

# An Integrated Approach for Recruiting and Retaining Foster Parents in New York City\*

*Client: The New York City Administration for Children Services*

## **Period of Performance: 2001 – 2005**

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** The mission of the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of New York City's children. For the past four years, True Insight/Stewards of Change consultants have worked with this \$2,200,000,000 governmental agency and its contracted partners to effectively integrate resources and programs, increase staff knowledge and capability, leverage growth opportunities, and realize better outcomes for at-risk youth, families and communities.

In 2001, there were more than 26,300 children in the NYC foster care system because their families were in crisis and unable to provide for their essential needs. Foster care is intended to promote the healing process by offering a stable and secure environment until a child can either return home or establish an alternative lifelong relationship with a caring adult, such as through adoption.

## **Challenge**

Just prior to hiring True Insight, ACS began implementing a major reform effort featuring a new neighborhood-based service delivery model designed for minimizing disruption to children requiring foster care and their families. At that time, many of the nearly 10,000 adolescents in the system were living in institutional settings because there simply weren't enough viable foster families available to care for them.

## **Strategy**

ACS engaged True Insight to address the growing demand for recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive homes. The challenge was to find families, particularly for older youth, among the residents of the same communities where young people were entering care. That meant that marketing and outreach efforts would have to focus on some of the city's highest-risk and resource-poor communities such as Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Jamaica and the South Bronx. To achieve success, True Insight would seek to heighten awareness and improve attitudes toward foster care, ACS, and the child welfare system among these targeted New Yorkers.

True Insight delivered a full continuum of technical assistance services to achieve the desired outcomes. The cornerstone of this effort was a multi-layered marketing communications plan that was informed by a solid foundation of strategic analytical research involving focus groups, attitudinal surveys and quantitative studies.

## **Results**

Marketing Services included the creation and implementation of a multimedia (television, radio, outdoor and print advertising, direct mail) branding campaign: Today's Foster Care. In 2003, ACS unveiled the recruitment initiative to the public in conjunction with NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Results included a 25% annual increase in prospective foster parent inquiries (63% during media flight), an 18% increase in certified foster homes, and improved public attitudes about foster care and the child welfare system in general.

Management Coaching and Training was offered to more than 175 executives, frontline staff, and volunteers. This technical assistance prepared ACS staff and employees at 40+ private, foster care agencies to more effectively manage the new influx of foster parent referrals generated by the advertising. True Insight introduced business process concepts and tools to the social workers and other staff who were responsible for the multi-step process that converts prospect Community Engagement played a key role in aligning, integrating, and promoting the broader marketing and advertising messages to meet the needs and demographics of the targeted constituencies. True Insight forged collaborative relationships with several Service Provider Networks



(comprised of 100+ nonprofit, faith-based and government agencies) to first understand local needs, and then build capacity, determine appropriate communication strategies, and leverage existing resources. True Insight also formed and facilitated new Community Marketing Work Groups that extended and enhanced Today's Foster Care recruitment materials distribution at the grassroots level.

In 2001, True Insight worked with ACS and a team of foster parents to develop another successful community-based initiative, the Circle of Support. These monthly groups create a positive environment for foster/resource, adoptive, and kinship parents by increasing the level of community support through networking, building partnerships, and information sharing. True Insight helped establish the initiative's mission, brand and operational program. We provided values-based leadership training, public speaking and group facilitation skills sessions, as well as marketing and outreach services. What started as a pilot program in five sites currently operates in 16 communities serving nearly 500 foster, adoptive and kinship parents and 1,000 children on a monthly basis.

Organization and Leadership Development to improve cross-unit communication, work integration and change-readiness. True Insight worked with the Office of Youth Development to increase service utilization and improve outcomes for nearly 1,000 youth served by ACS' Direct Foster Care and Direct Congregate Care units.

Event Planning, Marketing and Management Services supporting community outreach, publicity, recruitment and retention goals, including the NYC Adopt and the Golden Heart Gala. True Insight developed and implemented the NYC Adopt event for ACS in 2004. On an expedited three-month timeline, ACS engaged True Insight to help coordinate, implement and supervise all aspects of this event. This was the first year that the annual adoption event was held indoors. The event attracted more than 800 prospects interested in foster care and adoption while generating hundreds of additional new post-event inquiries and significant publicity for ACS.

The Golden Heart Gala event provides ACS a vehicle for recognizing foster parents and the individuals and organizations dedicated to serving children and youth in care. About 500 foster parents and guests attended the event in 2005. Since True Insight created the event in 2002, we have managed and enhanced this program, met all objectives and earned high praise for our efforts.

In a post event thank you letter from Commissioner Mattingly he stated that the 2005 ACS Golden Heart Gala was the best event honoring and recognizing foster parents that he had seen in his career.