



Oklahoma'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 Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) uses data-driven and relationship-based strategies to identify and recruit prospective foster parents.
- In recent years, OKDHS has streamlined licensing and approval by updating kinship licensing standards and simplifying the assessment process for kin and traditional foster parents.
- To help retain foster parents, OKDHS stays in frequent contact with foster parents and provides ongoing support, through case management, additional funding for respite care, training, and peer mentoring.
- OKDHS considers its home visiting programs critical to preventing initial or further involvement with the child welfare system and is in the process of relaunching its Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation (SAFE) model to promote consistent decision making about safety practices across the state.
- To improve permanency, OKDHS has made its individualized service plans easier for families to understand and strengthened its use of data and predictive analytics.

OKLAHOMA'S CHILD WELFARE AND FOSTER CARE CONTEXT

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) is responsible for child welfare services in the state. As of 2025, Oklahoma had a home-to-child ratio of 0.63, 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 Oklahoma’s foster care population decreased from 6,519 children in 2023 to 6,171 children in 2025, and the rate of children in care declined from 6.7 per 1,000 children in 2023 to 6.37 in 2025.² As shown in Table 1, children and youth in Oklahoma spent an average of 690 days in foster care, slightly less than the national average of 711 days. Forty-seven percent of children and youth in foster care were placed with kin or relatives, compared to nearly 40 percent nationally. Oklahoma was the first state to join ACF’s A Home for Every Child Initiative.

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

Measure*	Oklahoma	United States
Total children and youth in foster care	6,171	331,747
Per 1,000 children in the state	6.37	4.09
Foster care entries	3,568	175,008
Per 1,000 children in the state	3.69	2.31
Foster care exits	3,422	169,927
Ratio of entries to exits	1.04	1.03
Mean time in foster care (days)	690	711
Percent of children and youth placed with kin or relatives	47	39
Home-to-child ratio	0.63	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 OKDHS uses to increase the number of foster homes, including strategies for recruiting, licensing, supporting, and retaining foster caregivers.

Identifying and recruiting prospective foster parents

OKDHS uses data-driven and relationship-based strategies to identify and recruit foster parents, including ZIP code-level analyses to identify where foster homes are needed; repeated outreach and follow-up with prospective foster parents; and family-finding efforts.

- **Implementing data-driven recruitment.** OKDHS uses monthly recruitment data and gap analyses to identify counties and regions with foster home shortages and understand key demographic characteristics of foster youth and their sibling groups, and whether children are placed outside their home county. OKDHS shares monthly needs and recruitment data with internal recruitment staff and the 14 private foster agency partners across the state. OKDHS also partners with a child welfare data analytics firm to conduct ZIP code-level analyses, develop foster parent dashboards, and create an adverse placement score metric. OKDHS uses these metrics to engage community stakeholders and target recruitment efforts to increase the number of foster homes in children’s and youth’s home counties.
- **Cultivating community recruitment partnerships and collaborations.** OKDHS works with a range of recruitment partners, including the state’s 14 private foster care agencies, tribal foster care programs, a non-profit organization that aims to support foster and adoptive families, and other local organizations. OKDHS staff highlighted faith-based networks as particularly important recruitment partners in the state. OKDHS also maintains a database of community partners willing to support foster care recruitment.
- **Promoting recruitment through foster parent ambassadors and incentives.** OKDHS partners with the University of Oklahoma to replicate a successful foster parent ambassador model that uses word-of-mouth recruitment from current foster parents. Ambassadors are compensated for attending recruitment events,

webinars, and community engagements with recruitment staff. They provide insight into the realities of foster parenting, answer questions, and share their personal journeys.

- **Using a dedicated family-finding program.** Through OKDHS's Actively Seeking Kinnections program, a family-finding team member interviews children and families, develops a family diagram, searches for relatives or other connections in the child's life, and contacts the relatives or other connections about potential placement or ongoing connection with the child. The team member then provides a detailed report to case staff. This dedicated support is intended to reduce family-finding burden on case staff and allow them to focus on the child's other needs.
- **Tracking recruitment inquiries.** OKDHS's Foster Care and Adoption Support Center receives inquiries, routes prospective foster parents to OKDHS or private agencies, and tracks referral sources. The Center also conducts periodic follow ups with potential foster parents who do not ultimately move forward. Recruitment staff viewed this outreach as important because people often need time to make the decision to become foster parents.

Foster parent licensing and approval processes

OKDHS streamlined its licensing and approval processes by updating kinship licensing standards and simplifying the assessment process for kin and traditional foster parents.

- **Implementing kinship approval standards.** In 2025, OKDHS implemented kin-specific assessment and approval standards to reduce the administrative burden on kinship caregivers and staff while prioritizing safety assessments and expanding approval decisions. Under the new standards, kinship families can be approved within 30 days of placement, compared with the previous 60-day timeframe, and approval is no longer contingent on completing pre-service training. OKDHS also developed trauma-informed kinship-focused training and reduced training requirements from 27 to 12 hours. OKDHS further streamlined the evaluation of prospective homes by significantly reducing paperwork and shifting to an interview-based process with staff completing forms. The Kinship Resource Family Assessment was reduced from 30 pages to about 10, focusing on child- and family-specific needs and interviews with all household members.
- **Simplifying foster parent assessment processes.** Building on the 2025 kinship standards and feedback from foster parent workgroups, OKDHS began simplifying the Resource Family Assessment process for prospective foster parents who were not kinship caregivers. The revised process is intended to reduce the amount of paperwork prospective foster parents must complete, creating a more efficient and supportive approval experience while maintaining a focus on child safety and compliance with statutory requirements.

Supporting and retaining caregivers

To support retention and placement stability, OKDHS has worked to build relationships with foster parents starting at the point of recruitment, maintains frequent contact, and provides families with ongoing supports.

- **Maintaining relationships with foster families after approval.** OKDHS recruitment staff maintain frequent contact with prospective foster parents throughout the assessment process. Increasingly, OKDHS recruitment staff continue this support after approval, providing continuity during the transition to fostering and helping maintain a connection with a trusted staff member.
- **Providing additional support to families caring for children with higher needs.** OKDHS operates Enhanced Foster Care (EFC), an optional set of services for kinship or traditional families caring for children with more intensive needs. EFC provides a case manager, consultation with mental health clinicians, initiation

of child and family mental health services, crisis prevention plan, regular treatment-team meetings, additional foster parent training, and enhanced financial support. According to OKDHS staff, EFC helps fill gaps in the availability of therapeutic foster homes and retain foster homes.

- **Offering a foster parent mentoring program.** Until recently, OKDHS offered traditional foster parents access to a mentoring program that paired new and experienced foster parents. The program helped new foster parents navigate the child welfare system, care for a child who had experienced trauma, and collaborate with the child's parents. According to OKDHS staff, roughly 90 percent of parents who participated in the mentoring program continued fostering.
- **Collecting foster family feedback.** OKDHS collects information about family experience through foster parent work groups, "barrier buster" meetings that aim to address challenges voiced by foster parents, monthly surveys, and a reflection-based annual update. This input helps OKDHS assess foster parents' preferences and training and service needs, and it helps OKDHS better understand how to support difficult placements. OKDHS also invests time in understanding home retention rates and gathering qualitative feedback through surveys about why some parents continue fostering longer than others do.
- **Leveraging private agency supports.** OKDHS contracts with private child welfare agencies to provide a range of supports to foster families, including funding for respite or other child care services, clothing closets, training opportunities, frequent check-ins, monthly in-home visits, help arranging services and appointments, and support and advocacy during court proceedings. OKDHS noted that court attendance is particularly important to help foster parents navigate the child welfare system. Private agencies also collaborate with one another by cross-promoting retention events.

Interviewee insight

"I think we've seen great success with the [foster parent] mentoring program. Around 90 percent of the families that go through that stay open and [are] fostering ... it's been really impressive."

- OKDHS staff member

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

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

Prevention strategies

OKDHS considers its home visiting programs critical to preventing initial or further involvement with the child welfare system. The agency is also relaunching its child safety practice model to promote consistent decision making around child safety statewide.

- **Providing comprehensive home-based prevention services.** OKDHS offers several home visiting programs to strengthen parenting capacity and help families remain safely together. Its primary prevention program provides comprehensive home-based services using SafeCare, a state-funded, evidence-based home visiting program model. Additional home visiting programs are available through the health department to further strengthen parental skills and capacities.

- **Relaunching its child safety model.** In 2026, OKDHS partnered with a child welfare organization to evaluate and relaunch Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation (SAFE), its child safety practice model. To address practice drift over time, OKDHS provides staff coaching and training partners to promote consistent safety assessment and decision making statewide, with the goal of helping children remain safely at home whenever possible.

Interviewee insight

"With a Home for Every Child, I feel like we have this new take on what we want to do to really push forward prevention in [the way] we've always wanted to."

- OKDHS staff member

Permanency strategies

To improve permanency, OKDHS has modernized its individualized service plans (ISPs), strengthened its use of data and predictive analytics, and defined adverse placements to identify and address barriers to timely achievement of permanency.

- **Modernizing ISP terminology.** A 2023 OKDHS review found that ISPs contained substantial legal jargon and were difficult for families to understand. In response, OKDHS began a modernization effort in 2024 to make ISPs easier for parents to understand, incorporate parent input and family-centered language, and better align services with families' needs. For example, OKDHS replaced the term "visitation" with "family-time," which OKDHS staff indicated was meant to shift away from compliance-focused language and be more responsive to individual families' needs.
- **Using data to inform permanency decision making.** OKDHS uses case reviews to identify factors that may delay achievement of permanency and identify scenarios in which an intervention may be needed. Indicators included reasons for removal, length of time in care, and the number of caseworkers assigned to a child over time. After case reviews identified these factors, OKDHS developed a monitoring report to proactively track and address them. OKDHS also analyzed reasons providers request placement changes and the supports foster parents need to maintain placements. After finding that children under six were the largest group experiencing placement moves, the agency added supports for foster parents caring for young children. OKDHS also engages its foster parent association board to gather perspectives on supports foster parents need to adequately serve children and youth placed in their homes. OKDHS tracks adverse placements, such as moves to more intensive settings, placements outside a child's county, and sibling separation. The agency uses these data to proactively identify placement concerns, prevent additional moves, and preserve children's connections to family and community.

CONCLUSION

Oklahoma has worked to improve its home-to-child ratio by using strategies to increase the number of available foster homes and reduce the number of children entering or remaining in care. OKDHS has focused on data-driven recruitment, strong community partners, replication of promising local programs, and repeated follow-up with recruitment inquiries. Strategies to retain families emphasize continuity of care with case workers, enhanced care for children with higher needs, peer mentoring, and financial and service support. The agency's kin-first approach includes a family-finding team and updated kinship licensing standards. At the same time, Oklahoma provides family-centered, comprehensive prevention services and leverages data and predictive analytics to support permanency. The agency also started to relaunch child safety practice models to promote consistent implementation through staff training and coaching. Across recruitment, retention, and prevention, OKDHS values and uses feedback from current and former foster parents to improve practice. Together, these strategies have helped Oklahoma better match available homes to the needs of children and youth entering care, expand access to family-based care, and keep families safely together.

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. After 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. Radcliff, L. Mapping a Home for Every Child. Child Welfare Wonk, 2026. <https://www.childwelfarewonk.com/p/weekly-wonk-where-every-state-stands>
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