



Vermont'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. This 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

- Vermont's Family Services Division (FSD) uses tailored marketing and outreach campaigns to build a pool of caregivers who can meet the needs of children and youth in foster care.
- FSD emphasizes providing relationship-based support for foster parents, using local staff to build connections with families. Local staff gather feedback to better understand caregiver needs and retain more caregivers.
- FSD has streamlined licensing and approval practices and increased flexibility, with the goals of reducing non-safety-related barriers and expediting the approval of kinship care and traditional foster homes.
- FSD refined its risk assessment practices and has increased its accountability, consistency, and transparency in safety decisions.
- FSD uses public-private partnerships to promote reunification and permanency.

VERMONT'S CHILD WELFARE AND FOSTER CARE CONTEXT

Within Vermont's Department for Children and Families, the Family Services Division (FSD) provides child welfare services. As of 2025, Vermont had a home-to-child ratio of 0.88, above the national average of 0.57 (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.¹ Vermont's foster care population decreased from 1,078 children and youth in 2020 to 828 children and youth in 2025. However, despite the

overall reduction in the number of children and youth in care, annual entries into foster care increased from 436 to 475 children and youth between 2023 and 2025.² Potential factors influencing Vermont’s entry rates are discussed in the section of this brief about prevention strategies. As shown in Table 1, on average, children and youth in Vermont spent 681 days in foster care, compared to the national average of over 700 days. Over 40 percent of children and youth in foster care in Vermont were placed with kin or relatives, compared to nearly 40 percent nationally.

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

Measure*	Vermont	United States
Total children and youth in foster care	828	331,747
Per 1,000 children in the state	7.19	4.09
Foster care entries	475	175,008
Per 1,000 children in the state	4.2	2.31
Foster care exits	501	169,927
Ratio of entries to exits	0.95	1.03
Mean time in foster care (days)	681	711
Percent of children and youth placed with kin or relatives	44	39
Home-to-child ratio	0.88	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 FSD uses to increase the number of foster homes, including strategies for recruiting, licensing, supporting, and retaining foster parents.

Identifying and recruiting prospective foster parents

FSD has focused on marketing and media campaigns, word-of-mouth referrals, and family-finding efforts to identify and recruit traditional and kinship caregivers.

- **Tailoring marketing and media campaigns.** Marketing and media activities have been important outreach tools in FSD’s recruitment strategy. FSD contracts with multimedia market recruitment campaign experts to maintain and expand its community marketing presence, which the division views as important for elevating the needs of children and youth in foster care. FSD’s central office also supports several tailored recruitment campaigns. Staff identify specific populations in need of homes and develop campaign materials, including email distribution lists, recruitment messages, and follow-up materials. FSD identified positive caregiver experiences and word-of-mouth referrals as key recruitment pathways in Vermont’s rural communities.
- **Using a family network search when relatives do not identify themselves.** FSD noted that kinship caregivers are more likely to come forward on their own than to be identified through the division’s traditional recruitment efforts. When kinship caregivers do not step forward in response to the immediate family need, the division uses several family-finding tools, including ecomaps and genograms developed

Interviewee insight

“Happy foster parents talk about their experience, and that is the primary way that the division is recruiting.”

- FSD staff

with birth parents, to identify relatives and fictive kin (for example, a former teacher or coach) in the family's support network.

Foster parent licensing and approval processes

FSD streamlined foster parent licensing and approval by offering flexible licensing practices for kinship caregivers and reducing administrative barriers to licensing.

- **Providing flexibility in the licensing process for kinship caregivers.** FSD has reduced non-safety-related licensing barriers for kinship placements while maintaining safety requirements. For example, licensing authorities can waive requirements related to sleeping arrangements, such as rules about the number of children or youth in a bedroom. FSD also works creatively to address financial barriers for kinship caregivers, providing financial support for needs such as smoke detectors, fencing, or other home modifications that might otherwise prevent approval.
- **Streamlining licensing through an assurance-based approach.** FSD prioritizes caregiver assurances and self-reported information over extensive upfront verification requirements for both kinship and traditional foster care applicants. For example, FSD licensing staff ask applicants about their health history and any significant medical concerns but do not require prospective caregivers to obtain a separate medical examination solely for foster care licensing. According to FSD, this approach has helped expedite foster home approval while maintaining safety standards.

Supporting and retaining caregivers

To retain foster families, FSD provides relationship-based support and flexible financial assistance to help caregivers meet the needs of children and youth and sustain placements over time.

- **Emphasizing relationship-based support to foster parents.** FSD employs staff called local resource coordinators to build and maintain relationships with caregivers. These staff work closely with caregivers to understand their family circumstances, motivations for caregiving, and capacity to care for youth with specific needs. Resource coordinators in some districts have recently begun conducting face-to-face visits with caregivers to strengthen relationships and gain a deeper understanding of their circumstances. FSD also administers an annual caregiver satisfaction survey to assess what is working well, identify caregiver challenges, and inform efforts to support caregivers and youth.
- **Establishing reimbursement based on children's needs.** FSD provides kinship caregivers and traditional foster parents with the same reimbursement rates, ensuring that relatives who care for children and youth receive the same financial support as other foster parents. In addition, FSD uses a caregiver responsibility form to assess children's and youths' complex medical or developmental needs and their need for enhanced caregiving, allowing reimbursement rates to better reflect caregiving demands. Establishing sufficient rates at the time of adoption or guardianship has helped FSD determine the amount of ongoing assistance caregivers receive.

Interviewee insight

"If [foster parents] feel seen, heard, and respected, they're going to move mountains for these kids."

- FSD staff member

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

This section describes the strategies FSD uses to reduce the number of children in foster care, including preventing entry into care and improving permanency for children and youth in care.

Prevention strategies

Over the past 10 years, legislative and community responses to two child fatalities and the opioid epidemic contributed to an increase in the number of children and youth entering care. In 2021, the Vermont legislature commissioned a [child custody rate study](#)⁴ analyzing why Vermont's foster care entry rate consistently trended above the national average. In response to study findings, FSD implemented practice and policy changes designed to strengthen decision making, improve safety planning practices, support learning and system improvement, and increase the use of voluntary prevention services.

- **Strengthening practice guidance based on the structured decision making (SDM) tool.** The legislative study found there was significant subjectivity in how safety and risk were assessed through the SDM tool when determining decisions related to child custody. In response, FSD worked with a nonprofit consultancy to clarify definitions for specific safety indicators and raised the threshold associated with indicators, such as emergency removal due to immediate safety issues, requiring stronger evidence before supporting a removal decision. FSD implemented mandatory consultations with child safety managers when safety planning, removal, or out-of-home placement were recommended. FSD also trained judges and attorneys on how to use the SDM to promote greater accountability, consistency, and transparency across the child welfare system.
- **Building a learning and safety culture through critical incident review.** FSD has worked to build an organizational culture centered on learning and improvement. As part of its participation in a child welfare quality improvement collaborative, FSD developed an approach to critical incident review that used the Safe Systems Improvement Tool. This structured review tool helps agencies analyze the organizational, policy, practice, teamwork, and service-system factors that contribute to critical incidents and other adverse outcomes in a nonpunitive manner.
- **Making non-court-involved family support services voluntary for families.** In 2021, FSD made family in-home support services voluntary for families in non-court-involved cases. Previously, when a family scored high or very high on the division's risk assessment tool, FSD automatically opened a family support case. If the family did not engage in services, staff could consult with the deputy state's attorney to determine whether there was probable cause for court involvement. FSD shifted to a voluntary approach for non-court-involved family support cases. As a result, FSD reported that it has reduced its family support caseloads and the number of families formally involved with the child welfare system.
- **Planning through a coordinated system of care framework.** FSD operates under a cross-agency system of care framework to support children and youth with complex needs. [The Vermont State System of Care Plan](#)⁵ promotes coordination among family services, education, juvenile justice, and mental health partners. Through local coordinated service planning meetings, interagency partners work together to assess each child's strengths and needs and develop a coordinated service plan. Partners then identify and coordinate supports and services. Families participate directly in these planning meetings, creating opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and service planning.

Permanency strategies

To promote permanency, FSD uses public-private partnerships, invests in kinship engagement and family finding efforts, and addresses barriers to reunification through early substance use screening and support.

- **Establishing strong public-private permanency support partnerships.** FSD partners with a Vermont-based nonprofit organization that provides education, treatment, family support, and adoption services. Through the partnership, they established [Project Family](#),⁶ a public-private initiative that helps identify, recruit, and support adoptive families for older children and youth in foster care whose permanency plans include adoption. According to FSD, the initiative has helped children and youth achieve safe, permanent family placements and has provided families with ongoing support throughout the adoption process.
- **Screening for and addressing substance use early in child welfare involvement.** FSD works with the same Vermont-based nonprofit organization to provide substance use screening and to offer voluntary services when substance use concerns arise during child intake or safety intervention. Staff with substance use expertise and lived experience help parents navigate treatment and other systems, connect to services more quickly, and address barriers to engagement. This approach reflects FSD's broader practice of addressing substance use as a key barrier to reunification and permanency.
- **Engaging kinship caregivers through Child and Family Support and kinship navigation contracts.** FSD uses its Child and Family Support and kinship navigation contracts to fund kinship-focused services and family engagement activities across prevention and permanency efforts. These contracts are awarded to community-based service providers that specialize in child welfare, family support, and permanency services. In each district, contractors provide permanency support services that include family-finding efforts when children and youth first enter care, family coaching, and supervised visitation services.

CONCLUSION

Overall, FSD found that its efforts to increase the number of foster homes and reduce the number of children and youth in care have been most successful when they focus on building and maintaining relationships with caregivers, sharing resources, and providing financial supports to caregivers. At the same time, the division has pursued strategies to reduce the number of children in care by strengthening decision-making safety assessments to prevent foster care entry, while using public-private partnerships to promote reunification and permanency.

A Home for Every Child Case Studies: Methods

Recruiting and selecting states. The study team selected states from those with the highest home-to-child ratios in 2025. The team also 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.

Collecting data. The study team conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives from 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). The team recorded and transcribed interviews using Microsoft Teams. Following data collection, the team 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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