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PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Amid Critical Need for Foster Parents, Most Massachusetts Residents Lack Understanding About Foster Care System; Yet Agree Supporting it is a Priority

New statewide poll, commissioned by HopeWell, suggests education is key to recruitment

(DEDHAM, MA) - A new statewide poll suggests that Massachusetts residents have a mostly positive view of the state's foster care system, but misconceptions and a lack of knowledge about the process create barriers that may prevent them from considering a role as a foster parent.

In the survey commissioned by HopeWell, the largest nonprofit provider of comprehensive foster care services in Massachusetts, just 14 percent of respondents said they were "very familiar" with the foster care system. Yet respondents who consider themselves most familiar with foster care were more likely to define it incorrectly.

"Since the pandemic, we have had a critical shortage of licensed foster homes – we do not have enough foster parents to help the children and teens who are displaced due to reports of child abuse or neglect," said Shaheer Mustafa, LICSW, President and Chief Executive Officer of HopeWell. "The survey shows that one of the reasons it is so difficult to recruit new foster parents is many people don't understand how the foster care system works, nor are they aware of the benefits of becoming a foster parent."

The online survey of 1,000 Massachusetts residents statewide ages 25 - 64 included respondents who match the state's demographics by gender, race/ethnicity, and region, among other factors. Information was gathered April 17 - 27, 2023. The poll was conducted by FM3 Research.

At the outset of the survey, respondents who had never been a foster parent were asked if they had ever considered becoming one. Twenty-one percent said they had very seriously or somewhat seriously considered fostering, while 53 percent said they had never considered it. After being educated through the survey about the process and benefits of fostering, 34 percent said they would now consider it. Those who still would not consider fostering dropped down to 36 percent.

"Their interest in fostering jumped by more than 60 percent once they understood more of what is asked of foster parents and what supports are available. We know we have many caring residents in Massachusetts who are parents or who would love to be a parent and who could help provide safety and stability to a child or teen at a time when they need it most. Through the results of this poll, we

can concentrate our efforts around education and showcasing the real positive relationships that can form through fostering,” **said Imani Seunarine, Vice President, Child and Family Programs.**

Many respondents lacked strong awareness on various aspects of foster care and foster parenting. Some of the misconceptions noted:

- Forty-five percent of respondents indicated, incorrectly, they think children are placed into foster care due to the child’s behavior or the child’s legal issues. In fact, children enter foster care because their parents are unable to care for them at that point in time for reasons such as abuse or neglect.
- Less than half of respondents were aware that foster parents do not have to accept any child/youth designated to them.
- One in three participants said that children receiving foster care could not achieve the same level of success as their peers.

Overall, 53 percent of those surveyed had a positive impression of foster care, while 37 percent had a negative impression. More than two-thirds of respondents who had personal experience with foster care – either as a child themselves, as a foster parent, or both – said their experiences were positive. Among those who had fostered before, 73 percent said they would consider fostering another child in their home very or somewhat seriously, while just 8 percent said they would not consider it.

One important area of agreement – 83 percent of respondents said improving foster care systems was extremely high or very high priority. Another 13 percent said it was somewhat of a priority. Just one percent of those surveyed said it was not much of a priority. There was strong bipartisan agreement for this, as well as broad geographic consensus around the state.

Foster parents can be single, married, or partnered. They can be LGBTQIA+. They can rent or own a home. They can have biological children of their own or no children. They do not need any special parenting qualifications to sign up. Training, financial support, ongoing professional guidance, emergency assistance, and peer connections are provided.

There are approximately [380,000 youth living in foster care](#) in the United States. In [Massachusetts](#), there are approximately 8,000 - 9,000 youth in foster care but just 5,500 foster homes. While the stresses of COVID led to a significant drop in foster homes as some parents discontinued or paused fostering, the downward trend has been evident for decades. HopeWell has seen a 68 percent drop in its licensed foster homes over the last 20 years.

“Kids enter foster care through no fault of their own. Because of the abuse, neglect, and trauma they’ve faced, they often need some additional support. But at the end of the day, it’s important to remember that they’re still kids – and like all kids, they act happy, silly, curious, and kind. That’s why we need loving people from all backgrounds who are willing to wrap these kids in love at a time when they desperately need it,” **said Mustafa.** *“Fostering is not for everyone. But for those with a big heart who want to parent a child, it can be incredibly rewarding.”*

To see more in-depth survey results, visit hopewellinc.org/survey.

To learn more about foster care in Massachusetts, visit FosterHopeMA.org.

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About HopeWell:

At HopeWell, our mission is to enrich the lives and expand the opportunities of individuals and families in need of love, support, and safe places to grow and thrive.

Founded in 1964, HopeWell has regional offices across Massachusetts and supports more than 1,500 children, families, and individuals across the Commonwealth each year. We are the largest nonprofit provider of comprehensive foster care in the state. We also support children experiencing foster care as they grow their early literacy skills; youth who are aging out of foster care and transitioning into adulthood; families involved with the child welfare system; and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For more information, visit hopewellinc.org.