



# County of San Diego

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April 25, 2016

**TO:** Foster Care Services Committee

**FROM:** Nick Macchione, Agency Director  
Health and Human Services Agency

## **Foster Parent Customer Service Survey 2015**

Presently, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency Child Welfare Services' Foster and Adoptive Resource Family Services (FARFS) coordinates foster care placements for approximately 2,800 children who are unable to reside with their parent or guardian due to child abuse or neglect. There are an estimated 1,400 foster families in San Diego licensed to temporarily care for children.

In an effort to provide the highest quality Foster Care Program and services, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency's Child Welfare Services contracted with the Public Child Welfare Training Academy in 2015 to conduct an evaluation of customer service to licensed foster parent caregivers. As critical and vital members of our trauma informed service delivery system, it is imperative that foster parents receive adequate support, resources and information to ensure quality parenting for these vulnerable children.

In July 2015, a *Foster Parent Customer Service Survey* was issued to approximately 1,400 licensed foster parents via email and U.S. mail. The survey was provided in both English and Spanish. A total of 372 responses were received and evaluated. The survey questions embody the County's H.E.A.R.T. customer service commitment to using a positive approach in providing customers with a positive experience.

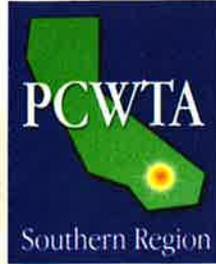
Overall, we learned that the majority of participants were satisfied with the training received, as well as information provided during the licensing process. Respondents indicated a need to increase foster parent participation and partnership; particularly, the Agency's use of foster parents in the recruitment process. The attached evaluation condenses the feedback from the respondents, and identifies areas in which we are doing well, as well as opportunities for improvement. The survey results will provide guidance for the implementation of the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI). QPI is a partnership with caregivers and Child Welfare Services to ensure all children in foster care are provided with effective, caring parenting.

As we move forward to support caregivers, we will continue to strive to incorporate system improvements that will result in greater transparency, communication, and partnership with the foster parent community. In doing so, this will help move us closer to achieving our *Live Well San Diego* vision of healthy, safe and thriving communities.

Live Well!

NICK MACCHIONE, Agency Director  
Health and Human Services Agency

Attachment



## **PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE TRAINING ACADEMY**

# **A SURVEY OF FOSTER PARENTS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**

## **An Evaluation Brief**

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on behalf of the Public Child Welfare Training Academy  
with the Academy for Professional Excellence

**October 2015**



PCWTA is a program of the Academy for Professional Excellence at San Diego State University School of Social Work in collaboration with our University partners, CSU San Bernardino, Loma Linda University and CSU Fullerton



# A SURVEY OF FOSTER PARENTS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

The Academy for Professional Excellence contracted with C. F. Parry Associates to develop and conduct a survey of foster parents with the County Health and Human Services Agency. Foster parents were asked to respond to questions regarding their perceptions of a variety of topics and give open-ended feedback regarding what things were done well to support them and what could have been done to improve their experience.

Foster Parents were surveyed in July and August of 2015 regarding their perceptions of:

- The recruitment and licensing processes
- Interactions with the case-carrying social worker
- Satisfaction with support received from the Agency

### METHODOLOGY

Surveys were distributed electronically via e-mail and on paper by mail. The survey was disseminated in both English and Spanish. 372 surveys were received including paper and electronic surveys. Respondents represented current and former foster parents from every region in San Diego County.

### SUMMARY

- **Responses:** 372 surveys were received out of a possible 1535 foster parents who received this survey; 34 responses to the Spanish language version (9.1%) and 338 responses to the English language version (90.9%). Surveys were received from all regions of the county and from foster parents at all levels of experience from less than one year to 13 years or more.
- **Recruitment:** Respondents were generally positive about their experiences with foster care recruitment. The majority of foster parents either agreed or strongly agreed that their initial contact with the Agency helped them to



decide whether to begin the licensing process, and that their questions were answered courteously and effectively. However, only 38.5% agreed that foster parents are given the opportunity to participate in recruitment and retention efforts.

- **Licensing:** The majority of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that expectations of foster parents and the process of becoming a foster parent were explained clearly; that they received all required forms and that the instructions for completing them were clear and easy to follow; that issues, questions and concerns were addressed promptly and that they were treated courteously and professionally.
- **Case-Carrying Social Worker:** The majority of respondents indicated positive perceptions of the case carrying social workers; checking either agree or strongly agree on all items. Level of satisfaction varied by item, from a low of 52.2% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the social worker “Provided adequate information about my foster child’s needs prior to placement,” to a high of 82.2% for “Respects my family’s culture.”
- **Supports:** The majority of those who used the supports indicated positive perceptions of quality, frequency and/or availability. The highest rated items were “In-service training enhanced my skills as a caregiver” and “Foster parent support groups have been a valuable resource for me” with 70% and 72.8% (respectively) choosing either “agree” or “strongly agree.” The lowest rated item was “I am given adequate notice about child moves/receiving a new child” with just over half of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing (51.6%).

Expectations of foster parents and the process of becoming a foster parent were explained



RESPONDENTS INDICATED THAT THE SOCIAL WORKER “RESPECTS MY FAMILY’S CULTURE”



“FOSTER PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS HAVE BEEN A VALUABLE RESOURCE FOR ME”

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

### Agency Policies and Processes:

One of the most frequently cited concerns was the length of time it took for licensing, placement of a child, and adoption proceedings to be accomplished. Respondents also identified issues with a lack of clarity in materials, procedures and policies and in the consistency of information provided when there was a change in workers. A number of people also identified the need for more accurate information about the needs of their foster child prior to placement, and others indicated a desire to see more materials on line.

Concerns were identified regarding the length of time it takes for licensing, placement, and adoption proceedings.

## INTRODUCTION

In March of 2015, the County of San Diego and the Academy for Professional Excellence contracted with C. F. Parry Associates to develop and conduct a survey of foster parents. A survey was developed that gathered information about foster parents' history of providing services to the County, perceptions of the recruitment process, the licensing process, interactions with the case-carrying social worker, and satisfaction with support received. Foster parents were also asked to give open-ended feedback regarding what the San Diego Health and Human Services Agency was doing well to support them and what could have been done to improve their experience. Both quantitative and qualitative responses are summarized in this report.

## METHODOLOGY

Following approval of the survey questions in late June, surveys were distributed electronically to foster parents for whom the county had e-mail addresses, and by mail to those who did not have a known e-mail address. The survey was also translated into Spanish and distributed in early August. At that time the English version was re-distributed in an effort to maximize response rates, and both surveys were closed on August 31<sup>st</sup>. Survey Monkey was used for the on-line version. Table 1 shows the numbers of foster parents contacted at each point. In July 2015 the County had 1,260 licensed foster homes.

Table 1: Numbers and Types of Surveys Distributed

	Emailed Survey Link	Mailed paper survey
<b>First Round July 7, 2015</b>	1117 (English)	289 (English)
<b>Second Round August 8, 2015</b>	1144 (English and Spanish)	102 (Spanish)

## FINDINGS

**Response Rate:** Surveys were sent to 1535 foster parents. The response was as follows: 372 surveys were received; 285 electronic and 87 paper surveys. 8 (2.8%) of the 285 electronic surveys were responses to the Spanish version, and 26 (29.9%) of the 87 paper surveys returned were the Spanish version. It was not possible to determine a definitive response rate since the second distribution of the e-mail links largely, but not completely<sup>1</sup>, overlapped with the first distribution and the extent of duplication is unknown. An estimated response rate of 24.2% was calculated based on a total number

<sup>1</sup> When the link was distributed the second time, updated lists were used. Thus, while the second mailing largely targeted the same set of individuals, there were some new foster parents included, while those who were no longer providing foster care in the county were excluded.

of 1535<sup>2</sup> foster parents contacted. This number reflected the number of links e-mailed in the second mailing (N = 1144), plus the number of paper surveys mailed in English (N = 289) and Spanish (N = 102). Although in line with what might be expected for this type of survey, the estimated percentage of responses is low. Findings based on low response rates should be interpreted with caution as those who responded may not be representative of the views of all foster parents in the county. However, as described in the next section, these responses represent all regions of the county and all levels of experience as a foster parent, which somewhat mitigates this concern.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

**Region:** Surveys were received from 372 current and former foster parents from all regions within San Diego County. Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses across regions within the county. The largest percentages (ranging from 22% to 25%) came from the North<sup>3</sup>, East and South regions with smaller percentages from the North Central (10.2%) and Central (13.4%) regions. Figure 2 shows the percentage of foster homes across regions. Figure 2 shows the percent of licensed foster homes by region.

Figure 1: County Region of Residence

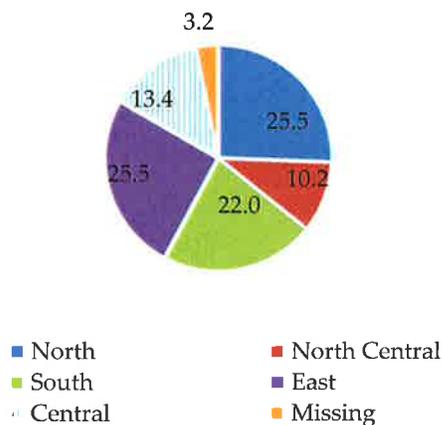
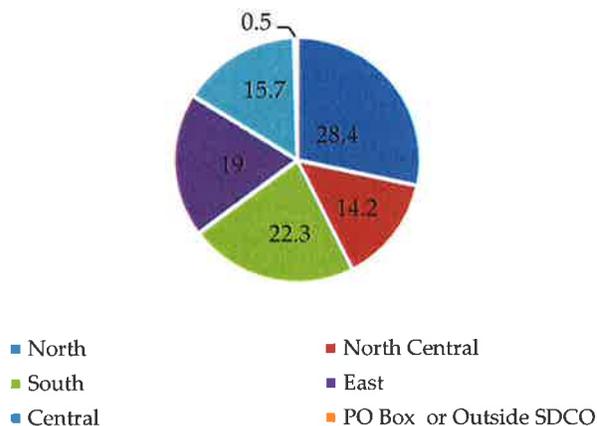


Figure 2: Licensed Foster Homes



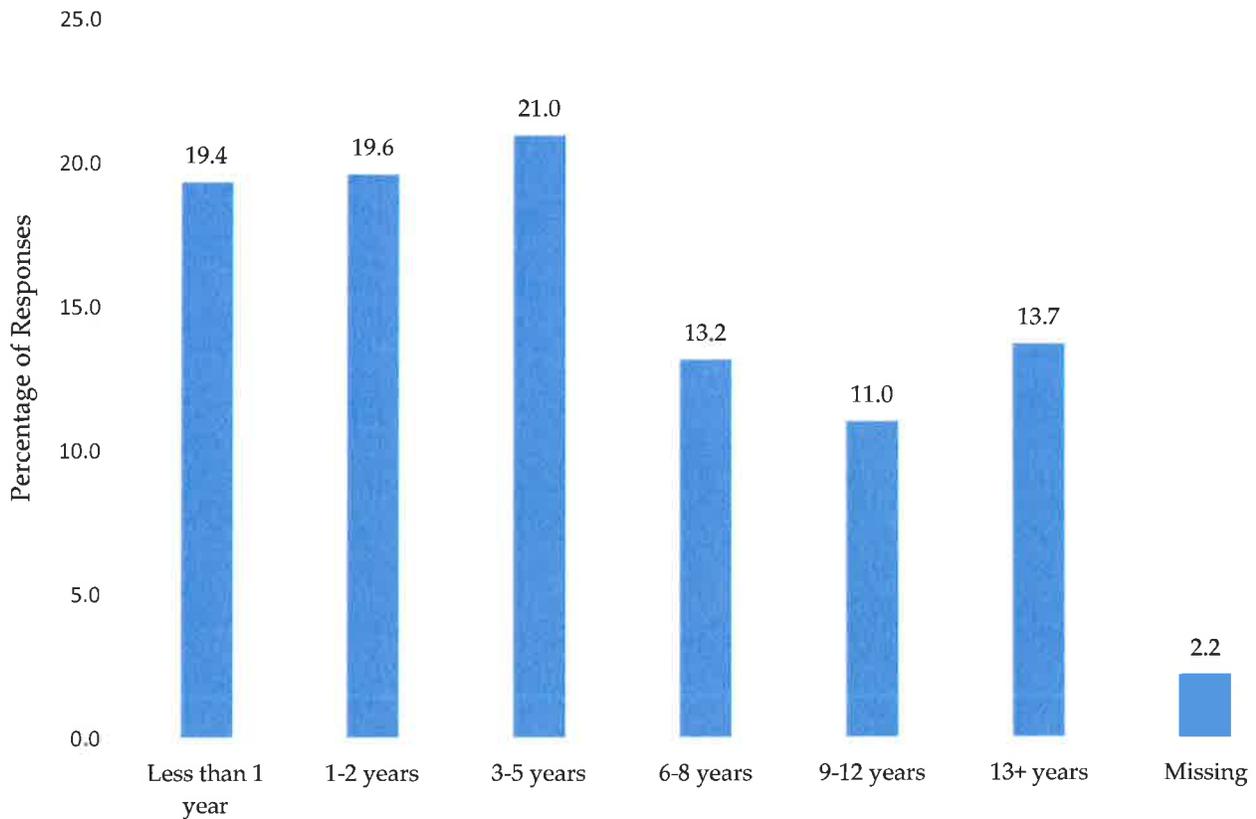
**Please note the region indicates the residence of the foster parent. Results that identify satisfaction of services and social workers may not reflect the office of the assigned social worker or the location of the service. Therefore no conclusions can be drawn about performance by a specified regional office.**

<sup>2</sup> The county had 1260 foster homes at a point in time in July 2015 and the survey was sent out in two rounds (July and August 2015), online and in paper formats and in both Spanish and English. This was done to try to reach as many foster parents as possible and overall 1535 foster parents received the survey.

<sup>3</sup> "North" includes both North Coastal and North Inland offices.

**Experience as a Foster Parent:** Years as a foster parent ranged from less than 1 to more than 13, with the majority of responses (60%) having 5 or fewer years of experience. There were no statistically-significant differences in the distribution of years of experience across regions. Most respondents had fostered a child within the last 3 years (69.9%) and did not have a prior relationship to the child currently in their care (84.7%).

Figure 2: Years as a foster Parent

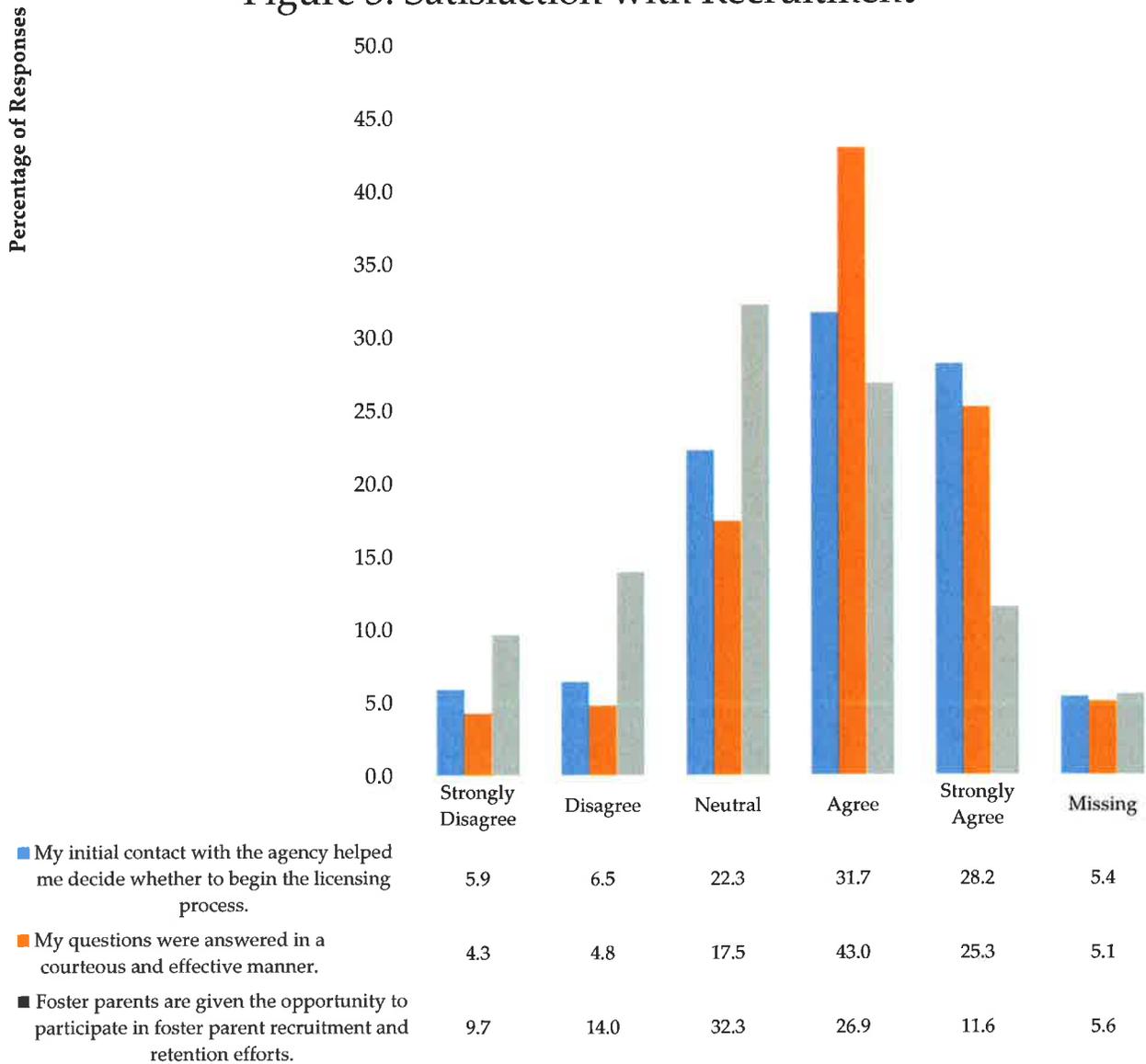


**Number of children fostered:** Respondents reported fostering between 0 and 100 children over the course of their time as a foster care provider. The average reported was 11 children, while the modal (most frequent) response was one.

## RECRUITMENT

As shown in Figure 3, respondents were generally positive about their experiences with foster care recruitment. The majority of foster parents either agreed or strongly agreed that their initial contact with the Agency helped them to decide whether to begin the licensing process and that their questions were answered courteously and effectively. There was less agreement that foster parents are given the opportunity to participate in recruitment and retention efforts, with 38.5% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this item. This finding provides an opportunity for the Agency to utilize foster parents in recruitment activities.

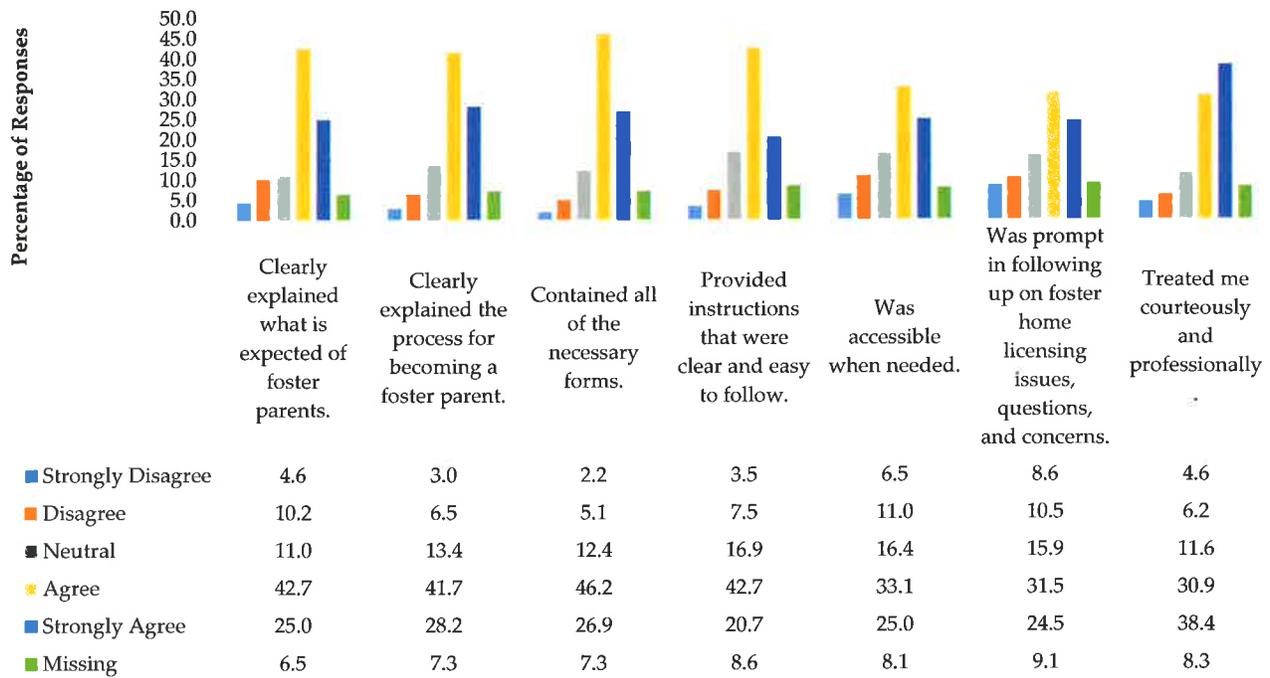
Figure 3: Satisfaction with Recruitment



## LICENSING

The majority of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that expectations of foster parents and the process of becoming a foster parent were explained clearly; that they received all required forms and that the instructions for completing them were clear and easy to follow; that issues, questions and concerns were addressed promptly; and that they were treated courteously and professionally (see Figure 5 below). Average ratings ranged from 3.6 for promptness in addressing questions and concerns to 4.0 for courtesy and professionalism.

Figure 5: Satisfaction With Licensing



Foster parents were also asked if they had ever received a complaint requiring a licensing investigation. Slightly less than one third (30.1%) responded “yes,” 62.1% responded “no,” and 7.8% did not respond to this question. Of those who responded “yes,” 65.5% indicated that the process was explained to them and 80.9% indicated that they were informed of the outcome.

## CASE-CARRYING SOCIAL WORKER

Figure 7 shows ratings given by respondents to items relating to interactions with the case carrying social workers assigned to their foster child or foster children. Figure 7 shows the percentages in each response category based on only those who responded to the item. The majority of respondents indicated positive perceptions of the case carrying social workers; checking either agree or strongly agree on all items. Level of satisfaction varied somewhat by item, from a low of 52.2% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the social worker "Provided adequate information about my foster child's needs prior to placement," to a high of 82.2% for "Respects my family's culture." A number of respondents had not yet completed the approval process and were unable to respond to these items. The percentage of missing responses; ranged from 16.7% to 22.6%.

## Figure 7: Perceptions of the Case Carrying Social Worker

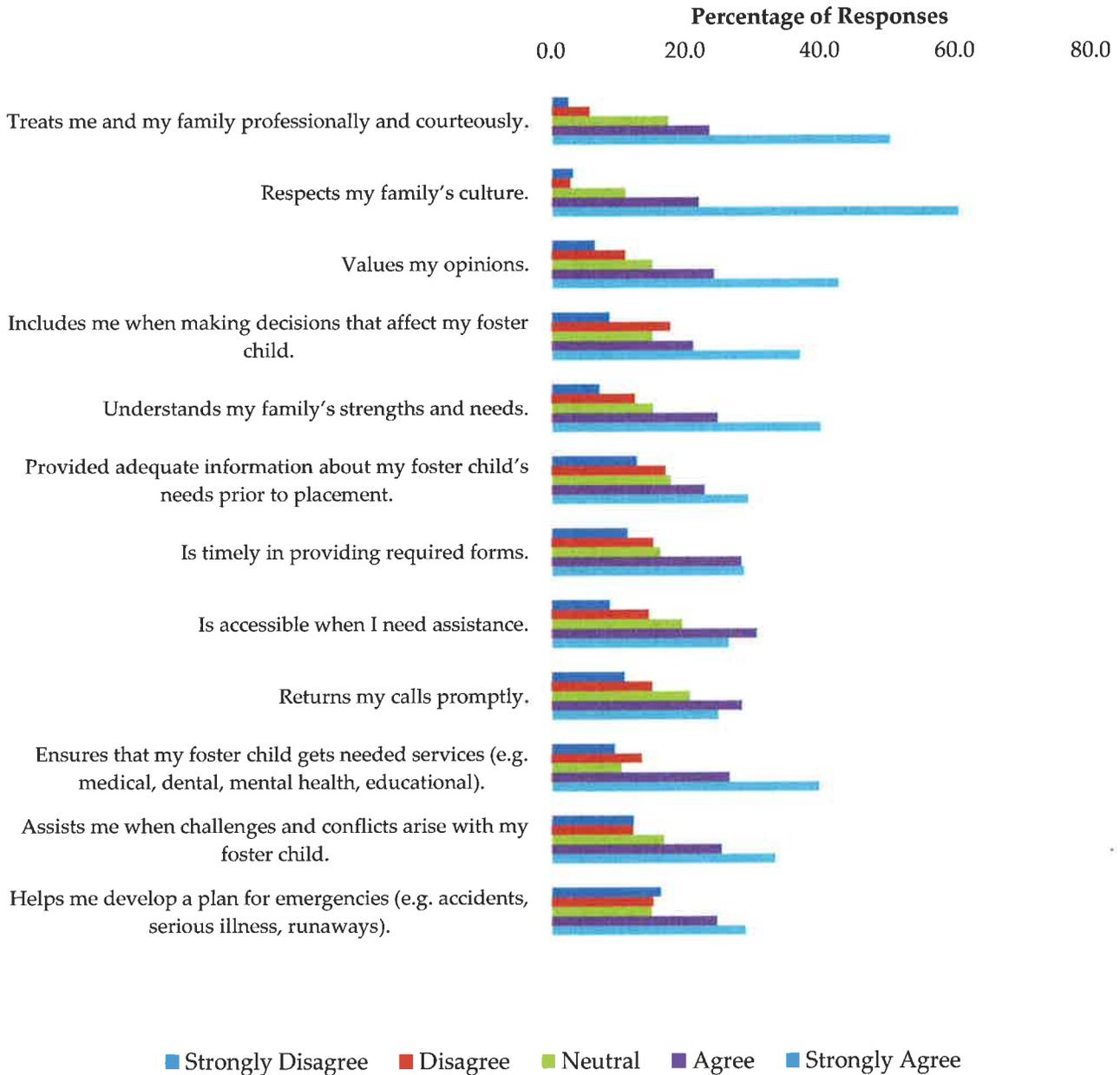
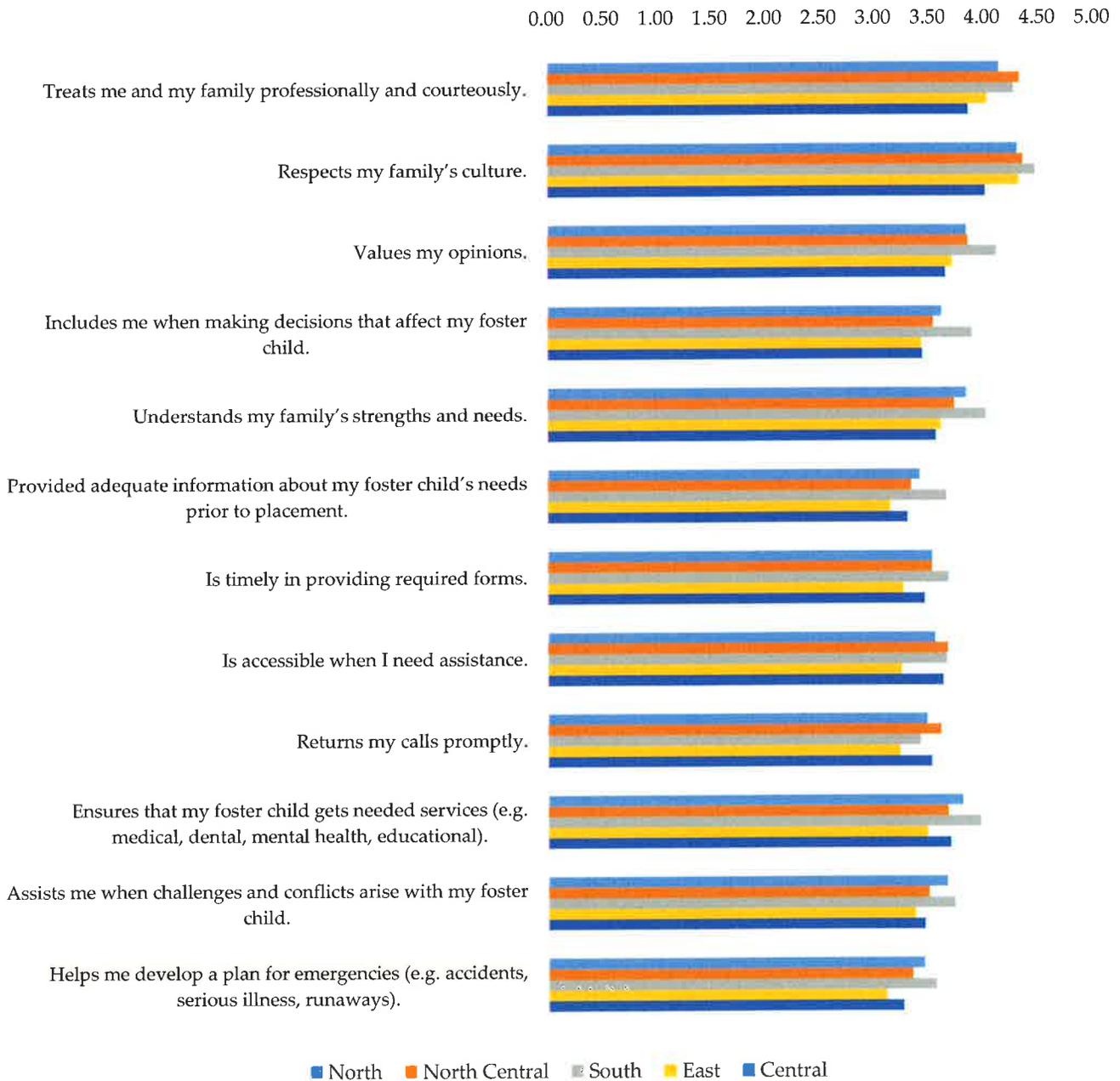


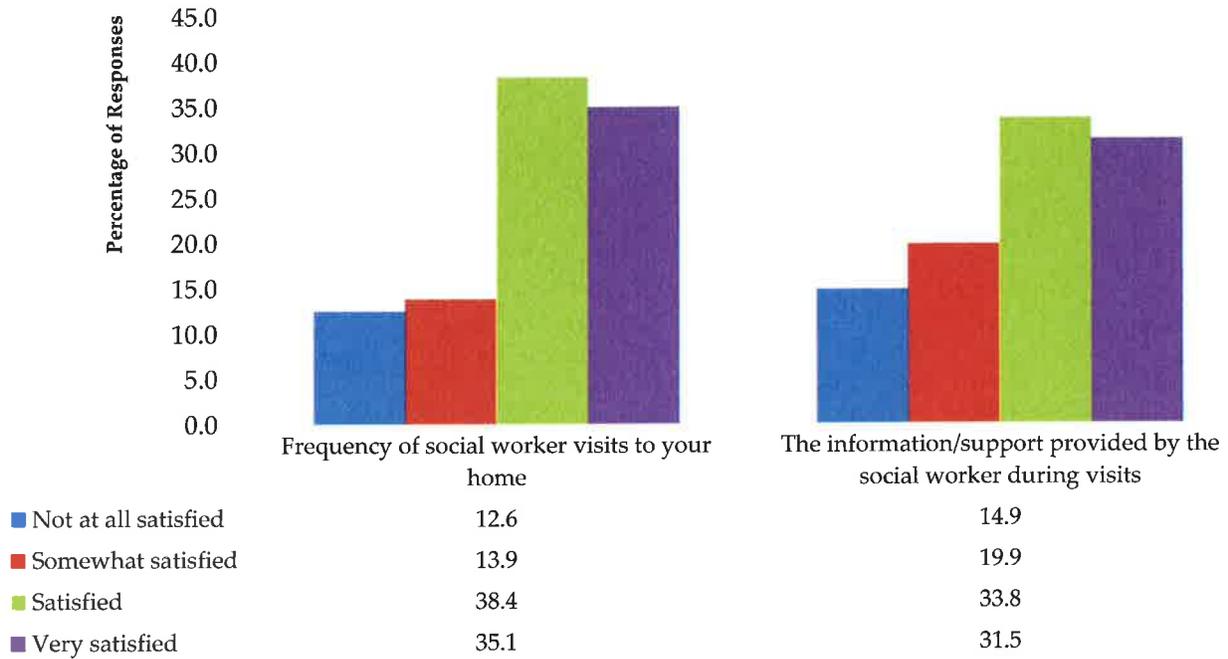
Figure 8 shows the average ratings for each item broken down by region. Although there were slight differences in mean ratings by region, none were statistically-significant. **The regional items reflect the residence of foster parent. Case-carrying workers are assigned based on the parents address and serve countywide.**

Figure 8: Mean Ratings of Case-Carrying Social Worker Items by Region



Ratings for items related to satisfaction with visits by the case-carrying social worker are shown in Figure 9. Again, the majority of responses were positive with respondents either indicating that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the frequency of visits and the support provided during the visits.

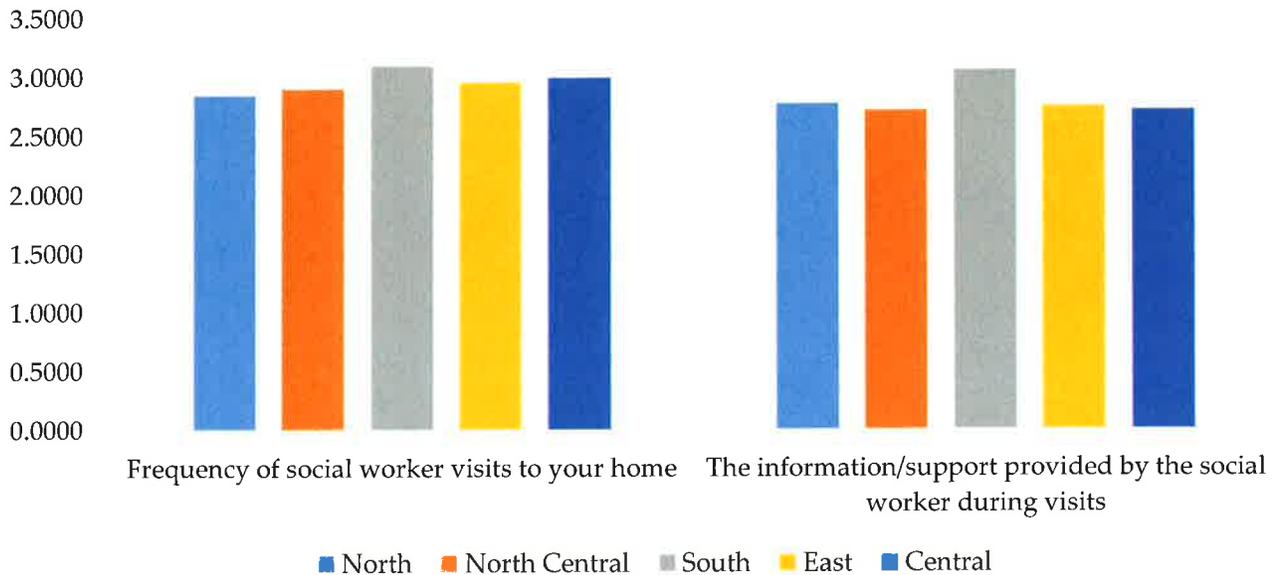
Figure 9: Satisfaction with Social Worker Visits



Please note the region indicates the residence of the foster parent. Results that identify satisfaction of services and social workers may not reflect the office of the assigned social worker or the location of the service. Therefore no conclusions can be drawn about performance by a specified regional office.

Figure 10 shows mean ratings of satisfaction with visits by the case-carrying social worker by region. These differences also were small and not statistically-significant.

Figure 10: Mean Ratings of Satisfaction with Social Worker Visits by Region



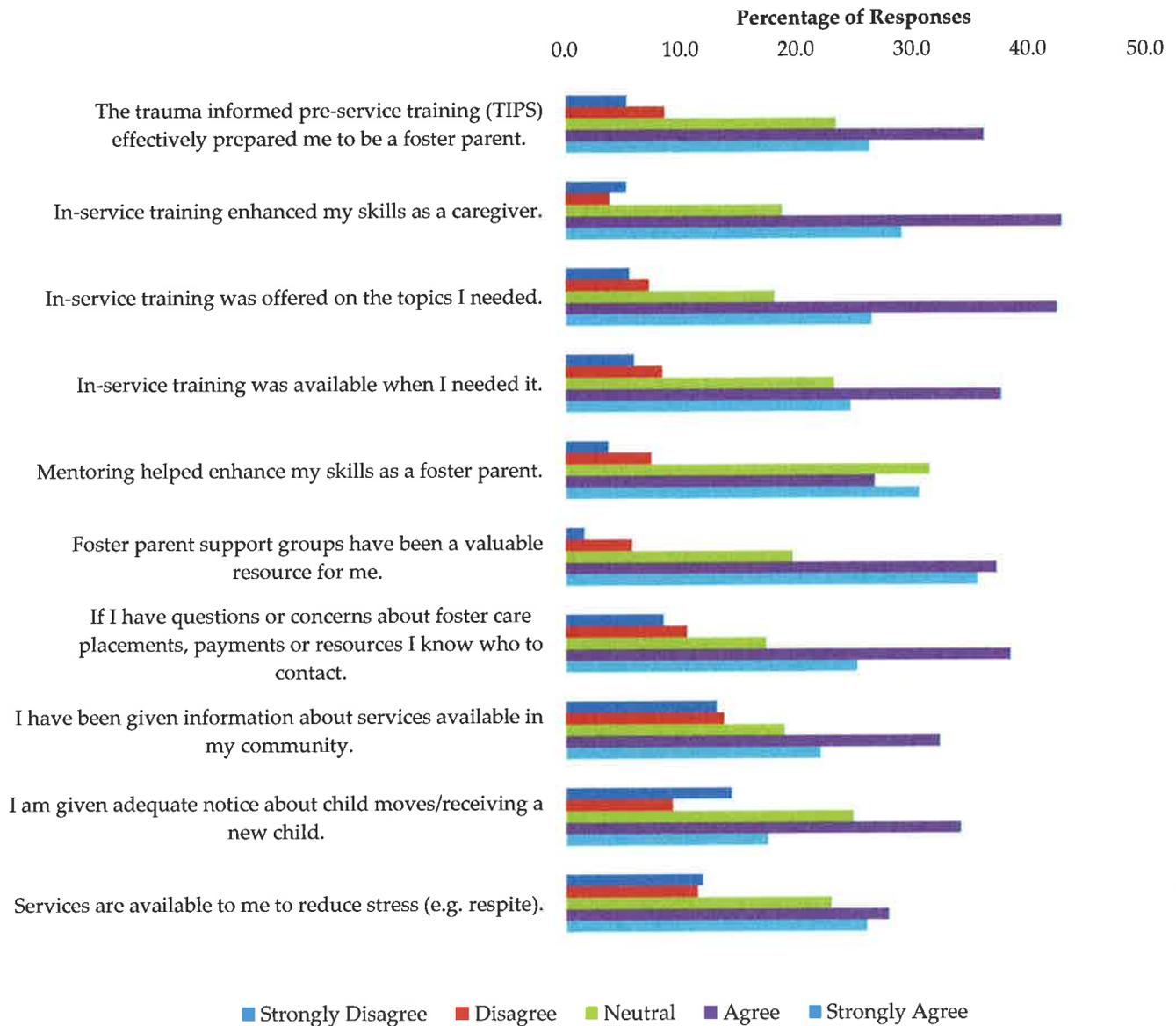
**Please note the region indicates the residence of the foster parent. Results that identify satisfaction of services and social workers may not reflect the office of the assigned social worker or the location of the service. Therefore no conclusions can be drawn about performance by a specified regional office.**

## SUPPORT FROM THE AGENCY

The last major area assessed was supports available to foster parents. Like the items related to the case-carrying social worker, items in this area also had larger percentages of missing responses. Respondents were also given a “did not use” option to indicate supports that they had not used and could not rate. Thus, Figure 11 shows the percentages in each response category based on only those who used and rated their use of the support or service.

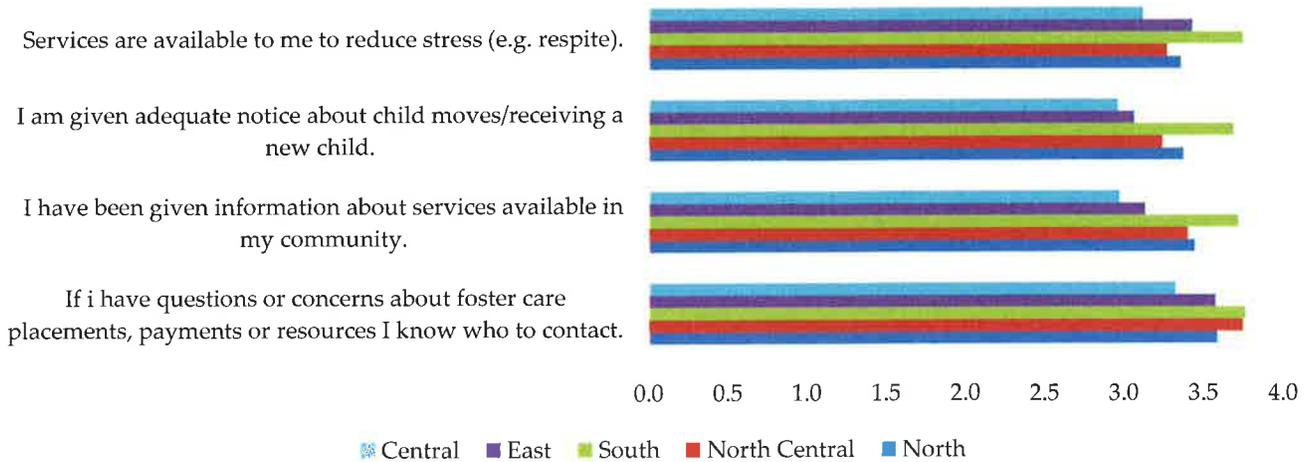
The highest-rated items were “In-service training enhanced my skills as a caregiver” and “Foster parent support groups have been a valuable resource for me” with 70% and 72.8% (respectively) choosing either “agree” or “strongly agree.” The lowest rated item was “I am given adequate notice about child moves/receiving a new child,” with just over half of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing (51.6%).

## Figure 11: Satisfaction with Supports For Foster Parents



Mean ratings for regionalized supports are shown by region in Figure 12. (Items that addressed centralized functions such as foster parents training, mentoring and support groups are not displayed in Figure 12 as they have already been displayed in Figure 11.)

**Figure 12: Mean Ratings of Support Items by Region**



One –way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed the differences in Figure 11 and 12 to be statistically-significant for the following items:

- “The trauma informed pre-service training (TIPS) effectively prepared me to be a foster parent” (F=3.040, d.f. =4, p<.05).
- “In-service training enhanced my skills as a caregiver” (F=3.902, d.f. =4, p<.01).
- “In-service training was offered on the topics I needed” (F=2.659, d.f. =4, p<.05).
- “In-service training was available when I needed it” (F=5.523, d.f. =4, p<.001).
- “Mentoring helped enhance my skills as a foster parent” (F=2.977, d.f. =4, p<.05).<sup>4</sup>
- “I have been given information about services available in my community” (F=2.809, d.f. =4, p<.05).
- “I am given adequate notice about child moves/receiving a new child” (F=2.871, d.f. =4, p<.05).

In addition to rating services and supports, foster parents were asked if they had ever used KIDSline, and also how they would like to be contacted regarding updates to State and Federal laws, foster parent licensing regulations, and child welfare policies and procedures that impact them. Of the 312 people who responded regarding use of KIDSline, 27 answered “yes” that they had used it (8.7%), while the large majority (91.3%) answered “no.” Of those who had used

<sup>4</sup> Some support items are delivered through a countywide contract with Grossmont College and some items are regionalized and are delivered via regional social workers.

KIDSline, 76% indicated that they were assisted promptly. The most frequently-chosen option for receiving information was e-mail (chosen by 69.6% of respondents), followed by U.S. mail (48.7%), support groups (17.9%), and Foster Care Services (9.6%)<sup>5</sup>.

## RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Responses to the open-ended questions were reviewed and coded based on a number of themes and sub-themes (see Appendix). Responses relating to several themes were coded under multiple categories. Major themes are summarized below with examples of the types of responses included.

To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, names of specific offices and workers have been omitted and indicated as [office] or [worker]. Issues also are not identified by region. Responses summarized within larger themes were not specific to one region. Where very few comments were received on an issue, it is not known how representative they are of the work as a whole. Presenting these comments by region was felt to be potentially misleading and might allow an individual to be identified from the content of the response.

## WHAT DO THE SAN DIEGO HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY AND YOUR SOCIAL WORKERS DO WELL TO SUPPORT YOU?

We received 207 responses to this question; some including multiple themes<sup>6</sup> and encompassing both general and specific feedback.

**Satisfaction with Social Workers:** The majority of the comments provided in response to this question involved feedback on foster parents' interactions with the workers (57%). Respondents commented favorably on several aspects of their interactions with the workers, describing those they dealt with as caring (13 responses); courteous, respectful and professional (12 responses); good listeners (8 responses); honest and transparent (6 responses); valuing their opinions (4 responses); efficient (2 responses) and knowledgeable (2 responses).

Respondents also commented favorably on workers' availability and responsiveness. Twenty comments touched on returning calls and responding to e-mails in a timely manner. Others mentioned that the workers were available to answer questions and assist in solving problems when needed (18 responses); and were proactive in providing needed information regarding resources for foster parents and foster children as well as issues affecting their current placements (20 responses). Sample comments in this area included:

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<sup>5</sup> Respondents could check more than one option, thus percentages add to more than 100%.

<sup>6</sup> Because responses can contain multiple themes, individual counts related to specific themes will not add to the overall number of comments.

Although there were many favorable comments, several foster parents commented that there were differences in their interactions with different workers and that some were much better than others (25 responses) and a small number commented on problems with specific workers (6 responses). One person summed up their experience by saying, "I've had some of the best social workers. I've had to deal with very few of the difficult ones. I am fortunate in that. The supportive social workers ask me about the status of the child and listen to the answers. Good social workers spend time and clue into the family dynamic where the child is placed. A great social worker will work with the family in creating solutions to meet the needs of the child, for while they are in care and beyond. The best social workers understand Fostering is a volunteer avocation and comes from the heart (mostly; I suppose there are bad ones out there) and we're not glorified babysitters. Recognizing foster parents as having a life outside of fostering is the best gift a social worker can give a family providing care."

**Services and Supports to Foster Children and Foster Parents:** In addition to interactions with the workers, foster parents commented on the services and supports available to them (10% of responses) and to their foster children (5% of responses). With respect to services for their foster children, respondents indicated being pleased with the services provided for the children, specifically mentoring, counseling/therapy, tutoring, summer programs, medical appointments, transportation and advocacy.

The most frequent responses regarding supports to foster parents, concerned appreciation for the training (20 responses) and support groups provided (6 responses). Trauma Informal Pre Service (TIPS) training, Options training and training provided through Grossmont College were all mentioned favorably, as were the Options support group and Bridges to Parenting. Foster parents also appreciated assistance with medical care and therapy for their foster children (3 responses), being able to get together at meetings and events (1 response), assistance with issues with birth parents (1 response), and economic assistance and funding for children's activities (2 responses). Eight respondents mentioned appreciating check-in calls from the worker to see if there was anything they needed, although one added that there was a lack of follow-through after the calls.

**Quality of the Overall Experience:** Finally, 39 responses to this question (13.9% of responses) dealt with the overall quality of the experience. Eleven of these responses indicated that everything was going well. Sample comments included: "everything, they give us all the information we need," "the [office] is OUTSTANDING in all areas! From placement to children transitioning home - they are the best," and "They did everything necessary to help us." Another 28 respondents took this opportunity to say that they did not feel that they had received any support and to express general dissatisfaction; for example, "Nothing (done well). They drop child off. I barely see anyone after that." "Nothing at all,

and I get support from other foster families. I don't feel comfortable talking to the social workers. It's like talking to deaf ears." "Nothing, we have had a baby in our home for over 2 months and no one has contacted us to let us know who the new worker is, and we call the old worker and they know nothing."

## WHAT COULD HAVE IMPROVED YOUR EXPERIENCE?

We received 226 responses to this question, some of which, again, touched on more than one theme. A little over 6% of those who answered the question (N=14) responded by saying that they were pleased with the Agency and did not have any suggestions; for example, "Everything is fine for the moment, I don't think there's anything to change" and "I think they have good service."

**Interactions with Social Workers:** The largest group of comments and suggestions was related to one or more aspects of the foster parents' interactions with a worker or workers (51.6%). One of the most frequently-mentioned themes was a desire for more frequent and consistent communication between the social workers and foster parents. Forty seven of the responses to the question of what could have improved their experience mentioned either a general desire for better communication or a specific concern in this area. The concern raised most frequently (15 responses) was around a lack of information regarding their foster child's needs.

Another of the major themes identified within this area concerned a lack of respect for foster parents and their role (36 responses). Foster parents also described a desire for more honesty and transparency (9 responses) regarding the ways in which expectations of foster parents are described, policies are applied, and decisions are made. Some also described a perception that they were treated unfairly or unethically (10 responses) based on social worker biases.

A third major theme was related to the availability and responsiveness of workers. The most often mentioned concern within this area was a failure to respond to e-mails and calls within a reasonable timeframe (15 responses). There were also concerns raised about the availability of workers to provide assistance and answer questions when needed (12 responses):

Foster parents also described a desire for more information to be provided proactively (7 responses). In the words of one respondent, "Most significantly my experience would have been improved by having an opportunity to get some basic facts, e.g. a Frequently Asked Questions forum would have been nice prior to orientation." This respondent went on to recommend adding on-line support groups saying that they thought they were more useful than in-person monthly groups or one-on-one meetings.

Another theme in this area dealt with a need for more experienced or better-trained workers (12 comments). These comments were primarily general, describing workers as "green" or lacking in

knowledge. One specific suggestion in this area was to improve training for social workers who work with children struggling with mental health issues.

**Agency Policies and Procedures:** The bulk of the comments in this area were concerned with the length of time processes took (23 responses). Nine of these comments did not specify a particular process that was of concern, but 6 specified adoptions related issues, 5 responses specified time it took to have a child placed with them and 3 specified the time it took to become licensed.

**System Issues:** Respondents also commented on larger issues affecting the Agency beyond specific policies and procedures. One frequently-mentioned issue was the number of worker changes throughout a case (10 responses) because they lead to gaps in information associated with the change, and the need to start over in establishing relationships.

A second theme was related to systemic issues that went beyond the Agency itself. Several respondents expressed concern that the child welfare system as a whole was failing the foster children (14 responses). Comments generally centered on the way in which specific cases were handled by either the Agency or the court, and the feeling that the decisions made in the case were not in the best interests of the child.

**Services and Supports to Foster Parents and Children:** This area yielded the largest number of specific suggestions for improvement. The largest number of comments in this area dealt with improvements to orientation and training (20 responses). Eight respondents asked for more training classes but did not specify a specific need. The remaining responses offered specific suggestions.

In addition to more training classes, one respondent also requested more support groups in Spanish, held on weekends when her husband could attend.

Three other responses concerned mentoring. One person asked for more mentors to be provided and another asked for additional mentoring for foster dads. A third person expressed concern with the quality of mentoring and the current system which they felt paid mentors without ensuring that they provide meaningful information.

In addition to training, mentoring and support groups, responses were received that concerned financial assistance (8 responses). Five people expressed a desire for more subsidies for foster parents generally. Another theme emerging from the responses was a desire for more help in dealing with birth parents (5 responses).

## SUMMARY

Responses to the survey indicated that the majority of foster parents in San Diego County were satisfied with their experiences with recruitment and licensing, interactions with the case-carrying

social worker, and supports received. Most respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated with courtesy and respect throughout the initial recruitment and licensing process, that expectations of foster parents were explained clearly and that their questions were answered effectively. Case-carrying social workers received high ratings for treating the foster parents professionally and courteously, respecting the families' culture, understanding families' strengths and needs, valuing the foster parents' opinions, and ensuring that foster children received needed medical, dental, educational and mental health services. Foster parents also were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the frequency and support provided during visits from the social worker. Pre-service TIPS training and in-service training were among the most highly-rated supports, and although used less often, foster parent support groups were also highly-rated.

While still positive overall, ratings were somewhat lower in a few areas. Foster parents were less likely to agree that they were given the opportunity to participate in foster parent recruitment and retention efforts, and generally gave lower ratings to items concerning accessibility and promptness in returning calls and addressing questions and concerns. Foster parents also gave lower ratings to the item "I am given adequate notice about child moves/receiving a new child."

Several themes emerged from the open-ended responses, at times appearing to be contradictory. Major themes related to interactions with workers centered on respect, availability and responsiveness, honesty and competence. All of these areas were cited as both strengths and areas for improvement. However, based on the comments of some individuals who had worked with several social workers, this seems to be explained, at least in part, by variations among the individual workers. These respondents described some workers as supportive, inclusive and responsive, while pointing out that this was not the case with others. Differences also seemed to be explained in part by differences in how respondents were using the term "respect." While respectful interactions rated strength for several respondents, these respondents appeared to be equating "respect" with courteous and polite behavior. Those who saw respect as lacking, primarily described the issue as respect for the foster parent's role and inclusion as part of the team responsible for the child.

Respondents indicated being pleased with the range of services provided for the children, specifically mentoring, counseling/therapy, tutoring, summer programs, medical appointments, transportation and advocacy. Training, support groups, and mentoring for foster parents were generally well-regarded. Respondents also offered a range of specific suggestions for improving these supportive services, including holding more support groups in Spanish, providing additional training for experienced foster parents, mentoring for foster dads, and training on drug and alcohol and other issues. Respondents indicated less satisfaction with other supports for foster parents, most often citing issues with payment, assistance with conflicts with birth parents, and hours of respite care available.

A major theme also emerged around dissatisfaction with how long Agency processes such as licensing, matching a foster parent with a foster child, and adoptions took. Respondents also identified issues

with a lack of clarity in materials, procedures and policies and in the consistency of information provided when there was a change in workers. A number of people also identified the need for more accurate information about the needs of their foster child prior to placement.

Lastly, several foster parents expressed dissatisfaction with the child welfare system, indicating that it seemed that both workers and the courts prioritized the rights of the birth parents over the best interests of the children. Since this issue is often not under Agency control, it might be best addressed with additional education of potential foster parents. Respondents also expressed frustration with worker changes and turnover citing concerns with re-building relationships as well as delays and gaps occurring during transitions.

In summary, the comments provided by the foster parents presented a picture of both significant strengths and a number of areas in which practice could be more consistent and improvements could be made. Since open-ended responses such as these often elicit responses from those at opposite ends of the spectrum, from very happy with the experience to very unhappy with the experience, these comments should be evaluated carefully by those knowledgeable about the program, and also considered in light of the level of overall satisfaction with the Agency's services indicated by the ratings of individual scale items. Since several individuals indicated on the survey that they would be willing to participate in follow-up focus groups, these also could serve to shed further light on the extent of any issues to be addressed.

The Agency has demonstrated commitment to receiving feedback and recommendations on system improvements to enhance services to children, and ultimately strengthen the foster care system. In 2012, the Agency began implementing the Quality Parenting Initiative to increase partnership and dialogue with foster parent caregivers. The San Diego QPI Mission Statement states: "Foster parents in the County of San Diego make an enduring, emotional commitment to each child and provide excellent parenting in a safe nurturing family. They are volunteers who are valued, respected, skilled members of a professional team that works collaboratively to meet the needs of the individual child. They nurture and support connections with the child's family, community, and culture. They give children a sense of stability and safety so that children can reach their potential and live healthy, productive lives." Through efforts such as this, foster parents and agency personnel can work collectively to reduce communication barriers and establish opportunities for ongoing system improvement.

## APPENDIX

### Codes used for open-ended responses

1. Satisfied overall (but nothing specific)
2. Dissatisfied generally
3. Relationship/interpersonal
  - 3.1. Respectful/courteous/professional
  - 3.2. Values input of foster parent
  - 3.3. Honesty
  - 3.4. Problem with specific workers
  - 3.5. Praise for specific worker
  - 3.6. Efficiency
  - 3.7. Warmth/caring
  - 3.8. Competence
  - 3.9. Cultural sensitivity
  - 3.10. Judgmental/biased/unethical
4. Availability/responsiveness (general)
  - 4.1. Return calls/ emails
  - 4.2. Provide assistance when needed/solves problems
  - 4.3. Answers questions
  - 4.4. Provides needed information (including timely provision of documents/forms)
  - 4.5. Mixed experience
5. Policies/procedures/processes
  - 5.1. Length/speed of processes (e.g., licensing, getting foster child, adoption)
  - 5.2. Clarity of materials
  - 5.3. Right to choose child's age, gender
  - 5.4. Travel
  - 5.5. More on-line and more by e-mail
  - 5.6. Complaint-handling
  - 5.7. Lack of consistency in application of policies and procedures
6. Communication
  - 6.1. Non-specific
  - 6.2. Know who to contact
  - 6.3. Questions answered clearly and consistently
  - 6.4. Adequate notice of moves
  - 6.5. Information about child's needs
  - 6.6. Information about available services for child

- 6.7. Information about available services for foster parents
- 6.8. Internal communication among workers
- 7. Services provided to child
- 8. Services and Supports for foster parents
  - 8.1. General
  - 8.2. Support groups
  - 8.3. Training
  - 8.4. Coaching/mentoring
  - 8.5. Meetings/events
  - 8.6. Orientation
  - 8.7. Assistance with birth parents
  - 8.8. Assistance with child behavior/parenting
  - 8.9. Assistance with getting services for child (e.g., referrals, appointments, transportation)
  - 8.10. Economic assistance
  - 8.11. Workers contacts
  - 8.12. Respite
  - 8.13. Support for when child is surrendered
  - 8.14. Child care during training/support group meetings
- 9. Multiple workers/turnover
- 10. Concern for system failing child
- 11. Supports for the social workers (recognition of being overworked)
- 12. Unable to code