Customer Service in Child Welfare

The term “customer” applied within child welfare may seem simplistic and a little off-putting to some child welfare professionals and families. In order for this application of a customer service framework to work in the child welfare field, we must recognize and honor the fact that child welfare work is different and much more complex than the traditional business of selling products or services. Foster, adoptive, and kinship families—and certainly child welfare staff—don’t usually perceive themselves as customers. Families’ roles are unique to child welfare and evolve over time, ideally, to becoming team members and partners. Knowing this, it is essential to respect and treat families as customers first, as a key step to helping develop trusting professional relationships and partnerships between families and an agency. In short, good customer service should be seen as the foundation to building relationships that result in safety, timely permanency, and well-being for the children served.

Each participant in the child welfare system, from the person who sweeps the floor, to the agency director, to the judge, to the foster, adoptive, or kinship family, must feel like a valued member of the team and take the act of providing good customer service to heart. They must all see themselves as empowered to achieve the collective goals and mission of ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being for children. Good customer service is everybody’s business. Good customer service is a continual process of improvement, touching all processes, relationships, and people in the agency and those served by it. It is more than just a one-time, feel-good initiative, or the responsibility of a single department or individual.

Why are Foster Parents Leaving?
Why are Foster Parents Leaving? What Foster Parents Want Their Agencies to Know.

A startling statistic: Almost half of foster parents quit within a year of their first placement. Twenty to twenty-five percent of foster parents quit each year and another quarter express uncertainty about continuing.

Below is a link to an article from Fostering Families Today magazine on how agencies can better assess, prepare, and support foster families.

“Why are Foster Parents Leaving? What Foster Parents Want Their Agencies to Know”
Every Month is Customer Service Month

In child welfare work, responsive, helpful, respectful service to all of our key partners should be a part of our work every day and every month. The following tips offer simple ways to infuse customer service principles into your work. To see the entire document with tips for every day of the month, click on the link at the bottom of the page.

Tips for Customer Service

“Think about your favorite place to shop or your favorite restaurant. What do they do to provide great customer service? What tips could you borrow from them to apply in your work with families?

“Has one of your colleagues been particularly helpful to you recently? Send them a quick thank you note by email and copy their supervisor. You can help create a culture that recognizes great customer service, even among colleagues.

“When talking to foster, adoptive, or kinship parents today, ask them, “What’s something my agency could do to help you feel like you are being served well?” Share the feedback with your colleagues.

“Start conversations with your co-workers at lunch about their best customer service experiences. Brainstorm ways that you can each incorporate those ideas into your work.

“Think about questions that prospective foster and adoptive parents ask you. Develop a short document with answers to these questions to share with all prospective parents.

“Think about terminology you use in your work that might be confusing for families. Brainstorm alternative terms to use to be more plainspoken and clear without being condescending.

“Take a few moments to celebrate your successes in providing good customer service and support to families.

Every Month is Customer Service Month