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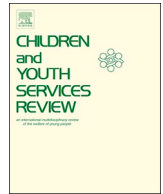
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False allegations and caseworker conflict: Stressors among long-term foster parents

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the wisdom and expertise of 19 foster parents who averaged 20 years of fostering experience to learn their most formidable challenges while interacting with the child welfare system as well as sources of support. Phenomenological methods revealed patterns in foster parents' shared experiences. Findings revealed two significant stressors linked to decision-making: 1) feeling disempowered and undervalued by child protection workers, and 2) coping with false allegations and the investigation process. System-level configuration of roles and power placed stakeholders in an adversarial rather than collaborative position. Their licensing social workers and other long-term foster parents were the strongest sources of support. Findings suggest that stressors may be alleviated with an inclusive and collaborative approach toward decision-making about child placement decisions, recurring trainings on the allegation process, assigning a support social worker during investigations, and cultivating an ongoing supportive community among foster parents.

1. Introduction

Providing the best care for children in foster care requires supporting those who care for them day-to-day. Fostering is demanding work and children and youth often remain in care for years; the median length of service for foster parents is 8 to 14 months (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). As such, in the U.S., there is an ongoing shortage of foster parents to take in a growing population of children needing of out-of-home care the U.S. has seen with increases every year from 2013 through 2017 and rates in 2018 only slightly lower than the previous year (ACF, 2017, 2019; Wiltz, 2019). Over the same time period, half the states in the U.S. also saw a decrease in non-relative foster care capacity (Chronicle of Social Change, 2018). Exacerbating the problem, retention rates are extraordinarily low, especially in the first two years of fostering, yet resources are disproportionately targeted toward recruitment rather than retention (Hendrix & Ford, 2003; Marcenko, Brennan, & Lyons, 2009; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003). As much as 30–40% of foster homes stop fostering each year (Haskins, Kohomban, & Rodriguez, 2019). This has a direct effect on placement stability for children. Transitions between homes are both common and stressful for children in care and contribute to their sense of loss and increased behavior problems (Nesmith, 2017; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007; Stott, 2012).

There is evidence to suggest that but a handful of foster parents provide the largest share of the fostering service over the years. Gibbs

and Wildfire (2007) studied retention in three U.S. states and found that in each state, a relatively small group of foster parents provided the majority of the foster homes for children. By two years, 68–81% of the foster parents had quit. Similarly, a recent longitudinal study revealed that 10% of the foster families disproportionately provided care for a greater number of children, requesting fewer placement moves from their homes, expressing interest in fostering siblings at pre-service, and fostering for a greater number of years, than the remaining 90% (Cherry & Orme, 2019).

There are myriad sources of stress for foster parents, coming from a range of places including their relationships with caseworkers, social workers, the children, biological parents, school teachers, etc. Various individuals connected to the child often hold different views about the goals of fostering and with that, varying expectations of foster parents (Nesmith, 2015). The participants from the present study emphasized two significant stressors regarding the foster parents' interface with the professional child welfare system: interactions with caseworkers regarding placement decisions and false allegations.

2. Foster parent stressors: Caseworkers and allegation investigations

Dissatisfaction with caseworkers. Parenting children with high needs is indeed a primary stressor for foster parents, but not always the tipping point that leads them to quit. Interactions between different

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stakeholders, decisions, and decision-making processes play a meaningful role in low retention. This is seen in a number of studies representing multiple countries.

Wilson et al. (2000) conducted a study in England and found that the most stressful events for foster parents included: placement disruptions, allegations, and disagreements with social service decisions. Thirty percent experienced at least one of these stressful events in the first year of fostering and by 12 years, that figure climbed to 81%. A Canadian study found similar results and a strong desire of foster parents to be viewed as members of the foster care team (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Another study conducted in Australia found that those most likely to consider discontinuing fostering were also the most dissatisfied with their caseworkers, their relationship with the foster care agency, feeling excluded from the child's planning process, and lack of ability to reach case workers (Randle, Ernst, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2017). Child factors did not alone explain that desire to discontinue; their satisfaction scores regarding the children in their homes were similar to that of other foster parents.

Research from Sweden reported that one of the reasons for placement breakdown was "...a difficult relationship with the social worker" and that foster parents needed individualized service that provided "the right supports at the right time" (Khoo & Skoog, 2014, p.255). A systematic review of past research found that "dealing with authorities" was a major stressor and questioned the assumption that parenting a traumatized child is more stressful than working with social services (Adams, Hassett, & Lumsden, 2018). Conversely, some research suggests that more resilient foster parents in the U.S. exhibit more empathy for everyone: foster children, biological parents, and caseworkers (Geiger, Piel, Lietz, & Julien-Chinn, 2016).

Unsubstantiated allegations. Allegations against foster parents can be a catalyst for quitting. Even when they are judged unsubstantiated, most foster parents quit fostering immediately or within a year of an allegation (Plumridge & Sebba, 2016). In a study of six agencies who experienced allegations, the foster parents described the investigation process as distressing and leading to "unresolved grief and bitterness, in spite of the fact that most investigations had ended over a year previously" (Minty & Bray, 2001, p.340). Some have argued that when there are allegations, the burden falls disproportionately on the foster parents,

The welfare department faces no reciprocal accountability. Although they are a party to the foster care contract, no charges are laid when they fail to follow their own Child Welfare Manual and Policies. (Groves & Kenny, 2011)

Plumridge and Sebba (2016) using data from England, reported that in some allegation cases, foster parents were cut off from support or information about the process from social workers during the investigation, leaving carers feeling "like a leper" in the words of one parent, or left entirely on their own and told they needed to "collect additional information before anyone could talk to the carers" (p.18). A review of empirical literature on allegations found that, excluding one outlier with extraordinary high rates, the rate of maltreatment allegations range from about 4 to 16% per year and the rates of substantiation tended to be half that or less (Biehal, 2014). These are annual rates; the chance of an allegation cumulates over time.

False allegations occur for many reasons. The children themselves typically enter foster care with a history of trauma which can affect both their recall and interpretation of events; new foster parents may be poorly matched with children and unprepared to handle challenging behaviors or not know when they should report incidents (Plumridge & Sebba, 2016). Though we tend to think of allegations as abuse reports, they can also be licensing violations that are more procedural as well.

The studies on this topic are conducted in many countries that use a foster care system, which speaks to the ubiquity of these problems. However, there are few qualitative studies on the topic, even fewer in the context of the U.S. child welfare system, which present the unique

perspectives of the foster parents themselves. Moreover, the vast majority of research on this topic draws on primarily white samples which may be reflective of the foster parenting population, but may not capture nuances specific to foster parents of color. Finally, most of the research is specific to the experiences and perceptions of relatively new foster parents and factors that lead them to quit in the first two-to-five years. The present study sought to examine the lived experiences of veteran foster parents of more than ten years and understand the challenges they face and why they continue to foster.

2.1. Foster parent retention

When foster parents and case managers work cooperatively together and negotiate decisions regarding the children, foster parents report higher levels of satisfaction (Delinger & Dorius, 2018). More specifically, timely responses from caseworkers, low-pressure interactions, and non-judgmental assistance have been found to be important to foster parents as they seek assistance with parenting (Delinger & Dorius, 2018). Those who foster the longest have also been found to be the most flexible about what kind of children they bring in (Cherry & Orme, 2019). One study of families involved in fostering for five or more years found that certain foster family characteristics contributed to their ability to push through difficult times, such as spirituality, use of humor, flexibility, or setting emotional boundaries (Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, & Piel, 2016). While five years is significant time fostering, there is little research on the insights and experiences of truly long-term foster parents who presumably have weathered a variety and sometimes recurring challenges: those who have fostered ten or more years. If in fact, as Cherry and Orme (2019) observed, a small percent do the bulk of the fostering, then we may stand to benefit from learning from veteran foster parents.

2.2. Theoretical framework

Foster parents must interact with, and are impacted regularly by, multiple systems. Systems theory recognizes that individuals exist inside of and interact with larger systems at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Each system plays a different role and has a unique as well as interactional influence on the individual or family. When an individual is faced with a challenge, it is therefore important to examine what other system-level factors contribute to it, or conversely, can yield positive change. In child welfare, a foster parent caring for a child may interact with multiple stakeholders that represent a variety of goals and interests (Randle et al., 2017). Social work also emphasizes a social systems perspective that suggests we cannot only work with the child (in this instance) but rather must recognize that supporting the foster parents contributes to supporting the child. This is a framework that extends well beyond the social work profession. It is with these perspectives that this study was conducted.

The research presented here was conducted from a lens of two core values and ethical principles of social work (NASW, 2017). While professionals from many disciplines work with foster parents, social workers are typically significant players and bring with them their professional values and ethics. Importantly, the social work core values and ethical principles are not limited to social work practice and are in fact applicable to any discipline, community, or person. The two that are applied here are: 1) the importance of relationships and 2) respect for the dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2017). The former is inherently an aspect of fostering children; the latter is necessary to maintain trust, meaningful support, and generate a sense of collegiality amongst all the stakeholders.

2.3. The present study

The present study aims to fill a gap in the information about long-term foster parent retention. Most of the current studies on this topic do

not reveal the nuances of interactions, emotions, and events that lead to underlying problems. For example while we know that foster parents experience stress stemming from tensions with caseworkers, child behavior issues, or from allegations, much of the research focuses on quantitative information: how many felt tension, how many stopped fostering due to allegations, and after what time period. There is much less information that explains the way these stressors unfold, what can be done to change that, and scant about the impact on the truly long-term foster parents, those fostering greater than ten years.

This study aimed to learn from seasoned foster parents, what they viewed as their most troubling stressors and how they found support and resilience to continue fostering. The research questions were the following: *What were the most significant challenges foster parents faced over time? How did they react to and interpret these stressful situations? What were their sources of support?*

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology examines “lived experiences” of participants with a goal to understand the (inherently subjective) perspectives of individuals, how they interpret their experiences and interactions, and how their individual stories align and diverge across themes that surfaced (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This is important because those individual interpretations likely impacted personal decisions to continue or stop fostering. Phenomenology also attends to the way the phenomena surface in the community of those affected by it. This works well with systems theory by examining individuals and their interactions with each other as well as the large systems in which they individuals belong (Englander, 2012).

The study protocol was approved by the authors’ university institutional review board. All participants underwent an informed consent process prior to participating in the study. There are no known conflicts of interest.

3.1. Sampling

The sampling strategy was purposive, seeking foster parents that had fostered more than ten years. This examines a duration much longer than other studies which do not have long-term samples averaging beyond ten years. The sample was drawn from a U.S. private non-profit foster home licensing agency that serves a large metropolitan area. Licensing agencies typically recruit, train, and monitor foster parents. They are responsible for ensuring that the homes meet the required standards, that the foster parents retain the required ongoing education, and support the foster parents with parenting. A disproportionate share of children in foster care in the U.S. are ethnic minorities, representing 65% of the child welfare population (KidsCount Data Center, 2018). In recognition of this, the agency placed a priority on locating foster parents of color. That is represented in the ethnic make-up of the sample.

The sampling frame consisted of all the foster parents who were currently licensed through this agency for a minimum of ten years and were currently caring for a child ($n = 25$). It was not required that their entire fostering experience was through the same agency. Nineteen were interviewed. Three expressed an interest but had scheduling conflicts during the study period. Two declined because they were overwhelmed with other commitments. One did not respond.

3.2. Data collection

In-depth, in-person qualitative interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide that addressed challenges experienced as foster parents over the years and sources of support. Participants were asked to share stories of why they originally opted to become a foster parent, challenges they faced, including whether they had ever

considered quitting, and what factors led to that. They were also asked what made them decide to continue fostering, what was the most helpful during stressful times, and who they turned to for support (if anyone). The interviews collected demographic about the about participants and basic information about their fostering history, duration of fostering, which agencies they worked with, number of children in the home, and any specialization in types of children they cared for.

Interviews were conducted at a private location of the participants’ choosing, most often in their homes or work offices. They averaged 45 min in length, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Although member-checking was not used with participants themselves, follow-up interviews with the current and previous executive directors were used to confirm the context, policies, and procedures that were raised in the interviews.

3.3. Analysis

Using the phenomenological approach, the interview process collected stories from the participants who experienced a common phenomenon – in this case, long-term foster parenting. Employing an open coding technique, categories of responses were identified in an iterative process that entailed first labeling possible codes, comparing them across interviews and within each interview, and refining them into themes that captured an underlying “essence” of their shared experiences. As part of this process, data (word choices, quotes) were used to explore points of divergence – when and how stories may have taken different paths. Finally, particular attention was paid to data that might disconfirm a pattern to ensure that the final themes were representative of the phenomena rather than idiosyncratic. The results yielded a composite description of shared phenomena, nuances reflecting variations in the ways participants experienced them, how they experienced them, and their underlying feelings and reactions about them.

3.4. Participants

The 19 participants each representing a unique foster home, and had fostered for an average of 19.8 years, ranging from 11 to 30 years. They cared for an average of three children in their home at a time. Some periodically cared for one or two additional children to provide temporary shelter as well. Unlike most studies on this topic which include disproportionately white foster parents, this sample was disproportionately comprised of people of color. This was reflective of the agency’s overall foster parent population, the result of intentional efforts to find families of color to care for children who themselves were disproportionately minorities. Fifteen (79%) parents identified as Black (African American or black immigrant) and the remaining identified as White. Nearly all were women; one father was interviewed. Twelve fostered as single parents, though this was not constant across the years as relationships ended or began. While some participants fostered any children, others worked with particular child characteristics based on gender, age, or needs.

3.5. Child protection caseworker context

These findings should be viewed within the system context. In the U.S., every state administers its child protection and foster care systems in its own way, though there are often similarities across states. In this study’s location, the county child protection office acts as the child placing authority. It holds legal responsibility for the child and assigns a caseworker to the child. Separately, a foster care licensing agency which can be run by the county or privately, oversees the foster homes and assigns a worker to the foster parents, often a licensed social worker. In the agency for this study, these were all licensed social workers. This agency is accountable to all the licensing regulations. These two sets of professionals have different roles, may not inherently work together, may not have shared goals, and often are not beholden

to the same set of policies. Unlike the licensing social workers who worked closely to support the foster parent, the child protection workers were exclusively responsible for the child.

4. Findings

Participants were asked to share fostering experiences and stories over the years, including any moments that led them to consider quitting, and what helped them through these difficult times. The participants identified several stressors. One of these, child behaviors, was so complex and substantial as to warrant a separate article (forthcoming). The two stressors presented here for which participants expressed the strongest feelings and devoted the most of their responses to discussing were strained interactions with child protection workers and investigations in response to allegations of either maltreatment or licensing violations. They highlighted the value of foster parent peers and licensing social workers as critical sources of support.

4.1. Tension with child protection workers is challenging and ubiquitous

When asked, “over the years, what would you say were the most challenging issues or situations you faced as a foster parent?” every interview participant named the tension with child protection workers that surfaced at some point(s) in their fostering career.

More specifically, they expressed strong sentiment that they were not valued for their expertise or familiarity with the child. This strain was the most pervasive theme, even after ten years of fostering. Every participant provided multiple examples of tension or conflict with child protection caseworkers that led them to consider quitting. While they had to work together, there were often disagreements about placement decisions in regard to reunification, adoption, or foster home transfers, as well as about day-to-day parenting decisions.

Participants shared many stories in which they believed they were advocating for the best interests of the child, but their opinions were ignored or not taken seriously. They told stories depicting their efforts to share their knowledge about the children in their homes and having that information dismissed. Many reported that when they tried to influence decisions about the children, they were informed that this overstepped boundaries of the foster parent role.

You have these troubles with the workers when you try to give suggestions or input, they think that someone is stepping on their toes or trying to get over their heads because they think they know best. And over the years I know that they do not. We spend much time, all the time with the kids. We know their needs. We know what we can do or try to get the help that we need to help the kids. But they don't want to hear it. So that's what I get frustrated about.

Participants encountered the most resistance to their input when they disagreed with a decision to have a child adopted. Often the foster parent concern was that the plan would split sibling groups – most often younger siblings were adopted while older ones were not. Other times, the foster parent was convinced the adoptive parents were unprepared for the child's challenges or that the child genuinely did not wish to be adopted into the home. They also observed pressure and haste toward adoptions that they did not believe was usually in the best interests of the child.

When the kids are up for adoption, they always say to us, “oh yeah, we're going to hear your opinion. We're going to respect your opinion. We're going to move nice and slow” and the minute they identify an adoptive family, everything changes. You know, they just run with it. They push the kid, you know? It's dealing with the bottom line. It's financial...sometimes it's different personalities and stuff that gets in the way of the best interests of the child. The “best interests of the child” are the five most misused words in this system as far as I'm concerned. Because that does not always happen - and that's a fact.

Some foster parents shared that they were explicitly asked by the caseworkers to discontinue offering advice or opinions. If they advocated too hard, foster parents said they were told to back off and at times even threatened that the child would be removed – an act they perceived as punishment without regard to the impact on the child.

Foster parents who come in and their job is to be the best parent they can be and to treat these children as they would their own. But the minute they do that and advocate for the kids the way that a parent would, that gets viewed as a problem.

These foster parents were concerned that the child's caseworkers were using the foster parent's attachment to the child as a means of controlling them because it was a point of vulnerability. In many cases, fear of having the child removed did indeed cause the foster parent to step back from advocacy, “that connection that you build with the child can be used as leverage to keep you in line. The threat of them being moved to a different home can keep you silent in a way that isn't healthy.”

Mixed messages from the caseworkers was another source of stress. When there was a crisis with a child in their home - for example a youth running away - foster parents were required to contact the child's caseworker immediately. This urgency led foster parents to anticipate that they would receive a quick response. When that did not occur, foster parents were confused by the unconflicting message –the incident was serious enough to be reported quickly lest risking consequences, yet did not yield a rapid response from the caseworker.

One foster parent expressed anger because she viewed slow responses as detrimental to a young child in her home. She explained that she observed warning signs the child was being abused during unsupervised visits with the biological parents. That is, prior to visits, the child began wetting the bed, had nightmares, increased aggression, and sometimes panic. She explained that eventually the parental abuse was officially investigated and substantiated, but only after more than a year of her trying to draw attention to the indicators. She summed her experience this way:

...all this abuse that happened to him was because the system didn't work. The people that were supposed to protect him, didn't protect him and had such slow responses. And the whole time we're in it, we're trying to wave our arms and say, “Hey! The house is on fire!” And then we're viewed as the problem. We're 'biased'.

Another foster parent summarized her experiences with false allegations and caseworker conflicts as traumatic, “we had no idea when we started fostering how much it would put us through the wringer. How much we would be traumatized by it.”

On the whole, the foster parents believed that their longevity serving the child welfare system afforded them a level of expertise unique to foster care and that their day-to-day interactions and observations with the children and youth made them the most-informed person at the table when decisions for children and youth were discussed. Ultimately, the foster parents indicated that they wanted their wisdom and expertise to be acknowledged, respected, and utilized.

4.2. Coping with false allegations

Participants were not asked specifically about allegations – only to describe challenges. It is therefore striking that every foster parent interviewed raised it as a primary stressor either directly (n = 17) or vicariously (n = 2). Foster parents described false maltreatment allegations, most often alleged by the child or the child's biological parents, as traumatizing. The two participants who had not personally experienced an allegation had a close friend or relative who had undergone a false allegation while fostering which they witnessed unfold.

Allegations were deeply distressing to foster parents. They experienced it as betrayal because they believed they were providing a good home for the children. Some felt blindsided – they had no idea there

were any problems until notified of the allegation. Being investigated was especially painful.

What it makes you feel like is a common criminal. Because you got to defend yourself. They come with investigating and all this stuff and you think, "they think I've committed a crime!"

Another who had fostered 27 years was indignant about the allegation. She shared her experience and reactions to it.

I had a kid who said I wasn't feeding him. Now this kid didn't look undernourished or anything like that. This kid was big as J and I put together...my kids'll tell you how much food I have here. If I took you all into my pantry, all y'all could bag up some groceries and it wouldn't even put a dent in my pantry. I'm serious. That's just kind of the way I am when it comes to food. Like one of my families had just come out of a shelter and I took them here and said, "just take what you want." So this allegation, it felt outrageous. To clear my name, what I ended up doing, thank God for cell phones, I started taking pictures every time he sat down to eat. And that's when I became believable, when they saw him sitting at my table, eating.

The allegations and subsequent investigations exacerbated the already-tense relationship with caseworkers. However, it was the impact on their relationship with the social worker assigned to them at the licensing agency that was hardest. The licensing social worker pulled back from all discussions with foster parents regarding the ongoing investigations, which is a common strategy to remain neutral. The foster parents, on the whole, found it to be isolating. From their perspective, the licensing social workers were their first line source of support and they felt abandoned in their time of greatest need. One explained, "It's just like you don't exist." Another said, "They just disappear on you. You're out there by yourself."

Foster parents were accustomed to turning to their licensing social workers to talk through and resolve their most challenging situations. They described feeling lost as to how to manage the allegation and afraid of the potential outcomes, even though they believed the allegations were unfounded. "It's kind of like you've been put in a boat and put out to sea. You have no paddle and no way to get back." They were unfamiliar with the finer details of the investigation process and were at a loss for how to navigate it without guidance from their social workers. Another foster parent described it this way,

It's like we done push her out there and she'll have to figure out how to get back. They shut you off just like you're on an island. They don't talk to you. They don't share information with you. They don't offer any support.

While they lamented a lack of information and advice at a time of greatest need, they were most disturbed the loss of human connections. They devoted substantial time to discussing how abandoned they felt, by those they had counted on most.

So I had an allegation and nothing came of it but I didn't like the agency's attitude that they just disappear on you. You're out there by yourself...I didn't like the "we can't talk to you and so you just sit there by yourself." And yet, if the county was so worried about my parenting, they never took the kids out of my home during the whole thing.

When asked how they would prefer allegations be handled, participants remarked that they wanted to know that their social workers believed in them and would back them.

Somewhere in there, foster parents need to know: We will stand by you. We will have your back. We will not stand by while they hang you out to dry when the going gets tough.

After decades of work with the same social worker for many of them, they felt that the social workers knew they were good parents and believed their innocence should be self-evident. One suggestion was to work collaboratively as a team.

I think if you have the team approach, then you have the team approach. You just work through whatever it is. But you don't stop talking to people.

All the participants acknowledged that they understood the intention was not to leave them hanging but to reduce real or perceived bias in the investigation. However, this was not enough to quell their feelings of abandonment.

4.3. The value of peer and social worker support

The participants noted the importance of support to help them navigate caseworker conflict, the pain of having children suddenly moved, and investigations. The most significant source was from their licensing social workers and other foster parents. They believed that a quality social worker was timely and responsive to messages, took time to listen to their concerns, and valued the knowledge they brought to the table. They were especially appreciative of social workers who were accessible quickly in the event of crises.

A lot of times it's the [social] worker that's supportive. When you need something they're there. Some of them will tell you, don't call me after 4:30. But some will say, "here's my cell phone. Call me anytime."

Another explained it this way, "the agency works really well with us. I know I could call [social worker] anytime just to vent if I needed to." It mattered that the foster parent believed the social worker genuinely cared about them and their overall wellbeing.

I absolutely know that I would not have stuck with this if it weren't for [licensing social worker]. I truly believe that she wants our best. She doesn't just want to keep us as foster parents, but she truly cares about the wellbeing of our family.

Understanding their unique personalities and needs as individuals mattered as well. "You need a social worker who can understand what makes you tick so they can help you get what you need... so they can help you handle the problems you encounter."

Most of the participants indicated they were open to criticism when it came from a supportive source. In fact, some very much welcomed the feedback, especially when they were too close to the situation to assess it clearly.

Sometimes we get so enmeshed with the kids that the lines of what we need is a blur. You need somebody to say, "whoa! You do this and this and this and if you don't do this, then how are you going to get that?" So you need a social worker who can do that.

Another parent put it succinctly, "I know we would not be fostering if it weren't for my [agency name] social worker." Mutual support was imperative as well. Most of the participants connected with other foster parents early in their fostering careers as a result of agency efforts such as networking breakfasts and community-like events. In difficult times, they reminded each other that the rewards come later.

And [another foster parent] used to say all the time when I'd say, "I don't think I'm making a difference," she'd say, "B, you may not think so right now, but somewhere along the line when they get to be adults, they'll appreciate what you've done." So I just keep pushing.

5. Limitations

By limiting the sample to long-term foster parents, the study only portrays perspectives of those who did not quit. Those who do give up fostering may have different experiences. The foster parents were all recruited through a single licensing agency, which can limit the breadth of experiences represented. That said, about a third of the sample had previous fostering experience with other licensing agencies, ranging from 3 to 18 years, which was also reflected in their interviews.

In the phenomenology method, participants are reflecting on past

experiences, often from the lens of their current feelings about them. Because allegation investigations are often traumatic, it is possible that participants are more likely to remember the negative or painful aspects of them. Phenomenology also falls prey to typical qualitative research limitations such as difficulty assessing validity when regarding individuals' highly subjective experiences and interpretations of those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). While revealing unique perspectives are an advantage, at the same time, it raises a question of generalizability. Phenomenological research findings maybe generalized to situations or settings that have in common a substantial portion of those qualities in the research setting (Morales, 2002), in this case, non-relative long-term foster parents in an urban environment.

Although ethnicity was not a focus of the study and not raised by participants, 79% of the participants, identified as Black, a reflection of concerted efforts by the agency to build a community of foster parents who are black, Indigenous, and people of color. In the phenomenology method, the researcher allows the participant to guide the direction of the narrative after open-ended questions and prompts from the interview guide. However, given the pervasiveness of structural racism throughout the U.S. including the child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2016), questions integrating race and ethnicity likely would have illuminated other contributing factors to many stories told here.

6. Discussion

The findings here present a unique perspective - firsthand accounts from veteran foster parents averaging 20 years and collectively representing 376 years of fostering experience. Seventy-nine percent of the participants identified as Black – something seldom seen in foster parent research. In light of a national foster parent shortage in the U.S., this study sought to identify challenges and wisdom from long-term foster parents. While much attention is given to recruiting new foster parents, it is essential to nurture and support them in that role to retain them.

These findings demonstrate that long-term foster parents continue to report some of the same stressors as those just launching their fostering career. Foster care is a system that, at its core, is centered on relationships. This study found that the nature and path of relationships with involved professionals served both as a challenge and solution for retaining foster parents, depending on the professional's role.

6.1. Relations with child protection caseworkers

Strained relations with child protection caseworkers and the investigation process were raised by nearly every participant, not only as significant stressors, but in their words, as traumatic. As the individuals with arguably the most interaction and contact with the children, foster parent perspectives are critical, yet, as reported here and in other studies, their knowledge, experience, wisdom, and opinions are frequently disregarded (Eaton & Caltabiano, 2009; Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013).

The foster parents were most dissatisfied that their expertise was not valued and that they were left out of the decision-making process. This is in line with past research, suggesting it is a pervasive problem (Ahn, Greeno, Bright, Hartzel, & Reiman, 2017; Geiger et al., 2013; Khoo & Skoog, 2014). One study of over 4000 foster parents in the UK found that when there was an unplanned placement disruption, 68% reported that they were not given an opportunity to provide input into the child's subsequent placement (Lawson & Cann, 2019). Cooley, Thompson, and Wojciak (2017) found that foster parents felt disrespected, unappreciated, and like they were "kicked around" as if they meant "nothing" to those working in the system (p.38–39). Most of these studies, however, included new foster parents; after two decades of service, one might anticipate that foster parents would gain a foothold at the decision-making table. This was not the case in this study.

One argument attributes this problem to a power imbalance in which those with the most power spend the least amount of time with

the child. Groves and Kenny (2011) explained,

[Foster parents] get caught in a power struggle with the DFCS over what is considered best for the children in their care. They will lose this battle, because the children are officially wards of the state, and even long-term foster parents have no legal standing. Although foster parents do all the hard work, they have a minimal say in planning the child's future.

The structure of the system may in fact create an inherent tension between foster parents and child protection caseworkers. Child protection workers typically are accountable for the child - not the foster parent or foster home - and have little or no obligation to the foster parents. For any given child placed in foster care, there are multiple stakeholders involved, each with their own goals, responsibilities, and vantage point regarding the child's substitute care trajectory (Nesmith, 2013). Unfortunately, there is not always mechanism in place to help the players work collaboratively rather than adversarially.

6.2. Supportive relationships

Past research that found strained relationships with child protection caseworkers recommend that foster parents need emotional support, trust, and recognition giving foster parents more control over decisions individualized support and training to manage expectations (Randle et al., 2017; Cooley; MacGregor; Eaton & Caltabiano). The participants argued that other foster parents and social workers from their licensing agency were important sources of support. They attributed much of their fostering longevity to social workers who came to know them as individuals and demonstrated genuine care about their wellbeing. This of course depends on low social worker turnover as well. Foster parent peers were also vital because they intimately understood the fostering experience. It is worth noting that the long-term peer support did not occur by accident amongst this group. The licensing agency established support groups, breakfasts, and other events early on with the intention of cultivating enduring relationships. As such, several of the participants had decades-long friendship with other foster parents.

6.3. The impact of allegation investigations on foster Parent-Social worker relations

Foster parents typically also have an assigned social worker of their own, and in this U.S. state, these were the licensing workers. Licensing workers have regular contact with foster parents and depend on a positive rapport with them. The foster parents shared that they appreciated the responsiveness, availability, and general positive regard they received from the licensing social workers when they needed assistance and that this was integral to their fostering longevity.

Yet, herein lies a conundrum. The more close and attuned to the family's needs the licensing social worker, the more painful the investigation process when they pulled back, as has been the common procedure in this region and some others as well (Plumridge & Sebba, 2016). The long-term foster parents in this project were proud of their parenting skills, highlighting the care and compassion they felt toward the children and youth in their homes. They believed that the social workers knew them well enough that they should, without hesitation, accept their version of events. At the same time, the licensing agency has an ethical obligation to conduct an unbiased investigation. Therefore, the very nature of the support – the close connections – was also the basis for feeling betrayed or hurt during allegation investigations. A lesson learned at this agency (see recommendations section), is that some policies do permit other ways to conduct an unbiased investigation.

6.4. Social work professional values on relationships

Two core values and ethical principles of social work are the importance of relationships and dignity and worth of the person, both of

which appear to need shoring up for work with foster parents (NASW, 2017). Social work also emphasizes a social systems perspective that suggests we cannot only work with the child (in this instance) but rather must recognize that supporting the foster parents contributes to supporting the child.

It is not unusual that child protection workers are not licensed social workers in the U.S. Twenty-two states, including that of this study, have an exemption for social work licensing in state government positions and 16 states have similar exemptions for local government (Association of Social Work Boards, 2018; Minnesota Statutes, 2018). While all the licensing workers in this study held social work degrees, the same cannot be said for the child protection workers. This is worthy of future research - to examine whether there is a difference in relationships with foster parents among child protection workers who are trained licensed social workers versus those trained in other disciplines.

6.5. Recommendations

Improve Collaboration. Several participants envisioned a team approach in which their cumulative fostering wisdom as well as intimate knowledge of a particular child was sought and carried weight in decisions that significantly impacted children. Such an approach would require that foster parents recognize that the child protection workers too have practice wisdom to contribute, coupled with other constraints they must adhere to.

Recommendations in much of the research on this topic tend to center on how to support foster parents, or that the process should be more collaborative, but often with little guidance on how to reduce tension with the child's child protection worker. A systems perspective would suggest change among multiple stakeholders as well as further upstream to include caseworkers, procedures, and possibly agency culture (Randle et al., 2017). Changing an entire system to be more collaborative is a daunting endeavor at best. However, there are efforts currently underway to do just that. For example, the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), launched by the Youth Law Center, is working to bring together public and private foster care stakeholders in a given state or jurisdiction to build a team-oriented approach in which foster parents have a voice in decisions that affect them and the children, and clear and agreed-upon expectations across stakeholders (QPI, 2018). QPI is currently underway in ten states, though still in the nascent stages of development in Minnesota Statutes (2018).

Offer Recurring Trainings Exclusively on Allegation Investigations. The frequency, timing, duration, depth, and level of interaction in trainings matters greatly. Although allegations are usually discussed in preservice trainings, this is a time when prospective foster parents are inundated with new information. Given their frequency, it may be beneficial to offer repeated trainings to foster parents at any stage of their fostering career that focus specifically on allegations that includes seasoned foster parents who share their personal experiences.

Examine policies closely. While in many locations it is standard procedure to require temporary suspension of communication between the foster parents and their licensing worker during an investigation, in fact it may not be required; it is worth looking into the actual local policies. For example, the participating agency's executive directors shared that, upon closer examination, they learned that government policies were more flexible than was reflected in practice and did allow for the licensing worker to remain in usual contact with the foster parent and to even to discuss the allegation, as long as they were not the individual conducting the investigation. The agency then adjusted their practice accordingly. Because there can be nuances specific to a particular case, it is also recommended that the social worker/caseworker regularly check in about what information can be shared with foster parents as the case progresses, to help prevent foster parents from feeling isolated (Plumridge & Sebba, 2016).

Build a community of support. Given that foster parents are most

likely to quit in the first two years, this is the most essential time for social workers to be as responsive and supportive as possible and to facilitate foster parent connections with each other. The participating foster parents were emphatic that they need ways to connect with and build relationships with other foster parents. Nearly all of them shared that the support networks they developed early on with other foster parents, often during preservice training, had long-lasting positive influences on their decisions about continue fostering through difficult times.

While this agency made intentional efforts to develop a community of support amongst their foster families, for organizations that do not have such programming in place, there are models for developing formal mentoring. These may entail careful matching, establishing reciprocal mentoring and frequent meeting schedules, and resource manuals (Miller et al., 2017). Another approach that shows promise is the Mockingbird model. It offers an innovative approach that establishes a foster home that serves as a hub to a set of other foster homes; the hub not only provides respite such as sleepovers but also advice, mentoring, and training (McDermid, Baker, Lawson, & Holmes, 2016). Its UK Mockingbird model has shown that the hub became a comfortable "second home" to both foster parents and the children, and greater retention.

Another consideration is to parallel the treatment (therapeutic) foster care approach. Here, the foster parents are integral to implementing and sustaining the child's treatment plan and therefore it is imperative that they work closely and cooperatively with child's therapeutic team (Seibert, Feinberg, Ayub, Helburn, & Gibbs, 2018). A modified version could be implemented for standard foster care, though it would still require efforts to build trust and cooperation.

Future Research. A follow-up study to this one, especially with the same participants, that delves into the role of race and ethnicity would be a worthwhile endeavor. It is possible that race and ethnicity are relevant factors in the phenomena that the participants shared. In the licensing agency's commitment to recruiting parents of color to become foster parents, they worked to create a supportive community. That process may be worth examining as well.

7. Conclusion

The child welfare system cannot adequately resolve a shortage problem without sustaining those already fostering. This may require a system-level solution that draws on the expertise of those educated as social workers in the systems perspectives, that cedes some decision-making power to foster parents who have the most contact with the children, and recognizes the primacy of relationships amongst all the stakeholders.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ande Nesmith: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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