



2025 - 2029 Illinois Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP)

Addendum A

FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT DILIGENT RECRUITMENT PLAN

**Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
Submitted June 30, 2024**

INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has dedicated staff for the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families. Despite setbacks from prior department wide restructuring and the isolation during COVID, DCFS has strengthened The Resource and Recruitment Unit (RRU) to facilitate its goal of diligent recruitment of foster and adoptive families that reflect the range of children in Illinois who need foster homes. The RRU is based in the Clinical and Child Services Division, where they work in collaboration with the Clinical Practice Division, to ensure timely and appropriate matching of children and foster placements. They also work in close collaboration with other DCFS divisions, including Licensing, Permanency and The Office of Caregiver and Parent Support. These evolving collaborations support follow through in licensing newly recruited families and ensuring they have support while fostering, which are essential to retention of foster and adoptive homes.

Retention is further addressed in the [D2-systemic factor of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention](#).

The Resource and Recruitment Unit is organized by region, which allows for flexibility to shape recruitment toward the unique needs of each community, with statewide coordination to ensure collaboration and consistency in procedures and data collection. After a timeframe of staff reduction, the unit has grown during the past five years to include a statewide associate deputy director of resource and recruitment, four regional resource and recruitment supervisors and 21 positions (seven current vacancies) for regionally based resource and recruitment specialists. The unit has staff of multiple races and cultures, who are fluent in not only Spanish, but also in other languages. The unit has increased staffing roles to include two dedicated Spanish speaking recruitment positions. Although there are multiple vacancies to fill, the RRU is more fully staffed than any time in history and all four supervisor positions are filled.

This CFSP for 2025-2029 builds on the growth of the RRU, including collaborating to improve stakeholder input and retention, addressing the disproportional placement needs of targeted populations of youth in care, specifying recruitment for the needs of the communities, improving training of staff, addressing linguistic barriers and ensuring timely placement of youth.

- ✓ **The Administration for Children and Families - Program Instructions, ACYF-CB-PI-24-02, issued February 15, 2024, identified specific items to be included in this Plan. Those items are denoted with a checkmark in the corresponding sections.**

PRIORITIZED NEEDS IN RECRUITMENT

Keeping children with family or other known and trusted adults lessens the trauma of having to move from their parent's home. Since the onset of the state of Illinois using Fictive Kin relative placement and increased efforts to place children with family through the Family Finding process, initial placements in traditional foster homes have been reduced. Per the University of Illinois, CFRC, FY19/20/21/22 monitoring reports of the BH Consent Decree, of all children entering substitute care, the percentage initially placed in a traditional foster home decreased from 20.7% in 2019 to 17.9% in 2020 and to 15.9% 2021.

- ✓ **A description of the characteristics of children for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.**

However, subsets of children remain who have needs beyond the capacity of available traditional foster family care. Using placement data, Illinois DCFS has identified youth with special needs,

such as emotional/behavioral health needs, sibling sets, adolescents, youth with language and communication needs, and pregnant or parenting teens as those needing foster and adoptive homes. The RRU is working diligently with all DCFS divisions to improve expedient placement of youth. It is important to note that per the BH Consent report, placement with siblings improved by 12% between 2020-2021.

Feedback from the Collective Stakeholder Input Meetings indicated concern that youth are sometimes placed with foster parents who are not supportive of their well-being, underscoring the need for capable foster homes from a variety of different communities.

VISION

The Resource and Recruitment Unit, along with its collaborative partners, seeks to become more data informed to improve effectiveness of recruitment efforts, especially for the groups of children with disproportionate needs for traditional licensed placement, by improving technology, building on the progress made and investing in evidence-based recruitment techniques. Engaging and collaborating with individual communities to empower them to embrace the children and families in need of fostering in their area is increasingly becoming a hallmark for recruitment services.

INFORMING RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

It is important that any recruitment efforts are informed by stakeholders: the youth in care, foster families, potential recruits and community partners. The receptiveness and encouragement of community stakeholder input is, and will continue to be, a vital element in improving the outcomes of the RRU diligent recruitment. For example, input from the DCFS Collective Stakeholder Input Meetings and Youth Advisory Board meetings noted concern about a low availability of homes for children with special needs, foster parents needing training on the effects of childhood trauma and youth having input into their placement decisions. In addition, the collective input from the DCFS Stakeholder Input Meetings showed that perceptions of low subsidy, low support and low training are affecting the recruitment of new foster parents. This information was used to shape the 2025-2029 CFSP.

Furthermore, the Resource and Recruitment Unit continues to collect and track quantitative and qualitative data to assess the effectiveness of the social media campaigns and virtual/in-person recruitment campaigns. This data is used to track the progress from the initial engagement (inquiry) to completion of licensure. With the onset of increasingly sophisticated technology, the RRU will have access to a wider range of data to inform their outcomes-based recruitment efforts.

RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES AND COLLABORATION

Recruitment is the front door for the public to learn about fostering, with the potential for improving the overall perception of DCFS. Positive collaboration is a fundamental piece of engaging a community for a successful recruitment program. Research regarding foster parent recruitment and the findings of the 2020-2024 Illinois progress report (APSR) have identified that communities seeing and being a part of collaboration for child well-being in their community is an important factor in long term growth and retention of a dynamic fostering program. The Resource and Recruitment Unit works with multiple internal and external groups to ensure informed and collaborative recruitment efforts, along with retention of foster and adoptive homes. The DCFS RRU has increasingly built such collaboration into its programs and services, with a goal to improve the flow of stakeholder feedback, agency information, communication and cooperation for timely placement of children and the incorporation of research and outcomes data into practices for effective recruitment efforts.

In addition to the DCFS RRU, individual Child Welfare Contributing Agencies (CWCA) also engage in foster home recruitment. Although the department contracts and closely monitors the CWCA for foster care services, their specific recruitment plans are independent of DCFS and therefore the department does not have official monitoring capacity of their plans. However, through quarterly meetings and ongoing communication and partnership, the RRU advises the CWCAs of federal requirements and the objectives DCFS has developed to inform their programs, along with opportunities for training and DCFS initiatives.

✓ **Specific strategies to reach out to all parts of the community.**

Increase community presence and build new connections and partnerships.

The RRU has greatly expanded its presence in communities over the past decade and will continually increase its community presence because the impact is multifold. With each new connection the RRU grows its understanding of the specific dynamics of each community, so that recruitment strategies can be tailored to the community needs and strengths. Some communities seek success in recruitment through churches. According to Families Rising (*The Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2024*), communities of color value relationships and family and have a strong connection to the church. On a recent Sunday, a pastor affiliated with the Restore Network in the Metro East area (foster parent support and advocacy group) spoke at church about the need for new foster parents and invited a panel of DCFS staff and Restore Network volunteers to attend. Four new foster families have come forward from that opportunity. Other parts of the community may respond better to recruitment efforts through health or school fairs. Trusted community leaders, who have a strong understanding of their community needs, dynamics and involvement, are being sought as liaisons for facilitating recruitment.

A review of current collaborations in the Northern/Cook area indicated at least 45 active partnerships. These collaborations are diverse in size, scope, ethnicity and involvement, providing increasing access to reach out to all parts of the community..

Diversify engagement: in person or virtually, multi-language, targeted community needs.

RRU staff attend meetings with community partners throughout the state to educate regarding the need for foster homes in their own communities. These events are hosted virtually or in person, at places such as churches and agencies, and can also be hosted in English or Spanish. They also utilize the partner's social media platforms to advertise the need for homes. Although the entire RRU works closely together to implement outcomes-based recruitment efforts, each team conducts recruitment activities that are determined to best meet the recruitment needs of that region and community. Partnerships with regional community groups can lead to inroads for recruiting unique foster families for our targeted groups of children. This includes recruiters attending community meetings in their regions with groups of various backgrounds and ethnicities to know the pulse of each neighborhood and partnering with them to identify and advance the needs for homes for children within their own community.

Partner with CWCAs to innovate recruitment efforts.

The RRU leads the Child Welfare Advisory Committee – Foster Care Recruitment Subcommittee in Illinois, which is a collaboration of DCFS staff and Child Welfare Contributing Agency staff involved in the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents. The committee discusses barriers, strategies and innovation in recruitment and retention. The interaction of members discussing grassroots ideas, research findings and up and coming policy change are a considerable enhancement to strategic planning in recruitment and retention. During the January meeting, members identified the need for the new strategic plan to include further guidance, goals and

objectives, which this CFSP has incorporated. The committee will continue to be consulted to shape the planning and efforts of recruitment and retention in foster care. The RRU is also working to increase collaboration with the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council and local councils that provide feedback and communication between foster parents and the child welfare system. They are an effective source of feedback and data regarding recruitment.

Partner with other DCFS units for enhanced opportunities.

The RRU continues to increase collaboration across DCFS offices to expand their engagement and presence at community events. This provides new and varied opportunities to connect with the public and initiate interest in fostering children.

Improve interactivity, processes, data collection and communication for efficiency.

The RRU will continue to grow and enhance their collaboration with other units within DCFS and externally with community groups and partners, especially focusing on means of engaging members who are invested in ensuring care for youth who are disproportionately in need of stable placements. The interactivity that will be embedded into *IllinoisConnect* will improve the collaboration process, including consolidating duplicative processes, modernizing communication for more efficient collaboration and establishing priorities of roles and processes through outcome measures.

✓ Various methods of disseminating both general information about being a foster/adoptive parent and child specific information.

Engagement in community events has become the predominant form of engagement for the RRU since the end of COVID isolation. During events, staff have conversations with interested people and share written materials that include QR codes with a direct link to the DCFS Resource and Recruitment page on the DCFS website, where more interactive information and support is provided. Recruiters also attend smaller health or school fairs that may target recruitment of families in specific communities or with needed skills (e.g., Spanish speaking, health care skills, children in the same school district). The upcoming use of *IllinoisConnect 360* will enable the RRU to analyze data and locations regarding needed attributes and target their recruitment efforts even more specifically. One area of great need is placements for children with special needs. Recruitment techniques that engage adults with specific skill sets, such as teachers, nurses and social workers, is being developed to ensure more placement options for these youth.

Although general clicks to the DCFS website for prospective foster parents has trended down, social media has progressively become a solid factor in the recruitment of foster parents. The RRU works in collaboration with the Office of Communications to create social media campaigns, including tailored marketing, to engage communities about the need for homes—including homes for our children with unique needs. The *Foster My Future* post analytics indicated that the campaign has increased its reach, from 13,000 accounts in previous years to over 18,000 currently. The proposed enhancements to communication and technology will greatly expand the reach and effectiveness of digital marketing for foster and adoptive parent recruitment.

Research on foster parent recruitment indicates that current and former foster parents are one of the most effective recruiters of new foster parents. The RRU has developed communication with current foster parents through several means, including the Child Welfare Advisory Committee - Foster Parent Recruitment Subcommittee and during the Illinois State Fair and Du Quoin State Fair. Developing increased contact and collaborations with current and former foster parents and youth in care to gather feedback and ideas can enhance the quality and effectiveness in diligent

recruitment. Providing ample support to foster parents, from the newly interested through veteran caregivers, to ensure a positive view of fostering in Illinois can improve retention of stable placement homes in Illinois.

Retention is further addressed in the D2-systemic factor of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention.

The RRU staff serve as an ongoing resource to recruited families throughout the licensure process and into the initiation of placements. Although the RRU staff are diligent in immediately following up on all types of inquiries into fostering, the increased abilities through *IllinoisConnect* technology will enable staff to track interest and follow up more closely, addressing barriers and supporting likely decreasing the time to complete the licensing processes.

DCFS has worked to expand its support of foster parents through several programs, including the Office of Caregiver and Parent Support's foster parent support specialists (FPSS). The RRU is working to increase collaboration with the FPSS, including having specialists attend recruiting efforts so that they can describe the array of supports prospective foster parents may receive. Additional increased supports to foster parents, through community-based groups, training and DCFS services, will further enhance their positive views. For example, the RRU continues to strengthen its relationship with the Restore Network, which provides support, advocacy, and training for prospective, new and veteran foster parents, including their *Trauma 101 Training*. The positive outlook of current foster parents becomes a constructive presence in the community, which leads to inquiries on fostering from their friends, family and neighbors.

✓ **Strategies for dealing with linguistic barriers.**

The RRU has added Spanish speaking/bilingual positions and is seeking to increase the number of Spanish speaking staff. They are fortunate to have staff who are bilingual in other languages, including some Asian languages and Greek. Multilingual outreach is done to advertise and recruit foster homes, including for non-English/Spanish only speaking youth. Furthermore, the RRU collaborates with the offices of Latino Services and Asian and Pacific Islander American Services to attend events and interact with community members, working to ensure there are no linguistic barriers during the recruitment process. The RRU also has access to interpreter services when needed. The RRU has begun to track the languages spoken in potential recruitment homes and will monitor the need for additional means of linguistic engagement. The department has had requests for in person interpreter services and forms and documents to be translated into over 20 different languages, 12 of which were Asian languages (e.g., Simple Chinese, Hindi, Vietnamese, Tagalog (Philippines), Uzbek and Korean), demonstrating the increased need for DCFS engagement in Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

ADDITIONAL SERVICES THROUGH THE RESOURCE AND RECRUITMENT UNIT

In addition to traditional recruitment efforts and tracking data, the Resource and Recruitment Unit has diverse responsibilities in the department that support the retention of foster parents, timely placement of youth and collection and management of data, ranging from tracking recruitment efforts, to progress in licensing families to placement vacancies.

Currently, the Placement Emergency Team provides support to staff seeking a home for placement disruptions, youth new to care and step downs from shelters and higher levels of care. The current format involves filling out forms, emails, hand counted lists, spreadsheets and a SharePoint site. If resources are exhausted, outreach is made directly to the licensing teams to determine if new resources have become available. When homes from the vacancy list have been exhausted, youth

are placed in an emergency foster home (EFC) or in a temporary shelter. Efforts then continue through the RRU by daily “shelter calls” connecting placement workers with viable foster homes from the vacancy list, by contacting family/fictive kin and by contacting the licensing team until the youth is placed in a home. Over the next five years, the implementation of *IllinoisConnect* will vastly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the process of the search for an appropriate placement through innovative interactive and live updated data availability regarding a child’s needs and placement vacancies, foster home preferences, skills and demographics.

- ✓ **Procedures for a timely search for prospective parents for a child needing an adoptive placement, including the use of exchanges and other interagency efforts, provided that such procedures ensure that placement of a child in an appropriate household is not delayed by the search for a same race or ethnic placement.**

The DCFS Division of Clinical and Child Services continues to develop more effective procedures for timely search and placement of children into licensed homes. The department’s focus is on placing children in homes that can transition into permanent placements, through adoption and guardianship, if the children are not able to be reunified with their family. The new technology of *IllinoisConnect* will greatly improve and streamline the identification of youth in need of placement and available placement resources, and collection of data regarding these needs and resources. Enhanced technology can aid in faster and well-suited matches in placements that could become an adoptive home.

Finding permanency placements for youth who have endured behavioral health issues is an area of crucial focus by the department. This was echoed through interviews at Regional Youth Advisory Boards, where youth in care identified an area of need as the difficulty in finding appropriate stepdown placements for children and youth following residential treatment; these step-down placements should have the potential for becoming permanency homes through adoption and guardianship.

An important factor in improving the timely placement of children with special needs into a more appropriate level of care and maintaining permanent placements that can result in adoption or guardianship, is the reduction of stress on the original foster placement. Services and supports to foster families can preserve their positive beliefs regarding fostering, improve retention of placements and eventual adoptions and increase the likelihood they will aid in recruitment of new foster families.

For children who have adoption as their identified goal, but do not have an adoptive resource (e.g., foster placement willing to adopt), per policy they are listed with the Adoption Listing Service. They engage in adoption matching for youth in care, through the media, exchanges and listing services. During a stakeholder feedback session, a suggestion was made to improve utilization of listing resources such as the Greenlight Family Services’ Heart Gallery. Per policy, placement of a child in an appropriate household cannot be delayed by the search for a same race or ethnic placement.

- ✓ **Strategies for assuring that all prospective foster/adoptive parents have access to agencies that license/approve foster/adoptive parents, including location and hours of services so that the agencies can be accessed by all members of the community.**

Access to information and the application for becoming a foster parent is readily available. The DCFS website is available 24 hours a day and provides information in English, Spanish, Polish,

Chinese, Tagalog, Arabic and Hindi for individuals seeking materials on foster care and how to become foster parents. Interested people can submit formal inquiries online, which are responded to within 72 hours. The DCFS website also provides the address, phone number and hours of operation for all the DCFS offices statewide, so that individuals can make in person inquires or phone inquiries. Newer means of communication, including messaging and texting, have also enhanced access. New to DCFS flyers are QR codes that inquirers can scan to get more information and the link to the online application. Ongoing enhancement of a broader range of information and recruiting materials is planned. Child Welfare Contributing Agencies who also recruit for foster and adoptive homes also have websites with access to information and applications 24/7.

✓ **Non-discriminatory fee structures.**

There are no fees for individuals seeking a foster care license. The application, licensure process and training are free of charge. Furthermore, the RRU, Licensing, Office of Child and Family Policy and permanency staff work to eliminate financial or resource barriers that could impair licensure of a family, such as assisting with childcare, providing referrals for household needs and problem solving of any other barriers. The divisions will continue to work in collaboration internally and with community partners to eliminate barriers to the recruitment and licensure of foster and adoptive homes.

PROGRESS IDENTIFIED FROM THE 2020-2024 ANNUAL PROGRESS AND SERVICES REPORT (APSR)

The findings of the Illinois APSR 2020-2024 indicated that the RRU is becoming an increasingly important component in ensuring timely and stable placement of children in foster care in Illinois through the array of services they provide: facilitating weekly shelter calls for youth in need of a placement resource, managing the foster parent vacancy placement list and contributing to the child services SharePoint data. In addition, the findings indicated that recruitment of foster and adoptive parents is trending away from traditional clicks onto a website, and new and innovative techniques are becoming imperative. Collaboration with the community through engagement with groups and at events has overwhelmingly become the most significant tool in recruitment over the past few years. Engagement at events has increased exponentially, from 300 in 2023 to 224 in the first five months of 2024. Collaboration with the Communications Office has expanded to diversifying social media and other forms of messaging. Some messaging has become tailored regarding targeted areas of placement need, however the technology available has only slowly been updated, pending the arrival of *IllinoisConnect*. Another highlight from the prior APSR is that the RRU has fostered relationships and expanded resources in new communities for foster family recruitment licensure. The efforts of the RRU have aided in more efficient and effective processes for timely placement of youth, tracking of data regarding recruitment and placement openings and diligent recruitment, especially for targeted areas of need for youth, the Clinical-Child Services Division and Resource and Recruitment Unit is aiming for even further outcomes based, data driven proficiency in their efforts over the next five years.

ADDITIONAL IMPROVEMENTS PLAN

In addition to enhancements and improvement to current recruitment activities and increasing collaboration with internal and external groups that have already been identified, the RRU has developed strategic planning in additional areas that will improve the diligent recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive homes: improving staffing, increasing training, utilizing national resources and expertise in informing Illinois practice, adapting communication and messaging to

societal trends, expanding opportunities for involvement in the fostering process and remaining engaged in the *IllinoisConnect* development (see descriptions below.)

An important first step in enhancing recruitment efforts will be to fully staff the Resource and Recruitment Unit. Although RRU has its highest level of resource and recruitment specialist positions, there are seven vacancies that impair the ability for full impact in communities. The Department of Central Management Services has completed their modernization of the hiring process and filling vacancies should proceed. Additional Spanish speaking positions is a future goal so that recruitment, follow up and resources for Spanish speaking homes can be enhanced.

✓ **Strategies for training staff to work with diverse communities including cultural, racial, and socio-economic variations.**

The RRU staff are required to complete annual training through the state of Illinois. In addition, the new *IllinoisConnect DCFS Learning and Development Center* has multiple trainings regarding specific topics in cultural, racial and socio-economic variations, including trainings on the Indian Child Welfare Act, Bridging the Language Barrier and Burgos Consent Decree. In addition, there is an ongoing, mandatory training for RRU staff regarding successful recruitment that includes ensuring culturally sensitive engagement in communities. The RRU will continue to enhance the capacity of the staff in working with culturally diverse communities, not only through formal trainings but also in shared learning through the Child Welfare Advisory Committee - Foster Parent Recruitment Subcommittee, cultivated experiences through increased community collaboration and mentoring within the RRU and collaboration with staff from DCFS divisions.

The Administration for Children and Families has identified national centers to provide expertise and evidence-informed training and technical assistance in diligent recruitment. The RRU has already begun connecting with the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment and will partner with them to further build evidence-based practices in recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families. Furthermore, DCFS looks to build upon the training initiatives for fostering and adoptive homes to improve stability, and therefore retention, of placements.

Another primary area of improvement for the RRU is communication and messaging. Society's use of social media is expanding quickly and has become an excellent source of reaching families and communities. The RRU will be working with the Communications Office to increase social media content, both in quality and quantity. They will create content to specifically reach targeted demographics for communities in need of foster families and groups of children who disproportionately need traditional placements. Because the social media post refers the user back to the DCFS website, this is anticipated to resurge website clicks. The RRU will also work with the Communications Office to expand the information and materials on the website to become more interactive and informative. Ensuring the use of positive messaging when recruiting foster parents is also very important and will be increasingly tailored toward what the data indicates is needed and working.

Data from RRU tracking of recruitment inquiries to licensure indicates that completion of licensure has increased from 816 homes during the 2015-2019 period to 872 in the 2020-2024 period, which is not yet complete. This year, 491 recruited foster families have begun the licensing process and there are 2,582 families currently in the licensing process. The licensing process is currently taking 9-15 months, which is projected to become much more efficient with the *IllinoisConnect* enhancements. During that same timeframe, approximately 20% of inquiries followed through to the licensing process. However, only around 3.35% have completed licensure. Considering that

some people are hesitant to commit to becoming licensed, increasing the opportunities for community members and groups to become involved in the fostering process, such as initially volunteering to support another foster parent or supportive organization, is also a promising inroad to improved recruitment and completion of the licensure process.

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has embarked on an ambitious but necessary endeavor of vastly improving and expanding its technology and data collection. The new *IllinoisConnect* system will redefine the capabilities for the Resources and Recruitment Unit exponentially. The RRU remains actively involved in the development of the new *Recruitment and Resources IllinoisConnect Dashboard* that will amplify the RRU's ability for outcome-based recruitment of foster and adoptive homes. Modernizing the collection of data allows for more efficient and effective ability to analyze trends to inform marketing and engagement, build and track campaigns and identify important events and communities where efforts should be directed. Furthermore, the system will provide interactive, live data and reminders regarding the flow and status of foster parent inquiries, throughout and after the licensing process, which will greatly improve direct efforts in the retention of foster homes and ensure they are supported throughout and after the licensing process.

GOALS SUMMARY

Goal: Improve the reach of recruitment

Strategy: Innovation to recruitment efforts

Objectives:

- Increase community presence and build new connections and partnerships,
- Comprehensive engagement: in person or virtually, multi-language, targeted community needs,
- Partner with CWCAs to innovate recruitment efforts,
- Partner with other DCFS units for enhanced opportunities,
- Improve interactivity, processes, data collection and communication for efficiency.

Goal: Improve Staffing

Strategy: Close work with CMS and Employee Services

Objectives:

- Fully staff the RRU
- Increase the number of Spanish speaking staff

Goal: Improve staff knowledge and ability for engagement

Strategy: Increase training

Objectives:

- Full completion of required trainings,
- Increase engagement and shared strategies through collaborations.

Goal: Improve practices for efficiency and effectiveness

Strategy: utilizing national resources and expertise in informing Illinois practice

Objectives:

- Increase knowledge base of recruitment strategies,
- Increase knowledge base for retention strategies.

Goal: Improve level of engagement with potential recruits.

Strategy: Adapting communication and messaging to societal trends

Objectives:

- Improve quality of social media content,

- Increase quantity of social media content,
- Increase interactive nature of web content.

Goal: Improve licensure rates of recruits

Strategy: Expand community involvement in the fostering process

Objectives:

- Increase opportunities for recruits to engage in pre-fostering volunteerism,
- Reduce timeframe for licensure,
- Improve support to recruits throughout the process toward licensure.

Goal: Improve efficiency of data systems

Strategy: Remain committed and engaged in the *IllinoisConnect* development

Objectives:

- Active engagement in mapping through onboarding of the Dashboard,
- Modernize collection of data.

CONCLUSION

Illinois DCFS has developed a robust recruitment and retention system that not only involves the Resource and Recruitment Unit of the Division of Clinical and Child Services, but also collaboration with Licensing and the offices of Caregiver and Parent Support, Communications, Adoptions, Permanency, and many others. Almost a decade after the inception of the RRU, the diligent recruitment of foster and adoptive families has evolved into more formalized practices of collaboration with community partners and digital communication. Further modernized tracking, data collection, communication and collaboration will come through *IllinoisConnect*. Evidence based, efficient and effective processes will yield more follow through and completion from inquiry to licensure. Enhanced and interactive tracking of placement needs, and availability will greatly improve timely placements, which together with robust supports to foster families, will improve retention of foster homes, stabilize placements, and increase pathways toward permanency, including successful adoption.

Update to Plan June 30, 2025

FY26 Illinois Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR)

Addendum A

FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT DILIGENT RECRUITMENT PLAN

Foster and Adoptive Parent Diligent Recruitment Plan:

Describe the progress and accomplishments in implementing the state's Foster and Adoptive Parent Diligent Recruitment Plan.

The DCFS Resource and Recruitment Unit (RRU) has made significant progress towards its Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) goals in diligent recruitment of foster/adoptive homes in Illinois. Although the RRU has addressed multiple objectives over the year, the focus has been the exciting completion of development and implementation of the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment module*, an integrative application and dashboard, that is a part of the department wide *IllinoisConnect* technology system being implemented. In addition, efforts toward efficiency in diligent recruitment of homes for our targeted populations of youth more often awaiting placement has been paramount.

Having appropriate staffing to complete the many tasks of the recruitment teams, has long been a difficulty for DCFS. However, the Department has slowly increased the number of staff and

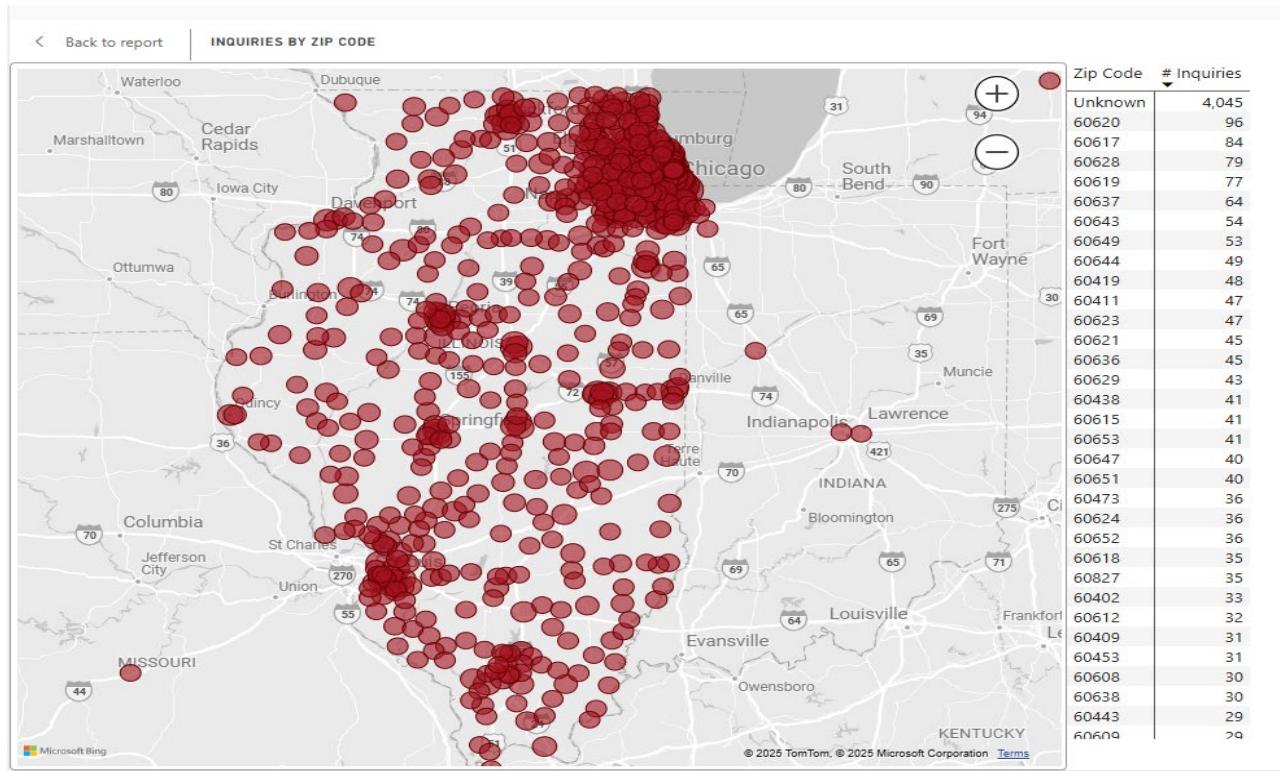
bilingual/Spanish speaking positions of the RRU. The leadership of the RRU has worked closely with our employee management services, to work toward fully staffing the RRU and increasing the number of Spanish speaking staff for better communication with the Spanish speaking families who inquire to become foster parents. The RRU continues to be organized by region, which allows for flexibility to shape recruitment toward the unique needs of each community, with statewide coordination to ensure consistency in procedures and data collection. There are 4 supervisors, each covering a regional team, now with 23 total Resource and Recruitment Specialist positions, under the 4 regional supervisors. Due to retirement and attrition, there are still 3 positions to fill, in addition to the two new Central Region positions, one that is bilingual/Spanish speaking. Overall, having more total RRU positions allows for more consistent engagement in community events, collaboration with community leaders, follow-up into inquiries and one-on-one time with recruits, during the process of supporting them toward applying for licensure as a foster home.

This past year was an exciting advancement in technology for the RRU. A significant goal set in the DCFS 25-29 CFSP, is to develop and implement the *IllinoisConnect* platform for all of DCFS to have increased process efficiency, technology modernization and improved transparency. The RRU staff was dedicated and worked persistently in mapping their system with the DCFS partner Illuminative Strategies Inc (ISI) to identify inefficiencies in their processes for gathering, tracking and utilizing inquiry and recruitment information, and to build a more efficient and technologically advanced system. In October 2024, the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment module* went live. Through the new system, inquiries from the website, use of the QR code or any other means, directly feed into the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment module*, uploading into the staff workloads by region, and automatically feeding into the dashboard. The information is extensive, including the potential recruit's location, demographics and unique qualifications or interests in fostering. In addition, the RRU staff enter all their information about recruitment campaigns (in person, virtual and social media) which also feeds directly into the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment dashboard*.

By transforming the RRU process into the automated *IllinoisConnect* technology system, staff can now work more efficiently and effectively with individuals who have sent an inquiry, to more easily record and track their progress through the stages of recruitment and toward licensing. In addition, the changes can improve retention of the inquiries and future foster/adoptive parents. Having an online system, instead of tracking on paper, separate spreadsheets or emails, allows for more fluid workflow, including assisting or sharing tasks when staff are not available, especially considering the large volume of inquiries that come daily. The updates to the system are live, therefore managers and administration have immediate insight into where recruits are in the process of inquiry, if they passed the application phase of recruitment and if they were sent to the licensing unit, the next stage before becoming a foster parent. The RRU staff can also develop, manage and track their recruitment campaigns through the system, replacing outdated methods of managing a campaign, extending the ability to work collaboratively with each other on campaigns and leading to new means of analyzing data to predict where campaigns might be most needed and most successful.

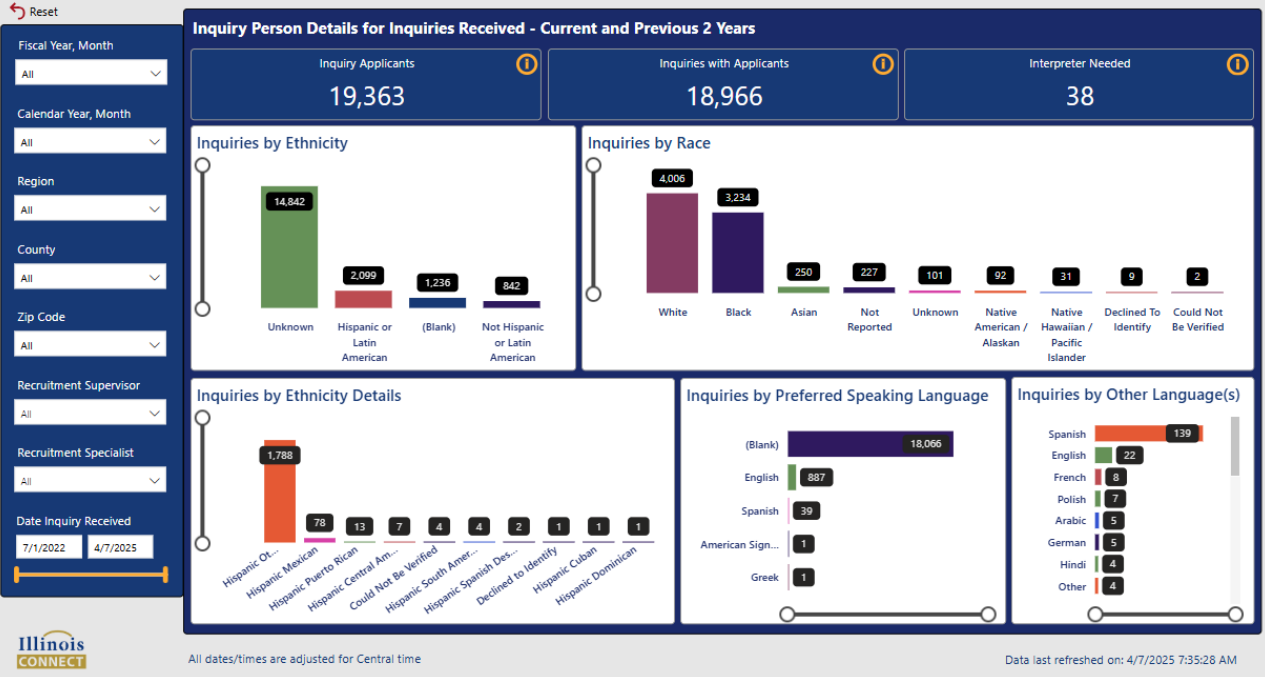
The “real time” tracking of inquiry and recruitment information feeds into the new *Illinois Connect-Foster Parent Recruitment Dashboard*, which provides data and analytics, and can be customized for detailed searches. These analytics are a new powerful tool that the RRU has for targeting its recruitment. For example, a search can show the communities with the most inquiries for a

timeframe, guiding management to develop specialized community campaigns that will be more successful (example below).



It also allows the RRU to identify and target areas of the state that are lacking in foster homes and recruitment efforts. Furthermore, the RRU staff can utilize the dashboard to track demographics that are within DCFS targeted needs, to specifically tailor recruitment efforts.

Foster Parent Recruitment Demographics Overview



Using the critical data that is tracked by DCFs regarding the demographics of youth in care, the RRU has a roadmap to focus their efforts into the diligent recruitment. The *IllinoisConnect* system is so detailed, that these recruitment efforts can even be refined to the extent of matching community needs for foster homes with the demographics of the inquiries. The RRU staff can cross reference where youth are coming into care with what inquiries came in from the communities, which highlights where they need to target more campaigns and recruit more foster families.

Illinois Department of Children & Family Services Youth In Care By Demographic Data as of February 28 2025

STATEWIDE

Primary Race	Total	00-05	06-12	13-17	18+
BLANK RACE	1	1			
COULD NOT BE VERIFIED	19	10	2	3	4
DECLINED TO IDENTIFY	3	1	1	1	
WHITE	10,092	4,096	3,206	2,069	721
BLACK / AFRICAN AMERICAN	7,760	2,762	2,600	1,572	826
ASIAN	54	20	9	13	12
UNKNOWN	62	48	7	5	2
NATIVE AMERICAN / ALASKA NATIVE	22	5	7	8	2
NOT REPORTED	1			1	
NATIVE HAWAIIAN / OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER	9	2	4	1	2
UNKNOWN DUE TO ABANDONMENT	2	2			
Total	18,025	6,947	5,836	3,673	1,569

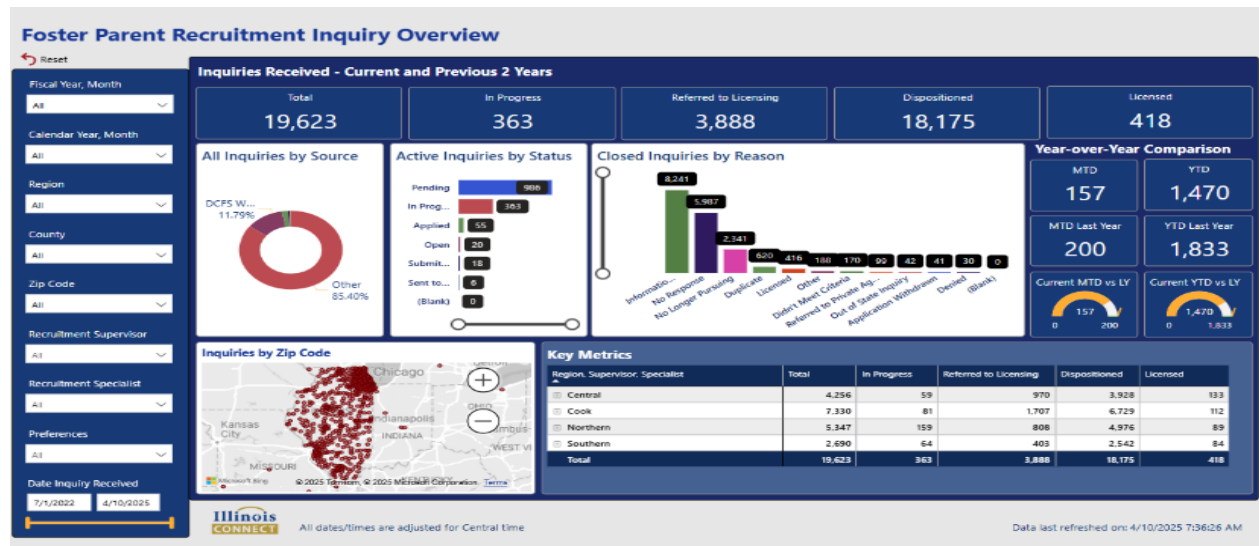
Ethnicity	Total	FEMALE	MALE
BLANK RACE	1	1	
COULD NOT BE VERIFIED	19	7	12
DECLINED TO IDENTIFY	3	2	1
WHITE	10092	4,972	5,120
BLACK / AFRICAN AMERICAN	7760	3,840	3,920
ASIAN	54	25	29
UNKNOWN	62	23	39
NATIVE AMERICAN / ALASKA NATIVE	22	12	10
NOT REPORTED	1	1	
NATIVE HAWAIIAN / OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER	9	3	6
UNKNOWN DUE TO ABANDONMENT	2	1	1
Total	18025	8,887	9,138

Moreover, the system allows the RRU to track their targeted goals of recruiting families who can meet the needs of the targeted populations of youth in care in greatest need of foster/adoptive homes. For example, the FY25 Annual Youth in Care Awaiting Placement report identified the average age of youth in psychiatric hospitals awaiting placement was 12.5, indicating a need for recruitment of foster homes willing to accept adolescent youth with social emotional difficulties.

Learning and utilizing new technology can be daunting, especially when staff have many responsibilities and fear that new things will slow their work down. Development of the new *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment module* carefully included feedback and expertise from the RRU staff. A staff member from the RRU submitted the following user story: *“Initially I was reluctant to be excited about having to learn a new system. I have been with DCFS for almost 27 years and have seen systems come and go. However, IllinoisConnect was easy to learn and helped me become more organized than ever. I no longer carry around 3 ring notebooks with handwritten scribbles in the margins, to keep track of tasks, events and inquiries. My entire scope of work is contained in one system, that is easy to navigate and keep updated. I used to struggle with keeping referrals updated to the current month, and this system has helped me to stay on top of everything. I also use the filter feature a great deal, to look up events or inquiries of a particular location or status. Overall, IllinoisConnect has been a great system for me and my work product.”*

According to the analytics of the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment dashboard*, DCFS was engaged in 578 events throughout the state, from July 2024 through March 2025, demonstrating increasing in-person engagement at community events since 2023. Regarding inquiries into becoming a foster/adoptive parent, the analytics showed 6888 inquiries statewide in 2024, which was over 1000 more inquiries from the prior year reported. In just the first 3 months of 2025, there have been over 1400 inquiries. Although the number of inquiries in 2025 is down from the prior year, duplication of inquiries was a factor in prior years, which is now corrected in the automated *IllinoisConnect* system.

The figure below captures the complex ability of the dashboard to show the details regarding inquiries into becoming a foster home, such as where they are in the process of moving toward licensing, where they are located in the state, and reasons they were closed, which can shape the RRU innovation in retaining potential recruits and moving them toward licensing.



Another indicator of the success in recruitment is the percentage of inquiries that are sent on to licensing. This statistic points to the ability of the inquirer to meet the standards that will be processed during the licensing process, but also may encompass any loss of interest or disconnection from recruits during the process. The rate of sending inquiries to licensing has grown from 18.4% in the prior year measured, to (1371) 19.9% in 2024 and (351) 25.4% in 2025! Preliminary assessment suggests that the efficiency of the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Care Recruitment module*, as a tracking and workflow management system, has been a significant factor in improving the rates of moving inquiring families through to the licensing process. Currently, there are 55 homes that have gone through the recruitment and licensure process and are pending licensure.

In 2024, DCFS licensed 506 new foster homes. According to the March 31, 2025, Licensing Data report, there are currently 2000 total DCFS foster homes licensed in Illinois (this does not include CWCA licensed foster homes). Because *IllinoisConnect* is being built incrementally and has not moved to the phase of encompassing foster home licensing yet, the numbers in the dashboard are still being compiled by the RRU staff, including prior year data. As new phases of *IllinoisConnect* are implemented, the recruitment and licensure data will become continuous, providing vastly improved reliability in data and ease of data collection and analysis.

The communications department of DCFS takes an active role in collaboration with the RRU in utilizing social media for diligent recruitment of foster families. They have significantly expanded the use of social media for engaging families in Illinois. This includes three different social media campaigns to target families who might become interested in fostering. The *Foster My Future* posts have continued weekly, with a different theme or catch phrase each post. In 2024 The *Foster My Future* analytics showed the posts reached over 26,000, which over a 30% increase in reaches, from the previous year. In addition to the *Foster My Future* posts, the communications department also initiated two new social media campaigns. The first new campaign is the *Foster Parent Top 10* campaign, that is designed to inform potentially interested families on things they may need to know if they would like to foster/adopt. This campaign is formatted with a graphic that is in both English and Spanish, to aid Spanish speaking families in navigating the inquiry system. This new campaign reached over 9500 people in its first year of the campaign. The newest campaign was launched in September 2024, shortly after the Illinois State Fair, where the theme was “*Super Heroes*” The new *Are You Ready to Become a Super Hero* campaign garnered over 6200 reaches, in just a few short months of engagement. Another area of innovation in the use of social media, is addressing the concerns of potential recruits. One of the biggest questions new inquiries to foster/adoptive services ask, is about the kinds of long-term support they will receive. The communications department has also initiated posts with links to booklets about Post Adoption and Guardianship Services, so that families understand the array of supports they will receive. A final important factor in the use of social media for engagement, is that all posts continue to include a QR code that directs the user into the DCFS website to immediately fill out an application of interest.

Utilizing external and national professional resources, to expand the RRU strategies for recruitment has remained a goal for the RRU, including the use of national expertise. Staff from the RRU engaged in a meeting with national experts in foster/adoptive parent recruitment, through the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, in the fall of 2024. The recommendations from the conference included engaging in consultation to review processes and create more efficient means of tracking and analyzing data for recruitment. The RRU staff were excited to know that their work on the *IllinoisConnect* recruitment tracking system was consistent with the national

recommendations. In addition, the staff learned additional innovative strategies for diligent recruitment.

Collaboration is a key factor in the success of the RRU. Ongoing collaboration with foster parent support has aided during recruitment, so that recruits know the level of support they will receive if they become a foster parent. The DCFS Foster Parent Support Specialist (FPSS) program continues to expand across the state and are often called upon to reach out to people who have shown interest in becoming foster parents. In addition, because they work closely with foster parents, the FPSS are important collaborators in recruitment efforts. The FPSS are in close contact with families in the community and can be good sources of new inquiries into becoming a foster parent, through their positive communication about fostering for DCFS. Furthermore, during monthly foster parent meetings the FPSS program allows the RRU staff to speak about the DCFS needs for new foster/adoptive parents.

For FY25, DCFS has changed to partnering with Let it Be Us as the contracted adoption listing agency. This partnership greatly expands the reach of the RRU in diligent recruitment of foster and adoptive homes. Let it Be Us is an established agency that already has a large following through social media and uses broad and innovative approaches for communication of the needs of children and matching them to pre-adoptive homes. Let it Be Us has a team of recruiters specifically campaigning for pre-adoptive homes, including for children with special health care needs. Through their adoption listing service, Let it Be Us specializes in adoption recruitment, matching and placement and works to identify and register all Illinois children with a goal of permanency, who do not have an adoptive home. Their team works to match these children with an adoptive family that meets their identified needs. Let it Be Us is well known by DCFS and private agency foster care programs, increasing the likelihood for case workers to work closely with their adoption team, for the youth they serve.

DCFS has actively met with “partners” for meaningful collaboration, through a series of Partner Engagement Events. Those participating include youth and families who have been involved with DCFS, to gain feedback regarding priorities for Illinois child welfare. One of those priorities identified is improving timely permanency. Although the partners identified prioritizing permanency with relatives, which should always be considered optimal, the RRU’s developments in the last year also work toward improved permanency for those youth who do not have relatives as a permanency option. Changing to contracting with Let it Be Us as the adoption listing agency has already shown more action-oriented results in finding permanency for youth who are ready for adoption. And the RRU has found more efficiency in their targeted recruitment, by using the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment dashboard* for targeted campaigns for foster/adoptive homes for youth who are in DCFS care but do not yet have a stable foster/adoptive home placement.

Illinois DCFS also contracts with private agency partners/Child Welfare Contributing Agencies (CWCA) to provide foster care services. The Program Plans with the CWCA require the agency to develop recruitment plans two times a year and provide them to the Department for review. The DCFS Agency Performance Monitoring and Execution division (APME) monitors the agency to ensure compliance with all aspects of foster care, including that the CWCA completes their recruitment plan reports. In addition, the Resource and Recruitment Unit and the CWCA agencies are a part of the Child Welfare Advisory Council (CWAC)-Foster Care Recruitment Subcommittee, meeting quarterly to discuss recruitment efforts, trends and barriers. Working together, DCFS and their private agency partners use the CWAC meetings to share and develop innovative strategies in their recruitment efforts.

The Resource and Recruitment Unit of DCFS is settling into its first year of utilizing the *IllinoisConnect-Foster Parent Recruitment module*. Already, the change from paper and email-based tracking to a fully automated and integrative system, has drastically improved the available time staff can devote to more critical tasks in the process of recruitment. During FY26, as the RRU staff become increasingly agile in the use of the system, they will utilize the real time data to inform their recruitment strategies, making more informed and timely decisions on how they shape campaigns, with a more efficient ability to target communities and demographics with the most need for new foster/adoptive homes. The RRU has 259 events scheduled already for the year. Recruitment efforts will become increasingly more intentional, instead of addressing the public at events, often at a booth, hoping to garner interest. This will include focusing more on developing highly specific, targeted campaigns at community agencies and organizations, that will engage the needed demographics and interest of potential foster parents. For example, older youth continue to be a population of youth in care who are disproportionately in need of foster/adoptive placements in Illinois. A targeted event might include hosting a campaign in a community where DCFS data shows we have a significant need for foster homes for older youth. For example, the RRU recently attended a Bilingual Family Summit in Oak Brook, to target recruitment for older youth. And they are planning attendance at a community event in Boone County, an area where the Dashboard has indicated new inquiries and interest, along with having a small community of active foster homes. Future events are being planned at places such as a middle school or high school, where the community members have their own children or are teachers, and they therefore have an investment in the success of the youth. Furthermore, with the improved data from the *IllinoisConnect Dashboard*, the RRU staff can cross analyze the inquiries they have received, to ensure inquirers from that community are invited to the events, to learn about the specific foster care needs in their community. In these targeted campaigns, the RRU staff will take a more active role, by giving presentations about the needs for and process of becoming a foster home in their community.