

Advocating for Change: What it takes to inspire shifts in the fostering sector

by Jayne Wilson

Over the past few years we have heard the occasional comment from a community member that changes to policy and practice that are causing hardship to our community are taking far too long. For those of you working on the front lines of fostering who have a very real need to see practice issues addressed, you are correct, it does take quite some time. The reason for this is because there is a process that we must follow and sometimes it takes months or years for the requested change to gain traction at the Ministry.

For decades BCFFPA has been mandated with the key role of advocating for and ensuring supportive infrastructure for foster parents. While BCFFPA certainly provides direct service to foster parents, most of our work has a broader scope. Examples of the other work we do includes speaking directly with the Minister regarding changes needed to mileage amounts and foster parent rates, addressing contract wording changes with the Policy Division, working collaboratively with MCFD to revise fostering publications, and collaborating with other agencies to create foster parent recruitment campaigns.

Given that our advocacy work is done without any public fanfare it's no surprise that there are questions about what impactful change we are making in fostering practice for the province. If you've never been an advocate you may not be aware that advocating for change can take a very long time. On occasion our timing is perfect and a community-level problem can be resolved quickly. But efforts to address larger issues that require more than a few conversations sometimes straddle a change in government, new leadership with different priorities, and require us to renew connections and then reintroduce an issue. When change happens for the community it might seem like it was sudden, however in most cases it has taken many years of conversation and collaborative effort to achieve the budget, the policy revisions, and on occasion, legislative amendments.

When we identify a troublesome trend, our immediate priority is to identify who to speak to and how to respectfully but authoritatively present the facts, evidence of hardship and assert the need for change to practice or policy. We must be cautious about how we approach advocacy to avoid the ever-present risk of losing our audience with too much noise or a combative attitude. We have to have patience and maintain our positive working relationships with Ministry staff who we are hoping will understand the experience of our foster parents. Most of our advocacy work is invisible and involves utilizing the connections we have in order to influence the changes we've been asked to advocate for.

Future foster parents who experience a positive policy or practice change won't realize that the shift was the result of 4 years of BCFFPA's requests for meetings and presentation of evidence, many conversations, 1 container of antacids, many moments staring at a blank wall, research, strategy, and a few redirections that result in one or two individual leaders embracing an alternative evidence-based perspective and changing something critical for our community. It's that simple. And it's that challenging. It only takes ONE person who is in a position to influence change to create a better environment for foster parents and foster children.

A small selection of recent impactful "change the system" requests that we have successfully responded to:

- Mileage amount increase (requested in 2010, announced in 2015)
- New foster parent education program (requested in 2011, partial completion (pre-service) and launched 2017)
- Changes to Foster Care Home Agreement without consultation (issue raised in 2016, resolved in 2016)
- Funding for BCFFPA support program (requested in 2011, funding provided in 2018)
- Foster parents signing permission slips (requested in 2013, announced in 2018)
- Foster parent rates increase (requested in 2014, system of care review in process...)

There are not many wins in the advocacy role. All wins are hard won. Have confidence that we're crafting solutions, asking for changes, and leading the charge for renewed practice and policy whenever necessary. Our responses take some time and consideration. Our responses are sustained and intentional. We don't give up.

Advocacy is not meant to be a game of power or personal profile raising, but a job to improve the experience of a particular group. There will always be critics of an agency that has a mandate of advocacy and perhaps that's as it should be. But whether or not we are supported or criticized by individual community members, we support each one of the foster parents in our province by taking whatever steps are necessary to advocate for a future where foster parents are recognized, respected, remunerated appropriately and valued for the crucial resource they provide in their communities.