration.
- **Behavioral problems/special needs**—Division and licensing agency staff indicated that children with behavioral problems or other special needs are difficult to place because foster parents are hesitant to accept children with these kinds of problems. The Department's data indicated that, as of March 31, 2005, 27 percent of the 1,529 children in group homes and shelters had been assessed with behavioral problems, and 22 percent had been diagnosed

with special needs, ranging from allergies or asthma to cancer or terminal illness. Staff further explained that older children often have behavioral problems or other special needs that make finding a suitable placement match that much more difficult. The Department's data indicated that 36 percent of the 824 teenage children in group homes and shelters had behavioral problems, and 27 percent had been diagnosed with special needs. Further, 13 percent of these teenagers have had substance abuse problems.

- **Delays in the placement process**—Although the Division's goal is to place a child into a family foster home within 21 days¹, division and licensing agency staff in some districts reported that placing a child into this setting typically takes 1½ to 3 months, and in some cases, may take much longer. These delays may be caused by a number of factors. For example, to determine if a family foster home is a good match for the child, some districts conduct transition visits to allow the child and foster parents to grow accustomed to each other before the child is placed in the home. These visits ideally occur over 3 to 4 weeks and entail the foster parents' meeting the child first at the group home or shelter and then at a neutral location before meeting with the child in their home. However, some division and licensing agency staff indicated that there are a lot of communication delays between the

¹ A.R.S. §8-515 requires a court order for a child who stays in a foster home suitable for immediate placement longer than 3 weeks.

licensing agency staff and the case managers, which also contribute to the delay in placing children. Further, to minimize the placement disruptions, District 1, which encompasses Maricopa County, initially places most children into shelters first to allow case managers time to find an appropriate family foster home to care for the child.

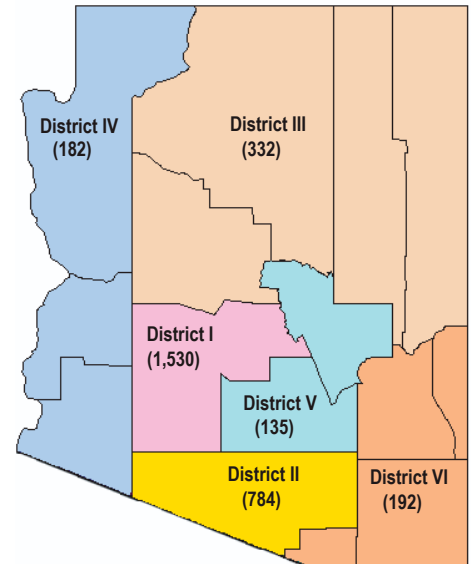
Division is making efforts to place these children—The Division is taking steps to overcome some of these barriers. Specifically, the Division is undertaking additional programs that may help attract new family foster homes and better prepare new foster parents for their role. In addition, the districts have developed strategic plans to try to reduce the number of children in group homes and shelters.

The Division is implementing new programs that may help attract and retain family foster homes:

- **Family to Family Program**—This Annie E. Casey Foundation program is designed to develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities in which the children live, and to increase the number and quality of foster families to meet projected needs. Under the program, the Division plans to identify local community partners to help it locate foster families and placement resources in the child’s neighborhood or community of origin. The Division also plans to streamline the family foster licensure process to make it more accommodating to potential foster parents. For example, the Department plans to create an online license application and renewal system. This system, scheduled to be operational in January 2006, will allow potential foster parents to submit the required application items electronically.

The Division plans to implement the Family to Family program across the State over a period of 3 to 5 years. In June 2005, the Division began implementing the program in the 20th Street and Indian School office in Phoenix.

Figure 2: Number of Children in Licensed Family Foster Homes by District As of March 31, 2005



Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Department of Economic Security.

- **Foster Parent Training Program**—To help ensure that a foster child remains in his/her initial family foster home, the Division is working to better prepare new family foster homes for potential problems. The Division is currently adopting a new foster parent training program known as the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting. Through a series of ten meetings, the training program seeks to develop 5 abilities and 12 critical skills that are essential to promote children’s safety, permanence, and well-being. The Division has a goal to fully implement the training program by July 2006.
- **Recruitment Strategic Plan**—In early 2005, the Division developed a new Home Recruitment Plan. The Division involved outside participants, such as licensing agencies and foster families, to participate in developing this new recruiting plan. Many of these strategies identified in the plan will be carried out in coordination with the Family to Family program.

The plan includes several action steps to improve the recruiting efforts:

- ♦ **Geographic Information System Map project**—The Division partnered with Arizona State University to use its geographic information system to develop a series of maps detailing family foster homes and children removed from care throughout the State. This project is designed to pinpoint and prioritize areas with foster home needs by creating several maps detailing the homes that children had been removed from and the placement of foster homes within that area.
- ♦ **Community recruitment liaisons and community recruitment workgroups**—As of June 30, 2005, the Division hired community recruitment liaisons in three of the six districts and expects to have the other three hired by September 30, 2005. These community recruitment liaisons will identify targeted recruitment populations for the district, assist in establishing district goals on recruitment and retention, and coordinate the local recruitment efforts with the licensing agencies and the Division's central office. Also, after the community recruitment liaisons are hired, the Division plans to establish community-based recruiting councils in each district. The councils will include foster parents, former foster children, licensing agencies, community partners, and department staff, and will work with Family to Family program strategic workgroups to direct and oversee the districts' local and regional recruitment efforts.

In October 2004, each district developed a strategic plan to reduce the number of children placed in group settings. These strategic plans identify various methods to reduce the reliance on group homes and shelters for placements, including the following:

- **Improving communication between the districts and the licensing agencies**—To improve the placement process and place more children into family foster homes, some districts reported that they meet regularly, often monthly, with the licensing

agencies to discuss placement needs. Other approaches have been taken to improve communication during the placement process. For example, District 1 piloted a foster-match party to expedite the placement process from shelters to foster homes by allowing potential foster parents to meet the children in an informal setting. Although it was not as successful as hoped, the district reported that some placements were made.

- **Providing training and support to family foster homes**—To help ensure the stability of children's placements in family foster homes, individual districts are providing additional support for family foster homes. For example, District 1 has increased the number of behavioral health teams, known as CPS Mobile Teams, that meet with foster parents to provide specific training to care for a child's specific needs.
- **Increasing efforts to get new family foster homes and to place children through targeted and child-specific recruiting**—In addition to new promotional advertising, districts are working closely with the licensing agencies to perform targeted and child-specific recruiting. Targeted recruiting is performed to increase the number of family foster homes. The districts regularly assess the needs for family foster homes and communicate these needs to the licensing agencies in the area. As part of their contractual requirements, the licensing agencies then develop a recruitment plan that targets a specific population group, or location, for a 3-month effort to try to recruit additional family foster homes.

The licensing agencies also perform child-specific recruiting. Child-specific recruitment looks at the child's needs to find a home that has those qualifications. For example, a recruiting plan at one licensing agency called for it to develop a profile of the child and to post it on its own and another foster care Web site. In addition, the plan called for the licensing agency to present the child's profile to potential foster or adoptive parents by distributing it to local civic groups, educational institutions, and churches, as well as in the lunchrooms of local businesses, schools, and hospitals.



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