

Foster Parent Workgroup Notes – Act 154 6/25/2026

Overall Themes from Foster Parents and Participants

The discussion centered less on the technical details of Act 154 and more on how investigations, substantiation decisions, and registry-related processes are experienced by foster and kinship caregivers. Participants emphasized that when allegations are made against a foster or kinship caregiver, the experience can feel isolating, confusing, frightening, and damaging to relationships with DCF staff and district teams.

A consistent theme was the need for clearer communication, more transparency, and better supports for caregivers before, during, and after an investigation or regulatory intervention.

Key Feedback and Perspectives

1. Caregivers need clearer information about what to expect if an allegation is made

Participants strongly supported developing a simple resource for foster and kinship caregivers explaining what happens when an allegation is made against them.

Suggested content included:

- What an investigation means
- What it does not mean
- Who may contact the caregiver
- Who may interview children in the home
- What role RLSI plays
- What role the district plays
- Expected timelines
- What communication may look like during the process
- What happens if the case is unfounded, internally founded, or substantiated
- Whether and when a caregiver may receive verbal or written notice of the outcome
- What the impact may be on placements, holds, licensing, or future caregiving
- The intersection of regulatory interventions with investigations

Participants noted that a one-page overview or brochure could be helpful, particularly if written in plain language.

2. Information should be shared more than once, not only during initial licensing

Several participants cautioned that foster parents receive an overwhelming amount of information during initial licensing and may not retain details about investigations at that point.

Ideas for when information could be shared included:

- During initial training, briefly and transparently
- At licensing visits
- At renewal
- At the time of each new placement
- When a child's history or needs may increase the likelihood of allegations or complex incidents
- At the moment an allegation is made, as a practical "what happens next" guide

There was support for normalizing this information without making caregivers fearful or implying that allegations are expected.

3. The investigation process can feel deeply isolating

Caregivers and Resource Coordinators described the period after an allegation as one where "everything goes dark." Caregivers may suddenly stop hearing from the staff they usually rely on, even while they continue caring for children in their home.

Participants described caregivers feeling:

- Alone
- Scared
- Angry
- Confused
- Unsure who they can talk to
- Unsure what information they are allowed to share
- Unsure whether the child will remain in the home
- Unsure whether they are still considered trusted partners

There was concern that this silence can reinforce an "us versus them" dynamic between foster parents and DCF.

4. Caregivers need a support person or point of contact during investigations

Multiple participants raised the need for someone who can support caregivers during the investigation process without compromising the investigation.

Ideas included:

- A designated point person who can explain the process
- A Resource Coordinator with clearer guidance about what they can and cannot discuss
- A peer support model with experienced foster parents
- External support options, such as community advocacy organizations
- Potential access to EAP-like support for foster parents

Participants recognized that FSD staff are mandated reporters and may not be able to serve as fully confidential supports. However, they still emphasized the need for

caregivers to have someone who can help them understand the process and feel less isolated.

5. Resource coordinators need clearer guidance and tools

Resource coordinators shared that they often feel their “hands are tied” when an investigation is opened. They may be asked not to contact the home until RLSI completes initial interviews or gives the green light.

Participants suggested developing guidance for Resource Coordinators on:

- When they may contact caregivers
- What they may say
- What topics they should avoid
- How to offer emotional support without discussing incident details
- How to preserve relationships while respecting investigative boundaries

There was strong support for giving Resource Coordinators clearer tools so they can support homes safely and consistently.

6. District relationships can be damaged by silence or unclear communication

Participants noted that foster parents often have established relationships with district staff and Resource Coordinators. When those people suddenly stop communicating, caregivers may experience that as rejection, suspicion, or a loss of trust.

Questions raised from the caregiver perspective included:

- How is the district notified when an investigation opens?
- How is the district notified when it closes?
- Are all involved workers updated when the caregiver is “cleared”?
- Can lingering uncertainty remain even after a “verbal closure” (intent to unsub is articulated verbally and it is acknowledged that it will take more time “to write it up” – the determination)?
- How can FSD prevent unresolved questions from damaging future working relationships?

Participants emphasized the importance of closing the loop not only with the caregiver, but also with the relevant district staff.

7. Participants had questions and concerns about substantiation standards and mitigating factors

Participants asked clarifying questions about the proposed framework, particularly the language around aggravating and mitigating factors. They had questions about the intent of internal findings in the context of foster parents and would like this clarified.

Concerns included:

- The term “prevail” was confusing

- There was a participant who was a retired attorney and felt this term was inappropriate for the definition given.
- The framework should more clearly distinguish between:
 - whether abuse or neglect occurred, and
 - whether the person should be placed on the registry
- Some mitigating circumstances may be part of the context for determining whether abuse or neglect occurred at all- this is not currently clear to this population in the framework
- Examples involving protective actions, self-defense, or preventing harm to a child need to be carefully framed

Participants suggested clearer language, such as explaining that mitigating factors may support an internal finding rather than registry placement, and that clear information be distributed at the beginning of any intervention.

8. Protective actions and self-defense need careful consideration

Several examples were discussed where a caregiver may physically intervene to prevent harm, such as stopping a child from running into danger or responding when a child is physically assaulting another person.

Participants emphasized that the full context matters, including:

- Whether the action was protective
- Whether force used was necessary or excessive
- Whether the caregiver was acting in self-defense
- Whether the injury was minor or significant
- Whether there was remorse, accountability, or changed behavior afterward

There was concern that examples used in guidance and discussion should avoid suggesting that reasonable protective actions would automatically be considered abuse or neglect.

9. Foster parents may face serious professional consequences

Participants emphasized that registry placement can have major consequences for caregivers, especially those who work as teachers, medical professionals, childcare providers, or in other roles involving children or vulnerable populations.

Concerns included:

- Loss of employment
- Loss of career options
- Background check consequences
- Long-term impacts from decisions made during stressful circumstances
- Caregivers not fully understanding the stakes when becoming a caregiver and also at the time of an investigation

Participants also raised concerns about identity verification and whether safeguards exist to ensure the correct person is placed on the registry.

10. Removal from a foster home during an investigation raises additional concerns

Participants discussed the complexity of situations where a child is removed from a foster home during an investigation, particularly when the child has a strong bond with the caregiver or foster siblings.

Questions and concerns included:

- Whether contact can continue between the child and foster family
- Whether contact with foster siblings can continue
- Who makes those decisions
- What happens if the child was moving toward adoption
- What happens if the caregiver later appeals or is cleared
- How long the relationship may be severed while the process unfolds

Participants noted that abrupt removal and no-contact periods can be traumatic for children and caregivers, especially when the child has lived in the home for a significant period of time.

Suggested Next Steps

Participants identified several possible next steps:

1. Develop a plain-language one-page resource for foster and kinship caregivers about what to expect during an investigation, assessment, or regulatory review.
2. Bring draft caregiver-facing content back to the next Foster Parent Workgroup for review and feedback, with a focus on clarity, tone, and usefulness during a stressful process.
3. Create guidance and possible scripting for Resource Coordinators and district staff on how to support caregivers during investigations while maintaining appropriate investigative boundaries.
4. Clarify communication expectations between RLSI, districts, Resource Coordinators, Family Services Workers, and caregivers, including when communication may be limited and why.
5. Explore whether caregivers can identify a support person during the process and clarify who they may talk to while still honoring confidentiality requirements.
6. Consider peer support, EAP-like support (Employee Assistance Program), or external support options for caregivers who are under investigation or navigating an assessment/regulatory concern.
7. Review the proposed framework language to ensure it is clear and understandable, especially around mitigating factors, internal findings, founded/unfounded determinations, and registry placement.

8. Include careful examples in guidance, particularly around protective action, self-defense, excessive force, and situations involving children or youth with complex needs.
9. Consider how and when information should be shared with caregivers, so it is not limited to initial licensing, including possible touchpoints at renewal, placement, licensing visits, or when an allegation is made.
10. Continue discussing how removals, holds, appeals, no-contact expectations, and post-investigation communication affect foster families, children, and placement stability.
11. Examine whether current practice varies across districts and identify opportunities for greater statewide consistency in how caregivers are supported during investigations or assessments.

Closing Reflection

The workgroup appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and emphasized that investigations involving foster and kinship caregivers are not only procedural events; they deeply affect relationships, trust, placement stability, and caregivers' willingness to continue serving. Participants supported clearer information, more consistent communication, and stronger supports that recognize both FSD's child safety responsibilities and the emotional reality for caregivers who are navigating an allegation.