



# Idaho's Strategies to Improve the Foster Home-to-Child Ratio: A Case Study

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The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) initiative, [A Home for Every Child](#), is designed to help achieve at least a one-to-one ratio of foster homes available for children and youth in foster care, where the numerator is the number of foster homes available and the denominator is the number of children in care. The goal may be accomplished by tailoring strategies to recruit prospective foster parents, supporting kinship and nonrelative caregivers, improving timely permanency, and reducing entries into foster care. This case study is part of a series designed to support continuous learning efforts under A Home for Every Child by examining states with some of the highest home-to-child ratios in 2025 (based on available data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and The Imprint's *Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families*). The series highlights policies and practices that can make more foster homes available and reduce the number of children in foster care.

## KEY POINTS

- The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW) reported that ongoing partnerships with courts, community partners, and the state legislature have helped achieve the department's positive home-to-child ratio.
- IDHW uses technology to streamline communication with foster parents and among staff at the department. In recent years, IDHW has created an online portal to improve foster parents' application and licensing processes. In addition, IDHW has begun recording home study visits with prospective parents and using artificial intelligence (AI) to draft summaries before submission to the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) to reduce burden on families and staff.
- To reduce the need for foster care, IDHW offers tiered prevention services to connect families with community-based resources tailored to individual family needs. IDHW reported that more than 90 percent of families that use prevention services avoid further involvement with the child welfare system.
- IDHW uses predictive analytics to assess risk and support decisions around investigation, allowing the department to focus investigative resources more efficiently.

## IDAHO'S CHILD WELFARE AND FOSTER CARE CONTEXT

In Idaho, child welfare is overseen by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW). Within IDHW, the Child, Youth, and Family Services Area deputy director administers the state's child welfare services. As of 2025, Idaho had the highest home-to-child ratio (0.93) across all states (Table 1), as calculated using [AFCARS data](#) on the number of children in care at the end of FY2024 and the number of foster homes in 2025 from The Imprint's *Who Cares* dataset. It experienced one of the greatest improvements in its ratio between 2020 and 2025 (+0.21).<sup>3,4</sup> Idaho's foster care population decreased from 1,530 children in 2023 to 1,258 children in 2025 and the state's foster care rate also declined between 2023 and 2025, from 3.2 to 2.5 per 1000 children. As shown in Table 1, on average, children and youth spent 528 days in foster care, compared to a national average of over 700 days. Nearly 30 percent of children and youth in foster care in Idaho were placed with kin or relatives, compared to nearly 40 percent nationally.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. Key foster care measures for Idaho compared to national numbers**

| Measure*                                                   | Idaho | United States |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Total children and youth in foster care                    | 1,258 | 331,747       |
| Per 1,000 children in the state                            | 2.5   | 4.09          |
| Foster care entries                                        | 922   | 175,008       |
| Per 1,000 children in the state                            | 1.93  | 2.31          |
| Foster care exits                                          | 924   | 169,927       |
| Ratio of entries to exits                                  | 1.00  | 1.03          |
| Mean time in foster care (days)                            | 528   | 711           |
| Percent of children and youth placed with kin or relatives | 29    | 39            |
| Home-to-child ratio                                        | 0.93  | 0.57          |

\* Numbers are as of September 30, 2025, and entries and exits are for fiscal year 2025. The ratio includes children in care at the end of 2024 and the number of foster homes in 2025.

Sources: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Dashboard 2026, Radel 2026

## STRATEGIES TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF FOSTER HOMES

This section describes the strategies IDHW uses to increase the number of foster homes, including strategies for recruitment, licensing, and foster caregiver support and retention.<sup>a</sup>

### Identifying and recruiting prospective foster parents

IDHW uses a combination of family finding efforts, targeted marketing, strategic faith-based and community partnerships, resource peer mentors, and improved data tracking to identify and recruit caregivers.

- **Creating a family locate team.** To reduce the number of new foster homes that foster care agencies must recruit, IDHW first seeks to place youth in homes of people they know, like relatives. IDHW has a specific family locate team that focuses on locating family members.
- **Refreshing traditional marketing efforts.** In recent years, IDHW launched a new advertising campaign, using billboards, bus wraps, and messaging to make families across the state aware of the department's efforts to recruit more homes for children and youth in care. The new materials highlight the highest-need age group (teenagers) and included specific messaging for kin and relatives.
- **Cultivating faith-based partnerships.** IDHW values partnerships with faith-based organizations, universities, and community organizations to recruit and retain foster parents. IDHW noted that

<sup>a</sup>More information about Idaho's ratio and its recruitment strategies can also be found in this [Heritage Foundation article](#).

Idaho's strong church networks have made churches a top referral source for prospective foster parents. Church groups are also a key part of IDHW's prevention efforts, described below.

- **Introducing resource peer mentors.** IDHW identifies and contracts with experienced foster parents in each region of the state to serve as resource peer mentors. These mentors use their knowledge of their communities to support prospective and newly licensed foster parents by sharing resources, addressing questions and concerns, and drawing on their own experiences as foster parents. Resource peer mentors also help recruit foster parents at Fostering Family Forum meetings.
- **Examining foster parent recruitment data.** IDHW regularly reviews data from recruitment contractors to examine how prospective parents move through the recruitment pipeline from expressing interest, to applying, to becoming licensed foster parents. This has helped IDHW identify successful recruitment strategies.

### Foster parent licensing and approval processes

The department has streamlined foster parent licensing and approval by revising state rules, reducing unnecessary requirements, and modernizing the application process.

- **Updating state rules for licensing foster parents.** In recent years, IDHW updated foster care licensing rules to remove barriers, including language that could potentially discourage prospective foster parents. For example, in the updated licensing rules, IDHW reduced pre-service training from approximately 24 hours to 10 hours and developed a tiered approach to training. Tier 1 includes virtual and self-paced introductory courses. Tier 2 offers more in-depth subject matter and is also virtual and self-paced. Tier 3 offers in-person or hybrid training focused on a specific topic.
- **Developing an online portal to streamline licensing processes.** To reduce paperwork burden for prospective foster parents, IDHW moved away from using PDF forms to using an online portal in which foster parents can complete their applications. Licensing staff review applications before moving them into the state's comprehensive child welfare information system (CCWIS). Licensed foster families could maintain access to the portal to complete additional requirements. The online portal, which provides a single location for tracking licensing requirements, was developed with input from foster parents and licensing staff.
- **Using AI to reduce notetaking burden.** For foster home studies, the department is testing use of AI to record, transcribe, and draft summaries for foster home study interviews. Licensing staff review the notes for accuracy before entering information into the CCWIS.

### Supporting and retaining caregivers

To retain foster families, IDHW provides clinical services, connects foster parents with ongoing resources, collects timely feedback on their experiences, recognizes foster parents' contributions, and monitors retention trends.

- **Providing clinical and emergency mental health services to help stabilize placements.** IDHW provides clinician coaches to support foster families in managing behavioral symptoms of children and youth in their care. Clinicians are able to provide in-home, one-on-one coaching to caregivers and children as needed. Foster families can also access a 24/7 helpline for immediate assistance during crises.
- **Communicating with foster families and sharing resources.** IDHW sends a biweekly "In Your Community" email detailing local activities and resources for foster families. IDHW hosts a monthly Fostering Connections Foster Family forum, where foster parents can engage with peer mentors, ask

questions, and share stories. IDHW also provides a Resource Family Handbook with resources and suggestions for foster families.

- **Developing other community-based partnerships.** Fostering Family Adventures is a partnership between IDHW and state parks that brings foster families together for outdoor events to increase informal and formal support. In addition, the state's Community Builders initiative engages volunteers and communities. The initiative developed a guidebook for community partners to share resources on how to support current foster parents.
- **Collecting foster parents' feedback.** IDHW administers a "Five Star" foster parent survey in addition to its in-depth annual fostering survey that assesses each phase of the foster family experience. The "Five Star" parent survey is emailed and texted to foster parents shortly after children leave their homes. It assesses the family's experience with their placement and with IDHW. The deputy division administrator follows up directly with any foster parents who provide ratings of one to three on a scale of five to better understand concerns and offer support; the administrator also shares this feedback with caseworkers. IDHW staff noted an increase in scores and response rates since the implementation of the survey.
- **Recognizing and thanking foster parents.** IDHW emphasizes the importance of maintaining regular communication and engagement with foster families through personalized appreciation efforts. For example, the department sends approximately 100 handwritten thank-you cards each month to foster parents approaching annual re-licensure. IDHW also noted that foster parents play an important role in recruiting new foster parents.
- **Examining data.** IDHW tracks the median length of time families foster to understand foster parent turnover and retention of experienced foster parents.

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## Interviewee insight

*"Retention equals recruitment too, because one of the best channels you have to get the word out there on what it's like to be a foster parent is foster parents."*

- IDHW staff member

## STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

This section describes the strategies IDHW uses to reduce the number of children in foster care, including preventing entry into care and improving permanency for youth in care.<sup>b</sup>

### Prevention strategies

IDHW uses a tiered prevention approach to connect families with community-based resources. The department encourages mandated reporters to connect families with these supports when appropriate. IDHW has also expanded its prevention workforce and uses predictive analytics to strengthen the assessment of family risk.

- **Implementing a tiered approach to prevention services.** The first tier includes a non-emergency navigation service that connects families with community resources. In the second tier, families can sign up for case management and navigation services. IDHW reported that more than 90 percent of families using these services did not subsequently enter the child welfare system. At the third tier, Idaho uses a platform into which child welfare staff and nonprofits can enter family needs. Nearby churches receive notification of families' needs so they can help provide services to address them.

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<sup>b</sup>More information about Idaho's prevention and permanency strategies can also be found in this [Heritage Foundation article](#).

- **Increasing the number of staff that provide prevention and clinical services.** Since Idaho’s 2025 legislative session, IDHW has increased the number of staff who provide prevention and clinical services. The 63 state employees hired since 2025 have been assigned to work for services such as home visiting, parenting, mental health, and substance use to help children remain safely at home.
- **Moving from mandated reporting to empowered support.** To help reduce the number of families that are unnecessarily flagged for the child welfare system, IDHW distributes information directing schools, medical professionals, and law enforcement to use the 211 care line when students and families need assistance. IDHW asks that these community members only make serious reports of risk to IDHW.
- **Using predictive analytics to assess risk.** When screening cases, workers use a risk assessment to support decisions around whether a higher level of investigation is needed. IDHW reported that about 85 percent of families assessed for screening were ultimately determined to be safe, suggesting an opportunity to more effectively and efficiently use investigative resources.

### Permanency strategies

To promote permanency, IDHW examines early reunification indicators, increased case review and oversight, and provides adoption and post-adoption mental health supports.

- **Examining early reunification indicators.** To better inform their judicial partners, IDHW shared two years of case data so court partners could understand which families may be more likely to reunify and help move children to permanency sooner. After sharing these data, Idaho found that the time from removal to reunification decreased from over 10 months to about eight months.
- **Increasing the frequency of family court reviews.** In July 2025, the Idaho legislature updated the frequency of court reviews from every six months to every two months after the initial six-month review. IDHW staff reported that these more frequent reviews helped create a greater sense of urgency and provided families with more frequent contact. They noted that judges have also found the more frequent reviews to be beneficial.
- **Providing adoption and post-adoption mental health services.** Like the foster parent retention strategies noted above, clinicians assist with stabilization to avoid any possible disruption in adoptions. They also work closely with Medicaid partners, behavioral health partners, and managed care administrators to ensure services are available to adoptive families and children and youth who exit care to adoption.

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### Interviewee insight

*“Child welfare isn’t the only [agency involved with] kids coming into care. Law enforcement [and] the courts are really critical parts of who ends up getting our services... We’re partnering to try to change the culture or understanding of the options and how we can go about [meeting] the needs of these families”*

- IDHW staff member

### CONCLUSION

Idaho’s experience demonstrates that improving the home-to-child ratio requires a comprehensive strategy that both increases the number of available foster homes and reduces the number of children entering or remaining in foster care. The state invests in recruiting foster parents through community-based outreach, faith-based partnerships, dedicated regional recruiters, and peer mentors, while also focusing on retention through clinical supports, ongoing communication, timely feedback mechanisms, and recognition of foster families. At the same time, Idaho has expanded prevention services, leveraged predictive analytics and resource navigation tools to connect families with supports earlier, and strengthened efforts to achieve timely

permanency. Together, these approaches have helped Idaho increase the availability of family-based care and reduce pressure on the foster care system, offering valuable lessons for states seeking to improve their own home-to-child ratios.

## A Home for Every Child Case Studies: Methods

**State recruitment and selection.** The study team selected states from those with the highest home-to-child ratios in 2025. They examined changes in home-to-child ratios between 2020 and 2025 and selected states to ensure variation in key characteristics, including the number of children in care, geographic region, and child welfare administrative structure.

**Data collection.** The study team conducted semi-structured interviews with five states. For each state, a two-person study team conducted one to four interviews with key child welfare stakeholders (such as prevention and permanency directors, or foster parent recruitment coordinators). They recorded and transcribed interviews using Microsoft Teams. Following data collection, they cleaned, de-identified, and synthesized notes into a single state-level summary organized by interview topic.

**Analysis.** The study team analyzed the cross-interview summary to identify key themes and strategies and populate the case study template.

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