

Diversity Paper

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At United Methodist Family Services, the staff is dedicated to providing an array of support for high risk children, high risk teens, and families to ensure that full potential is met and health and safety is a priority. Self identified as an unwavering champion for children and teens, UMFS collaborates with communities and outside resources to provide aid and support to children in foster care, as well as supports for families looking to foster or adopt (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). To no fault of one's own, children in foster care face endless adversity and challenges, hindering growth in a multitude of areas and opportunities to reach one's full potential. Children and teens in foster care carry a predetermined stigma with them due to trauma, and as a result, discrimination is present for high risk children as well as children with mental health issues, disabilities, and defiant behaviors. At UMFS, diversity, equity and inclusion efforts are made and prioritized in order to further combat challenges that children, teens, and families may already have faced, and continue to face, prior to receiving services (United Methodist Family Services, 2023).

UMFS as an organization strives to integrate cultural competency and other inclusion efforts into their trainings and resources to better understand the diversity, equity and inclusion challenges faced within the foster care system and the communities in which the children reside in. Although efforts and strides have been made within the country to minimize racism and discrimination, there is still tremendous amounts of work to be done. As a result, child welfare still has gaps in equity and the system sees more minority populations represented within the foster care system as compared to children in the majority. Minority children are less likely to have case workers, service providers, lawyers etc. of the same race or ethnicity, which may create hesitancy or mistrust on the child's side (CASA for Children, 2024). Statistically, twice the amount of black children are placed within the foster system in comparison to white children

(Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, 2023). It is also common for minority children to remain in foster care longer than white children, which presents a huge discrimination issue (Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, 2023). UMFS works alongside children and teens of all races, ethnicities, genders, and more, although the black population statistically appears to be the most served within the organization (United Methodist Family Services, 2023).

As for the LGBTQIA community, discrimination and harassment has increased within the foster care system, which increases suicide rates amongst this particular community (CASA for Children, 2024). At UMFS, it is not uncommon to have a youth that is apart of the LGBTQIA community. UMFS has encountered multiple outside resources that are either unwilling or unequipped to serve youth within this particular community. For example, many group homes even willing to take in a transgender youth will often place them in a home alongside kids that are their gender assigned at birth, and not the gender in which they identify as currently. It is important to note that one in three youth within the foster care system identify as apart of the LGBTQIA community, so it is important to become educated on their needs and concerns (Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, 2023). As a result of these gaps in equity, UMFS takes immense pride in providing the necessary resources and trainings to ensure a safe and inclusive working environment for both staff and clientele. As a collaborative team, UMFS staff advocate by sending representatives to various group homes as well as making informative phone calls to outside resources in order to raise awareness of the importance of placing LGBTQIA youth in safe, and well equipped homes (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). However, this process begins with multiple course trainings both online and in person, and all staff has to complete these in order to maintain working status at the agency (United Methodist Family Services,

2023). UMFS takes immense pride in advocacy for the youth in which they serve, as well as advocating for social and economic justice needs.

Any policy or procedure set in place at UMFS must be in accordance with both federal, state, and local laws and policies (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). As a result, the agency can guarantee that DEI policies are being followed diligently and are effective. With knowledge that minority youth and LGBTQIA youth are over represented within the foster care system, it is UMFS' job as well as other agencies working alongside them, to have the skills and knowledge to properly care for these specific youth, and to equip both youth and foster families with helpful resources (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). As for social justice efforts, UMFS sends staff to various informative events to consistently update employees on any ongoing social or economic issues within the community in which they serve (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). UMFS headquarters also requires all employees to be re-certified within a year of taking trainings the first time. This is done in order to update employees on any necessary changes in trainings and certifications. For example, all UMFS locations will often gather at Richmond headquarters to meet and discuss any ongoing issues that are common and need to be addressed as a whole organization (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). There are also numerous trainings and informative sessions held within the Richmond office that are both mandatory or can be attended at one's pleasure. UMFS as an organization is organized and consistent with updating their employees and is more than willing to listen to their employees and address any potential issues. This alone makes for a strong, and effective organization that serves their community properly.

As for micro, mezzo, and macro work, UMFS works diligently to provide services and care at all levels. By providing resources and maintaining the necessary training, UMFS staff is

equipped with the tools and skills to work with clients individually as well as in groups and communities. UMFS does a majority of their work at the micro and mezzo levels, however, their efforts within these communities of people ultimately benefit their community at the macro level. Beginning at the micro level, youth are assigned a case worker who are an immediate form of service and care. With knowledge of local foster homes that may be best equipped as well as knowledge of the youth's case as a whole, case workers aid in finding an immediate placement for youth. It is the within both the case worker and the child's best interest to have a case worker that aids in providing information and therapeutic resources for the foster parents. The case worker is also responsible for obtaining any information and paperwork when incidents arise or appointments need to be made for the youth in question. Case workers are ultimately responsible for the well-being of the youth as any decision that is made on their behalf can ultimately effect the child mentally, emotionally, or physically. Weekly or monthly home visits and check ins are also required to be done by the youth's caseworker to assess the safety and condition of the home (United Methodist Family Services, 2023).

As for the mezzo level, UMFS provides supports such as support groups for both foster and adoptive families, trainings for potential foster parents, and informative, collaborative events for both families and children (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). Potential foster families are well equipped with trainings at UMFS, but also have to collaborate in a lengthy background check process as well as working alongside staff to ultimately prove themselves worthy and equipped to care for a foster child (United Methodist Family Services, 2023). With both micro and mezzo levels immediately met, the community at the macro level makes immense strides towards the acceptance of foster families and foster children. With the attached stigma that all foster children are "bad" or "unworthy" due to tough behaviors, it is critical to

inform and provide resources for the community at large in hopes to persuade potential families and parents. With a current lacking of foster families and parents within the Tidewater area and across the country, it is crucial to work diligently by providing information through recruitment efforts as well as with the help of current foster families and parents who have taken a massive personal risk and changed a youth's life for the better.

References

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