

BRIEFING DOCUMENT
CARESOUTH/UOW FOSTER CARE RESEARCH PROEJCT
12 JUNE 2008

Project Details

Title: Identifying, attracting and retaining successful foster parents
Grant Awarded: ARC Linkage Grant, value \$480,000 over five years

Who are the Key Parties?

UOW

Key Personnel: Dr. Melanie Randle, Faculty of Commerce, School of Mgt & Marketing
Prof. Sara Dolnicar, Faculty of Commerce, School of Mgt and Marketing
Prof. John R Rossiter, Faculty of Commerce, School of Mgt and Marketing
Dr. Joseph Ciarrochi, Faculty of Health and Beh. Sciences, School of Psych.

Industry Partner: CareSouth

CareSouth is a not-for-profit public company which provides services for children, young people and adults with a disability and their families in the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Ulladulla regions. This joint research project focuses on the foster care program offered by CareSouth.

Key Personnel: Andrew Munro, Chief Executive Officer
Dee Neveling, Senior Clinical Psychologist

Why is this project important for the local region?

Foster care within Australia is facing growing problems in trying to attract sufficient numbers of foster carers. This has been attributed to numerous factors including an increased number of women entering the workforce, the special and often challenging needs of foster children, high rates of divorce and the increasing workloads of case workers which can restrict the support they can provide for carers.

An equally important issue for foster care is longevity and retention. Retention is particularly salient for foster care due to the disruption it impresses upon children and the potentially damaging impact this instability can have on young and often vulnerable individuals. Some of the primary reasons for parents ceasing to provide foster care are a lack of agency support, behavioural difficulties with the children and fundamental problems with the processes of foster care management.

The present project is a partnership between two local organisations – UOW and CareSouth, a provider of foster care services in the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and South Coast of NSW. The majority of participants in this study will be foster parents residing in these areas, so the issues identified will be specific to regional individuals and their pressures and concerns. Prior research shows that foster children tend to have high levels of aggression and associated behavioural problems, fewer pro-social tendencies, and poor peer relationships. They also face a multitude of risk factors that contribute to antisocial behaviour, including abuse, neglect and environmental instability. Developing tools to identify and retain local carers that can provide a supportive home for foster children will work to reduce the problems they face later in life, ultimately strengthening the social fabric of the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and South Coast regions.

What are we going to do?

This project will seek to address the key issues above by:

1. Developing an attraction and screening mechanism for suitable foster carers. This will involve:
 - a. developing a theoretical model of the fostering decision process (which will provide better understanding of the factors that contribute to a successful foster placement and ultimately improve foster care organisations' ability to attract new foster parents);
 - b. segmenting the potential foster care market and identify whether certain groups within the community are more likely to be successful foster carers than others (which will enable foster care organisations to target the right types of people within the general community when they are trying to attract new foster carers); and
 - c. gaining insight into the effectiveness of alternative communication channels when trying to reach the segments most likely to become successful foster carers (which will enable foster care organisations to communicate the most effective message to the right types of people).
2. Developing an identification and monitoring system for early warning signs for placement breakdowns. This will be done by:
 - a. developing a longitudinal information system for foster care monitoring within Australia (which will enable organisations offering foster care services to better understand the critical factors which should be monitored during foster care placements, and increase the retention of foster parents and reduce placement breakdown by monitoring these factors).

How are we going to do it?

Over the five year period the project includes four separate project components:

1. Project Component 1 – development of theoretical model of foster placement success and breakdown. Done by conducting in-depth interviews with (i) experts in the field of foster care (managers, psychologists, case workers, academics etc) and (ii) foster parents.
2. Project Component 2 – longitudinal study of foster placements to identify and monitor the warning signals of placement breakdown. Will involve foster carers completing surveys at regular intervals over a three year period.
3. Project Component 3 – market segmentation study to identify whether there are particular groups of people within the community who are more likely to be successful foster parents than others. Done by analysing the structure of the data collected during project component 2.
4. Project Component 4 – identification of the optimal communication channels and messages to reach and be meaningful to the segments identified as most likely to be successful foster carers. Done by developing a number of different types of advertisements and commercials, and testing them with community members to assess their reaction.

When is it going to happen?

The project commenced in February 2008 and will conclude in January 2013.