

**Focus Group Results from
Biological Mothers Involved with the
Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW)**

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**Prepared for:
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About the Report

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation's Bright Futures Milwaukee Fund commissioned a study on what keeps children safe in foster care in Milwaukee County in memory of long-time child advocate James. R. Ryan. In May 2009, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. (Planning Council) released a report titled "A Community Conversation about the Safety of Children in Foster Care" that takes a broad look at issues surrounding safety in foster care in Milwaukee County. Please visit our website at http://www.planningcouncil.org/docs/reports/Safety_of_Children_in_Foster_Care.pdf to review this report. The current report is a companion piece of a larger study examining foster care in Milwaukee County and focuses on the input of biological mothers involved with the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW) on what keeps children in foster care safe.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Meta House for organizing and providing space for the focus group with biological mothers whose children are, or were, involved with the BMCW. We would also like to thank the women who participated in the focus groups for sharing their experiences and their ideas about how to keep children safe in Milwaukee County.

About the Planning Council

This report was prepared by the Planning Council, which promotes community planning as a systematic way of viewing community issues and developing planned solutions to address those issues.

The Planning Council is an independent, non-profit research and planning organization that has been operating in Southeastern Wisconsin since 1965. The Planning Council has extensive experience in stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, program evaluation, survey design, data collection, and data analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

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*The Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc.,
is a non-profit organization serving Southeastern Wisconsin.
Its mission is to advance community health and human
services through objective planning, evaluation, and research.*

Background

Purpose of the Focus Groups

The Planning Council conducted several focus groups to explore and gather information from multiple sources concerning the safety of children in foster care in Milwaukee County. This report describes focus group input from a sample of biological mothers whose children are, or were, involved with the BMCW. The Planning Council gathered input from biological mothers on issues, challenges, and solutions that could help improve the safety of children and the quality of foster care in Milwaukee County.

Methodology

The Planning Council conducted a focus group with a sample of biological mothers whose children were involved with the BMCW, or whose children were at one time involved with the BMCW. The women also had connections to Meta House, an agency that helps women struggling with drug and alcohol addiction reclaim their lives and rebuild their families. The purpose of the focus group was to examine biological mothers' perspectives on what keeps children safe in foster care in Milwaukee County.

Meta House staff organized the focus group and selected participants. The focus group was convened at Meta House in March of 2009 and lasted approximately 90 minutes. One facilitator conducted the focus group and two recorders documented the session.

A set of open-ended questions was designed for the focus group to guide biological mothers in a discussion on what keeps children safe in foster care in Milwaukee County (see Appendix A). Specifically, biological mothers were asked to talk about:

1. The positive aspects of foster care,
2. Contact with foster parents or kinship caregivers,
3. Qualities of a foster home that make it safe for children,
4. Problems with foster care, and
5. Suggestions that would help make children safer in foster care in Milwaukee County.

Sample

A total of six biological mothers participated in the focus group. All of the women had connections with Meta House and the BMCW. Participants were predominantly African-American women. Half of the participants had children currently in the child welfare system; the other half of the participants had been reunited with their children. For the three women whose children were in the child welfare system, their children had been placed in foster care for a time-period ranging from ten months to three years. Among the six women, there were a total of 18 children who ranged in age from three to 26 (one woman did not provide the ages of her children). At least two of the women who participated in the focus group had been in foster care when they were young.

The viewpoints described in this report are restricted to the thoughts and opinions of the focus group participants and are not presented as representative of all biological mothers involved with the BMCW. Standard qualitative research requires that at least two focus groups be held with the same target group. Although this report reflects a limited sample size, the issues and themes discussed provide some insight into the experiences of biological mothers. Also note that biological mothers in the focus group often had experiences with multiple foster parents and/or kinship care providers, as well as contact with numerous professionals (caseworkers, judges, etc.). Information was not necessarily given about current or most recent providers or caregivers. Additionally, not all participants answered all questions.

Focus Group Results/Themes

1. *The Positive Aspects of Foster Care*

When biological mothers who participated in this focus group were asked to talk about the positive aspects of foster care, they primarily mentioned caring and competent individuals. Most often mentioned were judges and caregivers; also noted were BMCW caseworkers, advocates, and Meta House workers. In addition to individuals, some participants noted that the emphasis on keeping families together was a positive aspect of the child welfare system.

Judges

Nearly all focus group participants described having positive experiences with judges. Biological mothers described judges as “good”, “nice”, and “understanding”. They also said that judges listened, and let them talk. One focus group participant said that the judge spoke in a way that was understandable to her. Additionally, a couple of focus group participants noted that the judges intervened when they felt there were problems with their children’s foster homes. One of the participants noted:

“The judge didn’t play and was very willing to help. I told the judge that my kids told me that their foster parent was going to whip my son’s butt and I called 220-SAFE but nothing came of it. That’s just how the judge was. The Guardian and case manger weren’t doing what they were supposed to do. The case manager didn’t go out to see my kid; the judge stepped in immediately.”

Another focus group participant said that the judges worked with her, not against her. She said:

“The judges were good and understanding. At the time, I had criminal charges pending for a drug case. The judge relieved me by telling me that my rights were not necessarily going to be terminated. I remember that so well. I was so relieved. I knew then that there was hope. I knew that they weren’t working against me. I felt like I could put my shoulders down.”

Caregivers

Focus group participants nearly unanimously said that caregivers were a positive aspect of foster care. A few participants noted caregivers’ ability to motivate children and keep them happy. One focus group participant described her experience as a child in the foster care system:

“I was a foster child until I was 21. There were some nice things. The foster family I had was caring and nice. There were lots of things I got to do that I wouldn’t have been able to do if I was with my mom. I liked being in foster care. I didn’t want to be back with my parents. My foster parents were loving and caring, and they motivated me to do the things I wanted to do in life.”

Two of the focus group participants described foster parents who allowed them to have frequent contact with their children. They spoke highly of these parents and described how important this contact was for them.

Caseworkers

A couple of focus group participants noted that their caseworkers took their thoughts into consideration and let them know what was going on. As noted by one biological mother:

“I had a very good caseworker. I had no problems with her. She lets me say what I want to say and she takes what I say into consideration.”

Though not all participants had positive things to say about caseworkers, most agreed that caseworkers are only trying to do their jobs and keep children from being harmed.

Advocates/Mentors

One focus group participant described a respite worker who assisted her in removing her child from a placement she felt was unsafe. The worker helped her navigate the system. Another participant mentioned, and others agreed, that the Meta House counselors and group sessions were helpful in allowing biological mothers to talk through issues that they were having.

Foster Care System

Another positive aspect, that about half of the focus group participants noted, was keeping families together in foster care. A few biological mothers commented that keeping siblings together is important to them. These focus group participants noted that it is difficult to keep track of their children when they are not together, and they felt better knowing that their children are able to watch out for each other when they are placed together. As one biological mother noted:

“My nine-year-old and my three-year-old were in separate homes and it drove me crazy...It drove me crazy because I didn’t know what was going on with them. Now that they’re together, I know they are being taken care of and I know that my nine-year-old is watching out for my three-year-old. That left me at ease.”

More than half of the focus group participants said that they were pleased that their children were placed with relatives, at least initially. The reasons given were that their children were not being placed with strangers, and they thought that it would be easier for their children to adapt to their new, albeit temporary, living situation. One focus group participant noted that having her children placed with relatives helped them out financially. A few mothers described wanting to have their children placed with family because they felt as though the placement was not permanent. One biological mother explained it in this way:

“Because he [my son] was with family, it let me know that it wasn’t final. When you hear foster parent, you think that your child is calling someone else mom. Knowing that our kids are with relatives gives us hope that we can get them back.”

A few mothers did not have positive experiences with having their children placed in their relatives' care. This is explored in further detail on page 11, under "Placement of Children".

Positive aspects of foster care

- Professionals in the court system who are firm, but respect, listen, and understand the needs and concerns of biological mothers
- Caregivers who are experienced, knowledgeable, and good with children
- Caregivers who allow biological mothers to communicate with their children
- Caseworkers who listen and keep biological mothers informed
- Advocates and mentors who help navigate the system and talk through issues
- Children who are placed with family members who are able to care for them
- Siblings who are placed together when in foster care

2. Contact with Foster Parents or Kinship Caregivers

When members of the focus group were asked to discuss contact with their children's caregivers, responses focused on whether or not caregivers allowed biological mothers to have contact with their children. Biological mothers spoke highly of caregivers who provided an opportunity for open communication.

Positive Experiences

One of the focus group participants noted that she has contact with her children by telephone and that the calls are initiated by herself, her children, or the foster parents. She said:

"I have contact with my child's foster mom; they call her grandma. She could be wishy washy, but she calls me and I call them."

Another mother said that even though she is unable to visit two of her children because they are placed out of town, the foster parent allows her to send gifts and to call. She also has a daughter placed with a family member and she said that she sees her every two weeks.

Challenging Experiences

A few mothers mentioned foster fathers being rude to them on the telephone when they call or feeling unwelcoming when they visit. One participant noted the following negative experience with her children's foster parents:

"When my kids call me, the foster parents say that I'm agitating them. My kids love me. I'm trying to help the foster parents out by letting them know how my kids are, but they don't give me a chance. They told me to call at 7:00 and I called at 7:10 and now they said I can't call anymore. The husband hollered at me on the phone and was really disrespectful."

Another participant noted that her children were placed with a family member who did not allow her to visit or call. She noted:

“If I called when it was dinnertime, my brother would slam the phone down. I would have to stand on the sidewalk when I would go for visits.”

Contact with foster parents or kinship caregivers

- Biological mothers were primarily in contact with caregivers in order to be in contact with their children
- Having open communication with children and caregivers was considered a positive experience

3. Qualities of a Foster Home that make it Safe for Children

According to this group of biological mothers, to ensure that foster homes are safe, caregivers need to have adequate parenting knowledge and experience, and treat foster children like they would their own biological children. Additionally, focus group participants noted that caregivers who communicate with them and allow their children to communicate with them, helped biological mothers feel as though the foster home is safe.

Caregiver Knowledge/Experience/Treatment of Children

Three biological mothers who participated in the focus group noted that in order for them to feel as though their children were placed in a safe home, it was important for caregivers to have parenting experience and knowledge about children. One focus group participant said the following:

“The original foster parent was experienced and caring, even though my worker wasn’t...Her years of experience made that home safe for me.”

A few comments were made that caregivers should understand that children naturally act out, and children placed in foster homes may be even more likely to exhibit bad behavior. One participant noted:

“When he [my son] acts up it’s usually because he wants to be with me or because his dad didn’t come for a visit. People should know that kids will be kids and they will act out at times.”

Another said:

“They [foster parents] want to send my kids to therapy but there’s nothing wrong with them, they [my children] just want to go home.”

Another focus group participant noted the importance of knowing the places that children consider to be “safe places” so if they do act up, or run away, the caregiver will know who to contact.

One of the biological mothers described a challenging experience that she had with her children's foster parents, which she attributed to their lack of experience:

"The foster parents took my kids out of the day care that they had been going to for three years. They took them away from what they were used to. I accept that my kids were taken from me, because I was acting a fool, but they shouldn't have been taken out of their day care. I feel that someone should have stepped in. My kids' foster parents had no children of their own and didn't know anything about kids."

In addition to having knowledge and experience with children, two biological mothers noted that caregivers should treat foster children the way they would treat their own children. One biological mother said:

"My brother whipped my oldest son. He would take a belt to him and leave welts on his ass. They would get in trouble if they didn't do what he said, when he said it. They only had three minutes in the shower. I can't believe that my own family would treat my kids like that. My kids were told to lie to me. I didn't learn about all of this until I got them back and then they began chirping about it like little birds. They said that if they didn't eat when he told them to, they wouldn't be able to eat. My brother has his own kids, but he doesn't treat them like he treated my kids."

One other focus group participant noted her discomfort with the way her children's foster parents treated them when visitors would come to the house. She said:

"My kids told me that the foster parent's grandsons were over and spent the night, which made me wonder where they slept. I don't want my four-year-old child playing with 11-year-olds."

Connections Among Biological Mothers and Caregivers and Biological Mothers with their Children

Most of the biological mothers who participated in the focus group said that in order for them to feel that their children were safe, they needed a strong connection to the caregivers. According to one participant:

"Nobody knows the kids like the biological parents; so, the foster parents should correspond with biological parents, especially if the mom is doing what she's supposed to be doing. I don't see the harm in communicating."

One biological mother noted, and others seemed to agree, that biological mothers appreciate the opportunity to learn about the caregivers' values and to see where their children are placed. One participant explained it this way:

"When we get to be with our kids, it is usually at a visitation place or at the foster parent's front door. It would be nice if we could go into the kid's bedroom and put on their coat and see what their living situation is like, but we can't get behind the door. I would like to get a peek-a-boo of the house; I want to see behind those doors... We're not asking to sit down and have dinner with them, but we should have just as much of a right to go into their houses as a CPS [Child Protective Services] worker does. We should make it a unity thing."

A few biological mothers also made note about the importance of having their children placed with caregivers who allow them to call and take their children out. One focus group participant spoke in regards to her experience as a child in the foster care system:

“When I was in a foster home, it was important for my mom to call and take me out. I believe that it should be like that now, even though I know some parents would snatch up their kids and go. Foster parents should be open or else you wonder what they’re hiding. I say that because when I was in a foster home as a child, I was molested.”

Caseworkers Check on Children

Additionally, one participant noted, and others seemed to be in agreement, that workers should make unexpected visits to foster homes to check on the children. One participant stated the following:

“Workers need to make visits at 9 p.m. They should do pop-ins; foster parents shouldn’t always know when they’re coming.”

Qualities of a foster home that make it safe for children

- Caregivers who have experience with and knowledge of children
- Caregivers who treat foster children as they would treat their own biological children
- Caregivers who communicate with biological mothers, and allow biological mothers to communicate with their children
- Caseworkers who make unexpected visits to foster homes, after regular business hours to get a sense of what is happening in the foster home

4. Problems with Foster Care

Although participants said there were positive aspects of the foster care system, they also noted some challenges. Problems most often noted by biological mothers were related to issues with caseworkers or Guardians ad Litem. Additional problems noted by biological mothers included inadequate background checks, poor placement of children, and splitting up siblings.

Caseworkers/Guardian ad Litem

Several of the focus group participants noted problems with caseworkers. The most common complaint biological mothers made was that they felt as though caseworkers automatically sided with foster parents over them. Also noted was the lack of intervention when the biological mothers felt that there were issues with caregivers. Additionally, two focus group participants discussed the challenges of having caseworkers try to involve the biological fathers. One participant noted:

“Case managers are supposed to be helping us, but then they want to involve the fathers who have never been around...It’s questionable whether the father should be involved because they are probably doing drugs too.”

Some participants cited problems with Guardian ad Litem workers. Half of the participants said that they felt that these workers do not do what they are supposed to do. Some participants said they never met these workers, and one focus group participant noted that “the Guardian ad Litem finally came around after we got our third worker”.

Background Checks

Several of the participants discussed the need for more extensive background checks for foster families, including checks on children in the home and extended family members. One participant noted, and another agreed, that frequent guests should also have to undergo background checks. In addition to background checks, one participant noted that mental health screens should be required, and a few others suggested examining foster parents’ motivations for taking in foster children. They said:

“There are incentives to be a foster parent. We should think about why they’re becoming foster parents. Some are in it for the money.”

“Foster parents should not get into it just to adopt kids.”

Placement of Children

Focus group participants seemed to have mixed opinions about the BMCW policy of placing children with kin, if possible. A few participants noted that relatives can hold grudges, be resentful and biased, and treat the children and the biological mothers unfairly. A few recounted very bad experiences with kinship caregivers, as noted:

“When my child was taken for the second time, he was placed with my cousin...I wanted him placed there because I thought it would be easier to get him back. I found out that my cousin wasn’t taking care of him. The workers saved his life. He had to be put in the hospital.”

“My kids were placed with my brother who has an attitude... He wouldn’t let me talk to or see my kids. He was worse than if I put them in foster care. He thought he could run me, my kids, and the system, and he did for a while.”

On the other hand, some participants noted that they were grateful that their children were placed with relatives. They thought that this afforded them a greater opportunity to communicate with their children and reunite with them.

Focus group participants seemed to agree that separating siblings was a problem and should be avoided.

Problems with foster care

- Caseworkers who do not listen to biological mothers
- Guardian ad Litem workers who do not do what they should be doing
- Inadequate background checks on foster families and others who have frequent contact with foster children
- Automatically placing children with relatives, when that may not be the best placement
- Separating sibling groups

5. *Suggestions that Would Help Make Children Safer in Foster Care in Milwaukee County*

Focus group participants listed a range of suggestions that would improve the safety of children in foster care in Milwaukee County. The suggestions most often cited were more thorough background checks on foster parents and ensuring a smooth transition for children from foster homes back to their biological mothers' homes.

Suggestions that would help make children safer in foster care in Milwaukee County

- Caseworkers would do unexpected visits to foster homes, and do in-home inspections with either the biological mother or an advocate of the biological mother
- Foster parents would have more effective and extensive background checks
- Foster parents would understand and communicate to the foster children that reunification with the biological mother is the goal
- Children would be placed with appropriate foster parents (i.e. parents who do not have too many children, who are an appropriate age, etc.), and with people with whom the children feel safe
- Sibling groups would not be separated
- Children would experience smooth transitions from their foster homes back to their biological mothers' homes
- Biological mothers would have a plan in place for a smooth transition, over time, to reunite with their children (biological mothers may not be able to take all of their children back at the same time)
- Biological mothers would receive support as they transition back into the role of full-time parenting

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for Biological Mothers

1. Please introduce yourself. How many children do you have and how long have they been in foster care?
2. What positive things do you see in Milwaukee's foster care system?
3. Describe the contact you have with your child's foster parents or kinship caregivers.
4. What are the things that make a foster home a safe home?
5. By a show of hands, do you feel that your children are safe in their foster home or relative placement?*
6. What problems have you experienced with the foster care system?
7. Name one thing you would like to see happen in Milwaukee's foster care system that would keep children safer.

*This question was asked to generate conversation in a non-threatening way.