

# Episode 47: Utah's Foster Parent Shortage

**Deborah:** [00:00:00] Thank you for joining our conversation today about where foster care in Utah is at. And where it's going,

**Liz:** and we're seeing a nationwide trend. The number of families coming forward to do foster care has dropped dramatically.

**Deborah:** Hey, Liz. We're going to be talking about, as we said, something really important and we're going to put out a call to action because since the pandemic, the numbers of foster parents in Utah have been going down and that is of concern.

**Liz:** It absolutely is. It's funny, right at the beginning of the pandemic, we expected there to be a [00:01:00] drop in the number of families wanting to do foster care with everything going on. But fascinatingly, that year of the pandemic, and maybe the following year, we had more families coming forward to do foster care.

**Liz:** But right around 2022, there was a precipitous drop in the number of families calling, interested in providing foster care for children in Utah.

**Deborah:** Our two guests are going to be talking about that. Let me go ahead and introduce them. The first one is Tonya Myrup.

**Deborah:** She's director at Utah's Child and Family Services. That is the state agency that oversees foster care in the state. And our second guest is our own Nikki McKay. She's CEO at Utah Foster Care. Our hardworking team here finds, educates, and nurtures families to meet the needs of children in foster care throughout the state of Utah.

**Deborah:** Let's begin with Tonya. Tonya, let's look at numbers in Utah compared to the rest of the country and how that matches up with foster families that are good [00:02:00] matches for them.

**Tonya:** Yeah. So in Utah our goal, of course, at DCFS is always to keep children safe. safe at home whenever possible. And so when we're not able to do that, our efforts really shift that focus on finding a safe home with kinship, but

when that's not an option, this is where having that sufficient pool of foster families is really critical.

**Tonya:** With our foster care system here. We really benefit from having foster families who have opened their hearts and their homes to children entering care. Despite the current foster home capacity, we're still experiencing a pretty significant need for a more widened or a broader array of foster families for youth that come in with maybe some more challenging needs.

**Tonya:** So while every foster family is important and that's incredibly helpful, There's really a more specific and urgent need for foster families who are able and willing to take maybe those [00:03:00] sibling groups, youth that have medical or physical needs, and some of those youth that

**Tonya:** are a little bit older, actually starting at about nine years

**Tonya:** and older, we have a greater need for foster families willing and able to

**Tonya:** care for those populations.

**Liz:** Can we just back up just a tiny bit and I'd love to dive deeper into those numbers, but I'd also like to talk a little bit about the prevention work that DCFS is doing. I think that's the work that often just isn't seen at all by the community. So I'd love to get a little bit of highlight on that and then returning back into talking more about foster care.

**Tonya:** Oh, absolutely. , April is a really exciting month for DCFS as it's Strengthening Families Month, and this was formerly known as Child Abuse Prevention Month, Utah changed the name of this to Family Strengthening because we really wanted to focus on what we know helps prevent child abuse.

**Tonya:** So this month, DCFS has a media campaign and it's focusing on those efforts and activities that really anyone can be a [00:04:00] part of to help support the development of strong families. Strong communities. That's because we know that strong and engaged communities really play an essential role in this effort.

**Tonya:** So this month we're really excited to have governor Cox kicked off the month with a public service announcement with some tips on how to strengthen families. And we also have some additional public service announcements coming out from Tracy Gruber, who's the executive director of DHHS. Deandra

Brown, who's an amazing child abuse prevention advocate and Celeste Edmonds with the Christmas Box International.

**Tonya:** So really we're trying to make this a year long focus, not just this month. We're also going to continue this throughout the year, focusing on fathers and mothers and just having some different segments with the media throughout the year. So we're really excited about that. And if you want to learn more about prevention you can.

**Tonya:** Follow Utah DHHS on Instagram for more [00:05:00] updates and information throughout this month and the year.

**Deborah:** And April, of course, flows right into May, which is National Foster Care Month, which is always a big deal at Utah Foster Care. Nikki Utah foster care always tries to really put the focus on these great foster families that we have. What's being planned for May and tell us about some of our foster families that we're certainly proud of.

**Nikki:** Yeah, May's a wonderful time for us to really highlight The foster families that have stepped into the space and are caring for kids and also highlight some of the activities in the community and the community partners that want to say thank you as well. So we're starting off the month with our second annual cookie brigade, crumble cookies is involved.

**Nikki:** And we will be working with some of our volunteers and community partners and crumble employees, delivering out boxes of cookies to families throughout the state. We have Beehive Meals that also has been a great support [00:06:00] for foster families offering some of their delicious meals. So families have a little break from cooking every now and then as their families are growing.

**Nikki:** We have a proclamation that the governor will be signing just honoring May as Foster Care Month. We'll have, it also faces a foster care event, which is happening May 16th. And that will be at Entrada. Will be a panel with foster parents and biological parents and talking about their journey working together with the kids coming into foster care and being reunified with the family and how that journey has really taken shape and they've grown a beautiful relationship and connection with each other and can continue to support the kids now that they've been reunified.

**Deborah:** And that's also a great event for people thinking about becoming foster parents themselves to really hear it from both sides. So

**Deborah:** there's a number of events every month

**Deborah:** related to educating people who want to

**Deborah:** [00:07:00] become foster parents for these children who need them.

Tonya, you mentioned Governor Cox and one thing Governor Cox has said one of the goals of his administration is to have foster homes waiting for children rather than children waiting for a foster home.

**Liz:** What would it look like to have families waiting for children to be placed with them?

**Tonya:** ideally, we would have enough foster homes so that every child who's not able to be placed with kinship is able to be in a family based home that can meet their individual and their unique needs. So it really is about having that wide array of foster homes, really with different backgrounds and experiences.

**Tonya:** this is important because we want to match children with foster families who have the right skills, experiences values, and that family composition that really will work best for that individual child. another part of that is also having enough foster homes that children can stay in close proximity to their home.

**Tonya:** That's really important because it [00:08:00] allows the child to remain in their same school, stay connected with their friends and extended family, and be able to maintain all of those connections to the community. So this is especially important in those rural areas to be able to just have that large number of foster parents available.

**Tonya:** We know that children in foster care, they're already experiencing just such a significant loss. The ability to keep them in their own community is a huge help in supporting their well being and ongoing success.

**Liz:** Absolutely.

**Deborah:** in our classes that prospective foster parents take we emphasize that, If you can open your parameters up to accepting sibling groups like you mentioned what other groups in particular, Tonya, are hard

**Deborah:** to place with?

**Tonya:** We continue to need foster parents who have the capability to also serve youth who might have some additional medical needs or some physical needs. And again, just those older teens, especially, but again, , we especially need foster [00:09:00] homes who can support sibling connections. And a lot of those sibling groups are groups of three or more. We know youth who have exited foster care that have shared with us that keeping the sibling group together and supporting those continued relationships.

**Tonya:** Those are really among some of the single most important things we can do to improve their experience in foster care.

**Liz:** Of my favorite stories of foster families are the ones who came in with a certain kind of placement in mind, and then either, just decided to change their mind or

**Liz:** they took , a placement on a fluke, and it's turned out to be amazing for them. And then they become such great ambassadors to encouraging families to open up their parameters and helping them to realize you can do a lot more. Then you think you can, and of course they need support to do that.

**Liz:** And that's one of the reasons, DCFS and Utah foster care work so closely together is to provide that support. And speaking of that what does Utah do right in supporting foster families?

**Tonya:** So I've actually recently had some other states and other directors of child welfare agencies [00:10:00] reach out to me recently with this same question that they're really struggling to figure out how to best support families.

**Tonya:** And I think in Utah, that relationship, that connection that we have with Utah foster care has just been so incredibly helpful. The ability to have that organization that can just focus in the All of their efforts, all of their support on recruiting and helping foster families, such an incredible difference in being able to ensure that we have families available to help children.

**Tonya:** That partnership with the resource families , within DCFS, just incredibly helpful to ensure that family feels like they have the support that they need to be able to be successful.

**Deborah:** And Nikki talked a little bit about what they're doing in May, but really Nikki, the support is year round and Utah foster care is really innovating some ideas for this.

**Nikki:** Yeah, we've been so fortunate over the years and really over the last two or three years, [00:11:00] especially with some amazing community partners stepping in. To this space and saying how can we show up? How can we be here? How can we be part of foster care? Even if we can't be foster parents we have a business, part of our business.

**Nikki:** We do this event. We'd love to include foster families and youth impacted by foster care as a part of this concert as a part of this play as whatever they have going on. They're just really embracing families. Into their work culture, and it's been so fun to see. It's fun for the kids and the families.

**Nikki:** We hear so many comments about the importance for them of feeling. Like they matter to somebody that they're seen for the work that they're doing in our community. And it's just a beautiful thing to see. I think Utah is unique that way. There are people that really want to get involved and want to be a part of solutions and it's up to us to help them.

**Nikki:** See what those opportunities [00:12:00] are and find a way to say yes and cultivate those relationships and just keep things growing and moving forward.

**Deborah:** You see that firsthand, what comes to my mind is the foster family Sunday dinners that we started doing.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Those are fun. Those are really locally owned restaurants coming together with local businesses, providing the food and athletes from the University of Utah cooking. then everybody's showing up at Entrada and them opening their building And their beautiful space to serve dinner to the families and be together, build community.

**Nikki:** They've hosted trunk or treat events as part of those Sunday suppers. We have another one coming up in May

**Nikki:** and one of their employee resource groups will be hosting a

**Nikki:** game night for the kids after dinner. So really just finding creative ways to

**Nikki:** build community amongst the foster care families.

**Liz:** One of my favorite experiences is. It's been Entrata. They invited Utah [00:13:00] foster care DCFS to the Weezer concert last fall. And one thing that

was so cool was so many of our foster families invited families that they were working with either families that they'd had their children and the children had since returned home or maybe a foster family still had the kids in their care, but they were working on a relationship with the family of those children and they invited those families to come to the concert too.

**Liz:** So we had an audience full of. Of all kinds of people in the continuum of foster care,

**Nikki:** Yeah , that was a fun night for sure. That was the first concert for many of the youth and talking with the CEO of Entrata he shared recently that one of his, not just his favorite memories in his time working with the foster care community, but honestly, one of his most impactful memories of his life was that concert and for him standing on the floor, looking around, knowing that thousands of families were there, foster families.

**Nikki:** And he was a part of that shared memory. Just, it mattered so much to him and he was [00:14:00] honored to be a part of that with our family. So it's really fun to see.

**Deborah:** And you see the kids are looking

**Deborah:** around and there's other children that are in

**Deborah:** families just like theirs and it makes them feel like they belong. There's a great sense of

**Deborah:** belonging.

**Nikki:** Absolutely.

**Liz:** which is absolutely

**Liz:** essential. So one thing we talked about was the idea of having a sufficient pool of foster families that are. Just waiting to be matched with the right placement for them.

**Liz:** And one, thing we hear from families is, they get really excited and , they go through the licensing process and the training process and they get licensed and then they aren't called. And we try to encourage them and say, first, we like it when foster families aren't called.

**Liz:** Cause that means maybe there's less children coming into care and more kids being able to stay home. But what would you say to a family who's gone through all the process of getting licensed and yet they're not. Immediately utilized.

**Tonya:** I would say that I would encourage them to continue to stay in really close communication with your resource family [00:15:00] consultant. I would also say continue to take advantage of those additional trainings that are offered and anything else that you can do to just continue to build those skills, I think is helpful.

**Tonya:** But back to a little bit of that conversation we had before, I think expanding your comfort with taking children who have complex needs or older youth or being open to taking a sibling group, I think would be especially helpful. And just like you had mentioned earlier I hear those stories of, coming in with that narrow kind of I'm comfortable taking this age, and I'm feeling okay about one or two, but once they open it up to those other , age groups and other needs that it can just be such a rewarding experience. So I, I just think as long as we can continue to show them that support and stay in communication and just really continue to encourage them to maybe step outside their comfort zone a little bit and to be able to help support all of the children that we need.

**Nikki:** And [00:16:00] Liz, one other way that families, I think, can stay involved while they're waiting for a placement would be to open up their homes to provide respite for currently licensed families that do have a placement that need maybe heading out of town or need a few days of reprieve

**Nikki:** And relaxation and they can offer that and it's a good

**Nikki:** way for families to start to build relationships and see what foster care really is all

**Nikki:** about on a little more short term basis.

**Liz:** That's great. Yeah. And really help out another foster family. At the same time,

**Deborah:** We mentioned at the beginning

**Deborah:** that both Tonya and Nikki started as caseworkers at DCFS. And so tell us what you've seen over the years. There's been a lot that's changed, particularly since Utah foster care has come into the picture. Tonya, let's start

with you. What are some of the most dramatic shifts in child welfare you've seen?

**Tonya:** Yeah when I think back, it's amazing to think that we've been doing this work for 25 years. I started when I was [00:17:00] 13, and it was a, no, just kidding. I think that it has been just such an incredible time to be a part of child welfare, and , That continuous growth in looking at the research and better understanding what children who are at risk really need and what really keeps children safe.

**Tonya:** So I just, I feel like there has been so much growth and understanding in that need of when children are in care and the difference that a family setting can make and Of course, always we're hopeful that we can do whatever we can to keep children safe at home, because we know that reduces the amount of trauma and change and disruption.

**Tonya:** But when that's not possible is just how important those transitions are in being able to help support children in that move to a foster home, or if they do have to change placements, just being able to really slow down and ensure that we provide the support needed To [00:18:00] be more of a trauma informed agency where we're really paying attention to the impact that this could have short and long term.

**Tonya:** So I think that has been an incredible progression as well as just, I love the direction it's going where we're encouraging foster parents. To become a support to the child's family and to help support that reunification effort, I think that is such great progress in the right direction because parents need all the help and support they can get.

**Tonya:** And to think of that from a child's perspective the two people in their lives who are working hard to care for them to come together to work on behalf of their best interest in their needs. That's, I think, one of the things that brings me the most joy is to see when that can happen.

**Tonya:** So so many great changes. I could probably go on for an hour of just like picking through, the focus on kinship, the focus on just all of those supports that Children need to focus on strong

**Tonya:** families, strong communities. it's just been [00:19:00] really exciting, and I'm honored to have been a part of that.

**Liz:** What about you, Nikki? What have you seen?

**Nikki:** I think that a couple of things that came to my mind first off would really be the understanding of trauma and also brain development that really when we were caseworkers many years ago, I just don't feel like that was. And understanding that we all had.

**Nikki:** We didn't know as much about it and that's been really helpful for families. It's helpful for us to support families as they're caring for the kids that have experienced this trauma. Also I think the kinship, that, that really wasn't a focus when I was a caseworker. Not nearly like it is now of really searching and And trying to keep kids with families as much as possible.

**Nikki:** Those are two of the really big changes and just the processes in general. I was talking yesterday with somebody about when I was a caseworker and the process of placing a child honestly was here's your paper list and you just start calling. [00:20:00] And now it's so much more refined and so much more thoughtful and purposeful in here's this youth and these are their needs and what type of family do we need and let's call these families and talk through what this child needs and make sure we're making the best match that we can, which right goes back to why we need so many families as options so that we can Do that.

**Nikki:** And that's a big change to that. That's obviously much more beneficial for the youth and care.

**Deborah:** Utah continues to be recognized. Like Tonya said, we have other states call us all the time and say, hey, we hear you're doing this. So 25 years ago, Utah foster care started out as a very innovative organization

**Deborah:** I still harken back to Governor Cox saying we want to have foster homes waiting for children. . And

**Deborah:** that, that continues into all of our training. Right, Liz?

**Liz:** It does. And we try to encourage families

**Liz:** that regardless of how

**Liz:** their experience turns out, that [00:21:00] the focus is always that they're here to help the children and by extension, the child's family too. So we did a little bit of time travel back. In time, 25 years. Now you want to go forward in time, 25 years and grant you magical powers.

**Liz:** what would you change? What are your hopes and dreams for the next 25 years for child welfare in Utah? And we'll start with Tonya.

**Tonya:** So I was going to make the same joke.

**Tonya:** So in 25 years, when I'm 30, oh gosh, I'm looking,

**Liz:** Okay.

**Liz:** Yeah.

**Tonya:** just kidding. I, when I look forward to the next 25 years, I think ideally I'm going to go big here. Just that child abuse is no longer an issue. Back to those prevention efforts. I think the efforts to strengthen families, strengthen communities, that if that could be so strong, that children, that they're really able to live safe and healthy lives.

**Tonya:** and thrive in their own homes and communities. I just think that if we can continue to also create those supports to families so that when parents are struggling, that they [00:22:00] have the resources that they need to weather those challenging times in a way that doesn't put kids at risk. Over the years, I've seen such an increase in those collective efforts of so many people and agencies dedicated to really supporting children and families that it's been inspiring.

**Tonya:** And so I feel like, although this is really an aspirational goal, but I do

**Tonya:** hope that through these efforts that we can create

**Tonya:** those strong families And strong communities and just eliminate child abuse

**Liz:** Nicky, what are your dreams?

**Nikki:** I was thinking the same thing, really, but we always say as we would love to be out of business because we're no longer needed. I think that realistically, would echo what Tonya says and, look at all the prevention and ways that we can help support families to lessen the need for foster care in general.

**Nikki:** But for the kids and families that will still likely be a part of the foster care system, I think my dreams would be that we continue to [00:23:00] rally the community around the entire system, the foster family, the biological family, the kids, and continue to find new and creative ways to make them feel that they matter, that they're seen, a young man we were talking to yesterday that aged out of foster care, the word he used was wanting to be honored.

**Nikki:** And I haven't heard that often with the youth and it really struck me as we hear seen we hear connected, but to hear him say he wants to be honored for who he is and just

**Nikki:** his existence, right? So how do we help create opportunities

**Nikki:** to make the kids that we're working with feel that.

**Deborah:** Along with that, Nikki the other thing, foster care is not in the shadows anymore. It used

**Deborah:** to be people didn't talk about it, but now

**Deborah:** people are talking about it and they should be. And that's another way of honoring

**Deborah:** these children and these [00:24:00] families.

**Nikki:** Absolutely.

**Liz:** One thing we've talked about at Utah Foster Care is thinking about our name, not as like a thing, but as an activity that Utah is fostering care. And that can be for any family anywhere in the state that we just want to foster care of those families. And I love thinking about it that way more as a verb than a noun.

**Deborah:** And Liz, I'm going to turn this back on you because you've been training families for 25

**Deborah:** years. What changes have you seen and what would you like to see?

**Liz:** I think that Going back to what Tonya was talking about, that relationship between the foster family and the family of the children in care, I think we've talked about it the whole time, but it was one of those things that was more rare

25 years ago. Whereas today it feels like it happens pretty consistently, not every case, but pretty consistently.

**Liz:** And we hear just the most amazing stories from foster families talking about their work with the families, the children and going back to what we [00:25:00] talked about earlier about families expanding their capacity and of the kinds of kids that they can bring into their care. This is another thing families have said,

**Liz:** I knew I was going to fall in love with the kids. I didn't expect to fall in love with their parents. And to me it's one of the most beautiful parts of the work is seeing these connections happen. These families connect for the benefit of that child and seeing those relationships continue regardless of the permanency, that occurs in the case going back to Nikki's word again, honoring or Caden's word that they honor each other and they hold each other up and they hold each other dear.

**Liz:** And it's just, it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. It's still my favorite part of this work.

**Deborah:** That's a great way to start wrapping it up, but I don't want to leave without getting some final thoughts. Tonya, any final thoughts?

**Tonya:** I think I will just take this opportunity to thank all of the foster parents out there just to let them know you really are making such a positive difference in the life of children and families. And when we talk about prevention, this is the [00:26:00] tertiary prevention, right? Is that all that we can do for families that we're working with now to better support them, helps those prevention efforts in the future. So I just want to use that same word, honor and thank, all of the foster parents out there, that compassion, the kindness that they're showing, just the willingness to help those children in their home, have that sense of stability and really feeling like they belong.

**Tonya:** It goes so far. I just want to extend my deepest and sincerest gratitude to all of you out there that are providing that care.

**Deborah:** Thank you, Tonya, Nikki, final thoughts.

**Nikki:** I would echo that appreciation for families. Just a big thank you, to every foster family, to every kinship family, that opens their doors and helps provide a safe space. While families are healing. It's beautiful to see the impact that they're making again, talking with the youth yesterday, hearing him talk

about changing not just his life, but generations [00:27:00] forward and it's sacred work.

**Nikki:** It's work that we don't take lightly. We're honored to be a part of it. In any capacity, and I'm just thinking the families thinking in the community and everybody really that's willing to step into the heavy and the hard and the beautiful and be a part of solutions moving forward.

**Deborah:** Great words. Great words. . Thanks to you both. Tonya Myrup from DCFS and Nikki McKay from Utah Foster Care. Also my co host Liz Rivera. Thank you for joining me and our lovely producer Marshall Shearer who works behind the scenes. Remember you don't need to know everything to become a foster parent.

**Deborah:** You just need to be willing to learn. For details on both foster parenting and so many other ways you can get involved, go to [utahfostercare.org](http://utahfostercare.org). Check out some of

**Deborah:** the things that are going on during Foster Care Month, in

**Deborah:** the month of May, and beyond. This has been Fostering [00:28:00] Conversation. I'm Deborah Lindner.