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South Carolina'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

- The South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS) prioritizes placement with relatives whenever possible, making kinship care a central foster parent recruitment and permanency strategy and helping children and youth maintain family connections. SCDSS has expanded kinship care by reducing licensing barriers for relatives and broadening eligibility to include fictive kin.
- SCDSS modernized foster family licensing through streamlining and digitizing documentation and improving process delays.
- SCDSS uses a comprehensive approach to reducing foster care entry through expanded support for families and specific efforts to more carefully consider removing children and youth from homes.
- SCDSS uses regional support teams that bridge state-level administration and local county offices, visitation practices tailored to family needs, and ongoing family engagement to support successful reunification and timely permanency.
- SCDSS expanded services available to families before, during, and after reunification, allowing support to be tailored to family needs and helping stabilize placements over time.

SOUTH CAROLINA’S CHILD WELFARE AND FOSTER CARE CONTEXT

The South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS) is responsible for child welfare services across the state. As of 2025, South Carolina had a home-to-child ratio of 0.65, 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 Between 2020 and 2025, the foster care population declined from 4,070 to 3,322 children and youth in care. The state’s rate of children and youth in care also decreased between 2023 and 2025, falling from 3.0 to 2.9 per 1,000 children and youth, and annual entries fell from 2,838 to 2,685 children and youth.² As shown in Table 1, on average, children and youth spent 492 days in foster care, below the national average of over 700 days. Thirty percent of children and youth in foster care in South Carolina were placed with kin or relatives, compared to nearly 40 percent nationally.

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

Measure*	South Carolina	United States
Total children and youth in foster care	3,322	331,747
Per 1,000 children in the state	2.87	4.09
Foster care entries	2,685	175,008
Per 1,000 children in the state	2.33	2.31
Foster care exits	2,628	169,927
Ratio of entries to exits	1.02	1.03
Mean time in foster care (days)	492	711
Percent of children and youth placed with kin or relatives	30	39
Home-to-child ratio	0.65	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 SCDSS uses to increase the number of foster homes, including strategies for recruitment and licensing.

Identifying and recruiting prospective foster parents

SCDSS noted key strategies for increasing the number of foster homes available to children and youth in care, including partnerships with child placing agencies and tailored recruitment through social media and university partnerships.

- **Partnering with licensed child placing agencies.** SCDSS partners with private child placing agencies, which conduct most licensing activities for nonrelative foster homes in South Carolina. SCDSS requires child placing agencies to develop tailored recruitment strategies focused on SCDSS’s greatest placement needs, including foster families willing to accept teenagers, sibling groups, and youth with significant behavioral health needs requiring therapeutic foster care. SCDSS emphasizes working with child placing agencies to have more substantive conversations with prospective foster parents about caring for older youth and sibling groups and to highlight available supports and services for foster families, including resources available through the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

- **Tailored social media recruitment and university partnerships.** SCDSS combines tailored social media campaigns and partnerships with major universities to raise awareness of foster parenting and recruit families. Through professional videos featuring youth in foster care sharing their lived experiences, the agency uses personal stories to encourage public engagement. Social media campaigns also promote training opportunities for prospective foster parents, including sessions focused on supporting older youth and understanding available resources for families. In addition, SCDSS partners with universities to recruit foster parents by using sporting events to spotlight foster and adoptive families and raise awareness of the need for foster families.

Interviewee insight

"We partner with universities to get tickets for our foster families to attend football games, which is just an amazing experience. We've had them [universities] sponsor adopted children and families with really amazing packages, including box seats and player meet-and-greets... As part of that partnership, they highlight SCDSS and share information throughout the game about the need for foster parents."

- SCDSS staff member

Foster parent licensing and approval processes

SCDSS noted key strategies for improving the foster parent licensing and approval processes, including expanding support for kinship care, reducing licensing barriers while maintaining safety standards, and leveraging technology to streamline licensing.

- **Expanding and supporting kinship care through licensing flexibility.** SCDSS reported that reducing licensing burdens and expanding kinship eligibility has been one of the agency's most significant accomplishments in supporting kinship placements. SCDSS amended licensing regulations to make it easier for kinship and fictive kin caregivers to become licensed, particularly in emergency placement situations. For example, SCDSS updated policies with fire marshal standards that were viewed as unrealistic for many families. In the past year, SCDSS staff initially expressed concerns about liability when reducing licensing regulations; however, SCDSS reported that no significant issues have emerged. SCDSS reported that these changes have improved placement stability by allowing children and youth to remain with family while ensuring caregivers receive financial support and access to services.
- **Reducing traditional foster home licensing barriers while maintaining safety standards.** SCDSS has updated traditional foster home licensing regulations by removing unnecessary requirements, while maintaining child safety protections like background checks. For example, SCDSS removed a family immunization requirement, which SCDSS reported discouraged some families from pursuing licensure (even though the Department already had the ability to exempt families with a medical or religious objection from the requirement).
- **Leveraging technology to streamline foster family licensing.** SCDSS modernized its licensing process by streamlining and digitizing documentation. Previously, licensing approvals often exceeded the 120-day target due to paper-based submissions, fragmented document collection, and coordination across multiple parties, including fire marshals. According to SCDSS, the implementation of a commercially available software solution has increased transparency across the licensing pipeline and enabled staff to monitor application progress in real time, identify bottlenecks, and address delays more effectively.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

This section describes the strategies SCDSS 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

SCDSS emphasizes upstream and removal prevention to reduce the number of children and youth in foster care. Key prevention strategies include increasing access to prevention services, forgiving child support debt, supporting teenagers, and training mandated reporters.

- **Increasing access to prevention services.** SCDSS works closely with a state chapter of a national child abuse prevention organization to strengthen the capacity of Family Resource Centers, community-based hubs that connect families to services, resources, and information. Families who are screened out of a formal investigation but have identified service needs can be referred to these centers for assistance. In counties without a Family Resource Center, SCDSS family support navigators connect families to appropriate community-based services.
- **Forgiving uncollectible child support debt.** SCDSS has found that after reunification, some families have accrued substantial child support debt that they cannot afford to pay. In some cases, these financial burdens have contributed to housing instability and subsequent involvement with the child welfare system. To address this challenge, SCDSS partners with the state's child support division to forgive uncollectible child support debt for families with limited ability to pay. SCDSS reported that this effort has helped support successful reunification and prevent children and youth from re-entering foster care by reducing financial barriers to stability.
- **Creating strategies to support teenagers.** After an analysis found that three upstate counties accounted for about one-third of teenagers entering foster care and that many teenagers entered care due to behavioral concerns, SCDSS implemented the Teaming for Teens initiative in these counties. The initiative includes removal prevention services, child and family team meetings, community convenings, and outreach to judicial and law enforcement partners. In addition, through the Teen Alternative Prevention Pathway, law enforcement, schools, mental health agencies, and the Department of Juvenile Justice are able to refer teens at risk of entering foster care to in-home stabilization services. Based on promising results, SCDSS is expanding the Teen Alternative Prevention Pathway to additional counties.
- **Training mandated reporters.** SCDSS developed a training for mandated reporters focused on the unintended consequences of needs-based reports, rather than reports based on suspected maltreatment. As part of this effort, SCDSS created a decision tree to help mandated reporters consider whether a family's needs could be addressed through local community resources before making a referral to the child welfare system.

Permanency strategies

One of SCDSS's key permanency efforts includes an emphasis on reunification support and ongoing support following reunification.

- **Reunification support.** SCDSS has regional support teams that work closely with families to promote safe and successful reunification. These teams support families during court-ordered transition visits, offer evening and weekend visitation opportunities so parents do not have to choose between maintaining employment and visiting with their children, and maintain consistent connections with families throughout the life of the case. When appropriate, SCDSS also identifies opportunities for extended family members or other supportive adults to facilitate family visits instead of agency staff, helping create a more comfortable and family-centered experience.

CONCLUSION

SCDSS's efforts to reduce the number of children and youth in care and improve placement capacity have been supported by strong cross-system collaboration and alignment among state, regional, and local partners. SCDSS also prioritizes engagement with courts, legal stakeholders, law enforcement, health and mental health providers, and community organizations to support the implementation of prevention and permanency strategies. These efforts are complemented by expanded kinship care and reunification assistance, including licensing flexibility and enhanced services for caregivers, which allow staff to tailor support to the unique needs of children and youth and their families. Together, these strategies have strengthened the agency's ability to support children and youth and their families.

Interviewee insight

"There's a lot of services that we can put into place that support the transition into the home, as well as after they've transitioned home ...The service array that we [SCDSS] have really allows us to do both. It allows parents and children to prepare for what reunification will look like for them. And then it gives that ongoing and additional support once that reunification happens."

- SCDSS staff member

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. 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.

Data collection. 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.

REFERENCES

1. Radel, L. *Mapping a Home for Every Child*. Child Welfare Wonk, 2026.
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