

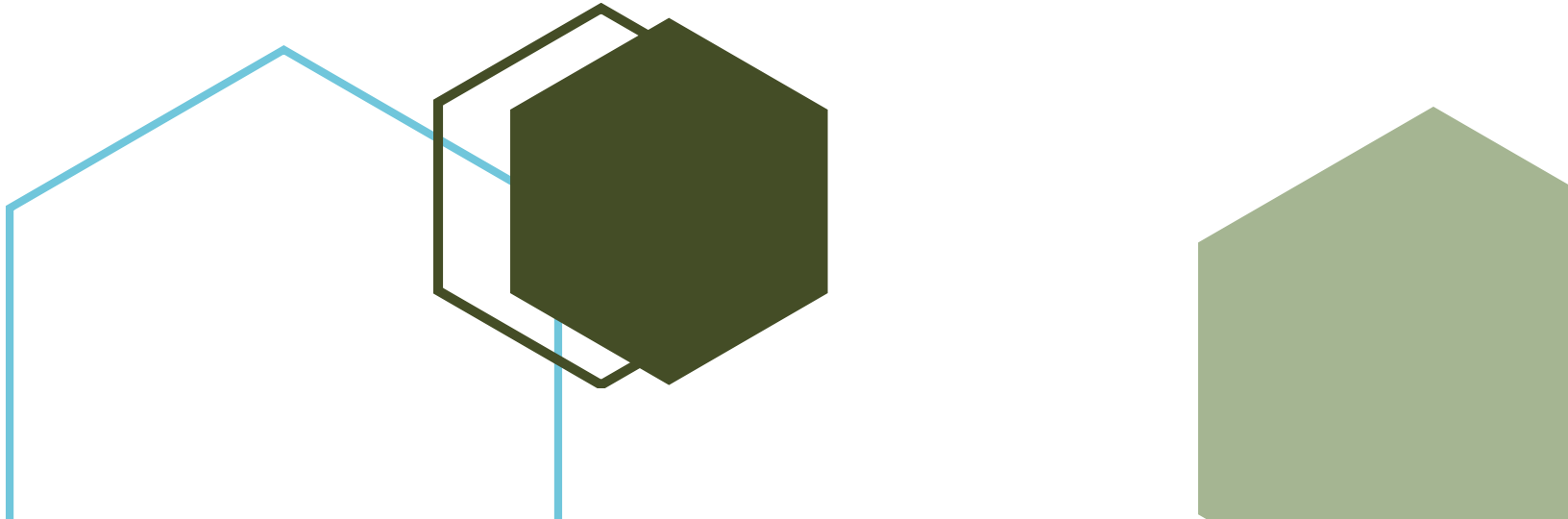


Vermont Diligent Recruitment Plan

[2020-2024]

Summary

Diligent recruitment is a systematic approach to identify, recruit, develop and support a pool of families who can meet the needs of children and youth who require placement in foster care. One of the key goals of Diligent Recruitment is to intentionally recruit foster parents who:

- Are best able to meet the needs of the children in care;
 - Will actively support reintegration and the role of birth families; and,
 - Are willing to meet the immediate and long-term needs of the children in care
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2020-2024 Vermont Diligent Recruitment Plan

I. Context and Background

Understanding Diligent Recruitment

Diligent recruitment is a systematic approach to identify, recruit, develop and support a pool of families who can meet the needs of children and youth who require placement in foster care. One of the key goals of Diligent Recruitment is to intentionally recruit foster parents who:

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The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994, as amended, prohibits the delay or denial of any adoption or placement in foster care due to the race, color, or national origin of the child or the foster or adoptive parents. It also requires States to provide for diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children for whom homes are needed. To meet MEPA's diligent efforts requirements, States must have a comprehensive plan that includes:

- A description of the characteristics of waiting children;
- Specific strategies to reach all parts of the community;
- Diverse methods of disseminating both general and child-specific information;
- Strategies for assuring that all prospective parents have access to the home study process, including location and hours of services that facilitate access by all members of the community;
- Strategies for training staff to work with diverse cultural, racial, and economic communities;
- Strategies for dealing with linguistic barriers;
- Non-discriminatory fee structures; and
- Procedures ensuring a timely search for prospective parents awaiting a child, including the use of exchanges and other interagency efforts, provided that such procedures ensure that the placement of a child in an appropriate household is not delayed by the search for a same race or ethnic placement.

Key Information: The Structure of Child Welfare in Vermont

The Agency of Human Services was created by the Vermont Legislature in 1969 to serve as the umbrella organization for all human service activities within state government. The Agency is led by the secretary who appointed by the Governor. The Secretary's Office is responsible for strategically leading the agency and its departments and establishing and implementing agency wide policies and practices that cross departmental boundaries.

The Department for Children and Families (DCF) DCF sits within the broader Agency of Human Services. DCF is unified in a passion for:

- reducing poverty and homelessness
- eliminating hunger
- Improving the safety and well-being of children, youth and families
- keeping children safe from abuse
- providing timely and accurate financial supports for individuals and families
- supporting Vermont's most vulnerable citizens (e.g., older Vermonters, people with disabilities, and families with children)

The Family Services Division (FSD) works in partnership with families, communities and others to make sure children and youth are safe from abuse, their basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter and health care) are met and youth are free from delinquent behavior. They also ensure families are supported to achieve these goals.

FSD serves the following populations:

- At-risk children, youth and families
- Children and youth in the care and custody of the state
- Youth on juvenile probation
- Foster, respite and adoptive parents

Districts and Central Office

A Family Services District Office is located in each of the 12 AHS regions across the state. Each local office is led by a District Director who is responsible for carrying out the mission of the Division and practicing the day to day work of child protection in accordance with best practice and policy. Districts range in size, with variations in the number of staff on hand to do the work. Each district is however responsible for the full scope of child protection work carried out by the division.

Additional work units are located within the Division's Central Office. FSD is led by a Deputy Commissioner and is supported by the Family Services Management Team, made up by the Directors of each work Unit. An Operations Unit provides management oversight to the 12 District Offices. The Policy, Planning and Practice Unit attend to the development and implementation of all Division Policy. The Residential Licensing and Special Investigations Unit licenses and regulates foster care and residential programs that serve children. They also conduct child abuse investigations on cases that involve a licensed caregiver or other regulated child serving programs. The System of Care Unit oversees foster care, adoption and guardianship, post permanency supports as well as all three of the interstate compacts. A long-standing public/private partnership between the State of Vermont Permanency Planning Team and Lund is responsible for child specific recruitment for children who have no identified permanency resource. The Special Services Unit oversees the high end of the system of care including Residential Treatment and WRAP level services.

The Need for Diligent Recruitment

The State of Vermont, like many jurisdictions has been experiencing an increase in the number of children entering foster care. As of the writing of this Diligent Recruitment (DR) Plan, there are currently 1337 children placed in care. While an initial look at data

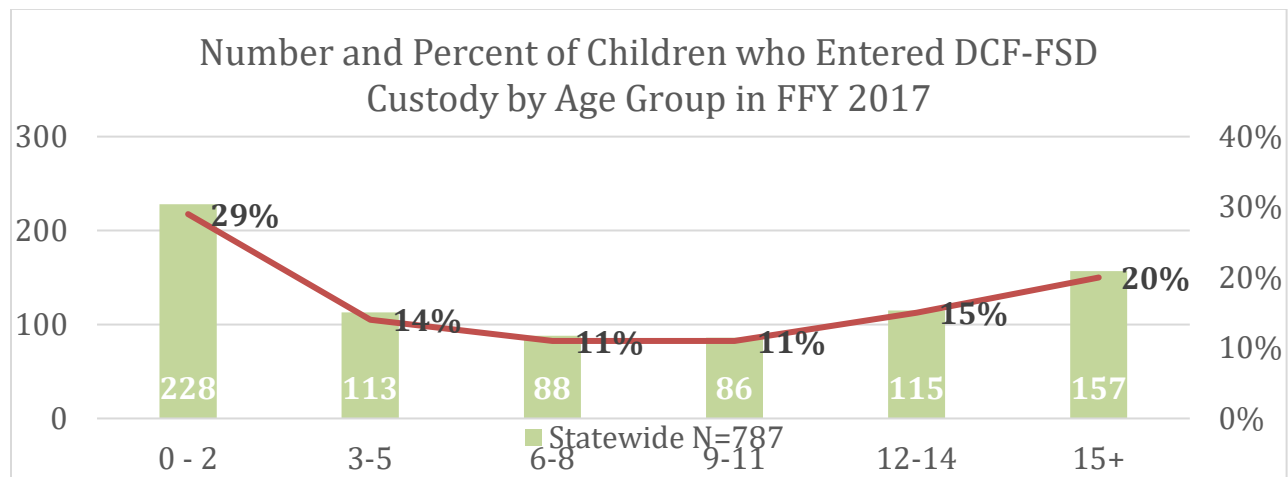
seems to indicate that we have plenty of homes to care for the children in our custody, our districts are experiencing a different reality. Licensed homes do not always have the capacity or availability to respond to the specific needs of the children needing care. Caregivers consistently share that they wish that they had more support and contact from the district offices. Children entering care have increasingly complex presentations which only exacerbates those difficulties.

Key Information: What do we know about Child Characteristics?

The following demographic information will provide detail related to the children being cared for in foster care in Vermont:

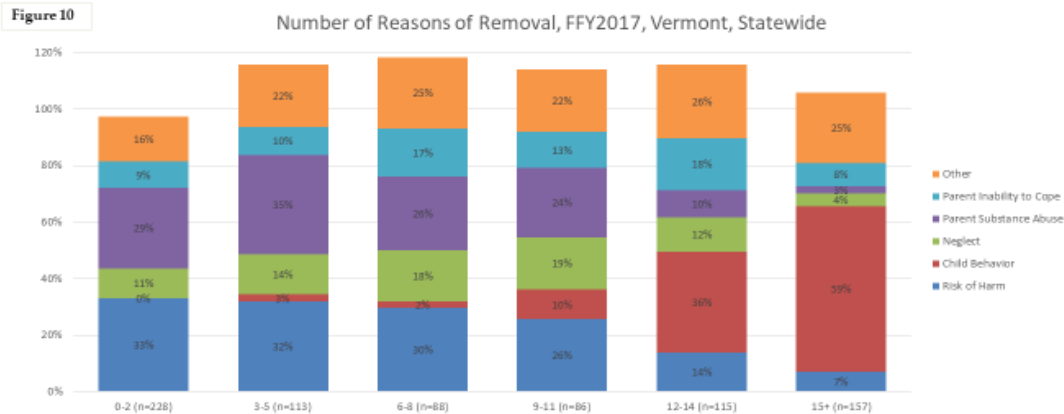
- Just over half of the children who entered care were Male: 55% (443) compared to 45% (345) Female.

The cohorts of children entering care were grouped by age



- The very young cohort of children entering care came to the attention of the division due to their vulnerability typically entering due to a risk of harm often connected to substance abuse. Approximately 60% of the under 5 population of new custody entrants are impacted in some way by the opiate crisis.
- The older cohort of youth entering care typically came to the attention of the division related to their behavior.

YOUNGER CHILDREN ENTER CARE AT A HIGHER PERCENTAGE DUE TO RISK OF HARM AND PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE



Data Source: ROM Foster Care Counts report identifying youth entering foster care from 10/1/2016-9/30/2017, unduplicated count, capturing the first entry if multiple entries for a single child exist.
Data Details: A single child can have multiple removal reasons at the time of removal. Other category = combined removal reasons of Abandon, Child Substance Abuse, Inadequate Housing, Parent Death, Parent Jail, Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse.

Current and Potential Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families for Children in Foster Care

A cursory analysis of VT data indicates that there is not a disparity between the race of the children who enter foster care and the race of the caregivers they are placed with. There is some anecdotal evidence however, that youth of color may be somewhat overrepresented in residential and institutional levels of care.

World Population Review (2018) indicates that the Vermont population is 624,263

- 94.7% White,
- 1.2% African American,
- 2% Hispanic,
- 1.5% Asian,
- 2% of more than one race or ethnicity.
- 37% claim no religious affiliation

Additionally, there are no federally recognized tribes in Vermont

The Need for Increased Use of Kinship Care

Nonrelative Foster Care continues to be the most common type of placement at 55%. There is significant variation from one FSD district to another regarding the use of relative placement ranging from a concerning 8.9% to a rate of 49.3% with an average statewide kin placement rate of 28%. These numbers have fluctuated throughout the

PIP period. Increasing Kinship placement is an identified priority of the DR plan. One clear fact is that FSD must improve the overall rate of kinship care if we hope to reduce the amount of recruitment, we need to do to identify non-relative caregivers. Based on the research, sustained focus on this area of diligent recruitment will yield improved outcomes in placement stability, minimize the trauma of removal, maintain vital connections and improve overall child well-being measures.

CURRENTLY, 80% OF CHILDREN ENTERING CARE ARE PLACED INITIALLY IN RELATIVE OR FOSTER HOME CARE

Figure 6

INITIAL PLACEMENT TYPE FOR CHILD ENTRIES (10/1/16-9/30/17)	Foster Home	433	55%
	Group Home	70	9%
	Institution	43	5%
	Intensive Residential	10	1%
	Non-Final Adopt	6	1%
	Parent	30	4%
	Relative	194	25%
	Independent Living	1	0%

Data Source: ROM Foster Care Counts report identifying youth entering foster care from FFY 2017 10/1/2016-9/30/2017.
Data Details: Includes an unduplicated count, capturing the first entry if multiple entries for a single child exist.

II. Diligent Recruitment Guiding Principles and Values

While children remain in out-of-home placement, the Vermont Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division and its partners seek to provide safe and appropriate family foster homes that encourage and support reunification when that can be safely accomplished. We are committed to keeping siblings together, ensuring that placements minimize trauma and are conducive to supporting children’s cultural, spiritual, academic and emotional development.

This list of Guiding Principles and Values was developed as a part of the Family Services Division Strategic Planning process.

We Believe...

Children, Youth, and Families

- Deserve to be safe, heard, and connected to their communities.
- Know themselves best and their expertise should be valued
- Are viewed in the context of their culture and community.
- Can grow and change with support and adequate resources.
- Are active participants and partners in the process.

Staff

- Offer their dedication and commitment, which are essential in carrying out our mission.
- Provide quality work that is strengths-based, trauma-informed, and influenced by research.

Foster and Kin Families

- Are primary partners in ensuring the well-being of children and youth.
- Deserve timely training, communication, and support they need to be effective.

Communities

- Are essential to keeping children safe and promoting healthy families.
- Collaborate to meet the holistic needs of children, youth, and families.

III. Vision for Diligent Recruitment in Vermont

The overall vision for Diligent Recruitment in Vermont was constructed in collaborative fashion by the DR Core Team, comprised of twenty-seven internal and external stakeholders at both the state and district levels.

Priority Areas and Objectives for the Plan

Our Diligent Recruitment plan is designed to achieve the following priorities and objectives, which align with and fit within specific strategies from the broader FSD Strategic Plan.

Three major priorities to be addressed in the Diligent Recruitment Plan:

Priority 1.) increase retention of kinship, foster and adoptive parents

Objective i: Reduce % of Kin and Foster Families that close Voluntarily or Withdraw

Objective ii: Increase % of Kin and Foster Families whose level of support and connectedness needs are met to sustain healthy partnerships

Priority 2.) improve recruitment by increasing timely system response from inquiry to licensure

Objective i: Districts adhere to a common, best practice inquiry to licensure process

Objective ii: Increase % of Kin and Foster Families with access to timely, relevant training

Priority 3.) increase available capacity of kin foster and adoptive parents

Objective i: Using targeted recruitment plans on the state and district levels to increase the number of homes that, with appropriate support, can safely care for the diversity of children in care (complex needs, LGBTQ, racial and ethnic backgrounds, youth with physical and developmental challenges).

Objective ii: Increase % of children with kinship placements

Objective iii: Increase # of foster homes able to maintain children within their geographical and cultural communities

We will pursue these priority areas and objectives by strengthening our key infrastructure elements (described below) and implementing a variety of activities tied to each priority and objective.

Action steps for each priority have been developed to support implementation. The DR Action Plan is a living document which articulates plan strategies, priorities, objectives and activities. As the project continues, the Strategies and Priorities are expected to shift infrequently. The Objectives and Activities will be revised regularly based on how the plan unfolds and based on what the data tells us about the success of the various interventions employed.

Vermont FSD will continue to use its Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) processes for this diligent recruitment work, in which the districts identify their strengths and challenges in a variety of PIP related practice areas.

Key Infrastructure Elements for Diligent Recruitment

After deep problem exploration and identification of root causes, the group identified five key infrastructure elements essential for a successful DR Program in Vermont. These elements are considered critical to the successful implementation of a Diligent Recruitment Program in Vermont. Ultimately, any activity that a district or the central office engages in to support Diligent Recruitment will be associated with one of the key infrastructure elements. The key infrastructure elements are summarized below, including the description and practices for each.

1.) A Responsive Model of Engagement and Support

A model for engagement and support of resource families—from recruitment to post placement—that ensures:

1. Families are recognized as valuable resources;
2. All families have access to a common, efficient, and supportive home study, training, and licensing process;
3. Agency resources are readily accessible;
4. Family concerns are addressed quickly; and,
5. An Agency culture where all staff have an integral role in the recruitment, development, and support of families.

2.) Community Engagement

Communities are engaged in understanding the needs of children in care and are provided with opportunities to support those children and the families that care for them.

3.) Unified Policy and Procedures

Unified policies and procedures for the recruitment, development, and support of resource families, with District plans to meet the needs of individual communities.

4.) Training and Development

A training and development program that:

1. Equips resource families to meet the needs of children in their care;
2. Enables and supports the workforce to effectively engage and meet the needs of families; and,
3. Educates the community about the needs of children at risk of entering foster care, the needs of resource families, and the continuum of ways to support the children of Vermont.

5.) A Unified Data Model

A unified system for data collection and reporting, utilizing the same variables to establish a baseline, set goals and objectives, monitor progress, and assess the effectiveness of strategies for recruiting, developing, and supporting families.

These key elements represent the vision for Diligent Recruitment and together they provide the foundation for the development of priorities for a Diligent Recruitment Program in Vermont.

The Vermont DR program will provide general, targeted, and child-specific recruitment and will support and develop caregiving families that meet the needs of children in care and are capable of:

1. Participating in concurrent planning;
2. Accommodating siblings placed together;
3. Offering care to children with special needs;
4. Supporting educational stability; and,
5. Reflecting the diversity of Vermont's children.

What Will Change Under Our New Approach to Diligent Recruitment—What Will be New and What We'll Stop Doing

Practice Changes

- Each district office will use a common tracking spreadsheet to support to collection of data related to system response from inquiry, first contact, orientation, initial training, through the home study process and on to licensing. We will be able to identify areas where caregivers tend to drop out with a goal of streamlining and shortening the entire process.
- Recruit new families and when they demonstrate interest ensure that we respond to the inquiry in a timely manner
- Offer Orientation meetings for potential caregivers across the state on an ongoing and routine basis including an online version statewide...

- Redesigned Caregiver Training to afford an interested person the opportunity to engage in training immediately through online offerings and then a series of face to face learning sessions. We have stopped the approach of only offering trainings in each district twice/per year for six consecutive weeks at a time.
- Reduce our practice of placing children before caregiver training has been completed by shifting how and when training is delivered.
- Reinvest in and embed Family Finding into division practice throughout the life of a case. Formalize and provide structure to family finding activities by contracting with community partners to complete family finding on every new custody case within 45 days of entry. Offer guidance and training and to the field to support Family Finding implementation. Message to foster families and birth parents about family finding.
- Caregivers who are well trained and supported will be better able to care for the children who need care. The well-being needs of the children will be better understood and consistently met. Families who are supported are likely to continue to provide care and will tell their friends about their successful experiences.
- FSD will be able to stop placing children in homes based heavily on the availability of the home. Recruitment activities combined with adequate Caregiver Support and development will ensure that a cadre of skilled caregivers are available and prepared to meet the needs of the children who need care. Families will have a role in their own development as caregivers and will be more fully engaged in identifying their strengths and challenges
- Increase consistency across the state in the core level of support proactively and routinely offered to all caregivers across multiple domains. Caregivers will know what supports are available to them and the Division will ensure that those supports are accessible.

Organizational Culture Changes

- Coaching to support a culture shift related to the responsibility for recruitment and retention of caregivers, making it clear and reinforcing that all FSD staff have a role in the recruitment and retention of caregivers.
- Funding has been allocated to hire Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention Specialists in each district. Their job description focuses their work on activities that will support DR implementation. Additionally, the FY 2020 budget supports three of our larger districts to hire a second Resource Coordinator (RC). The RC's responsibilities include many activities connected to DR including recruitment, making placements and the ongoing training and support of caregivers.
- The work of recruitment and retention of caregivers will be incorporated in an intentional and systematic way in each district office. This work will no longer be "the thing that we get to when we have time". We have increased staffing in each district office to offer additional resources to support this shift.
- Caregivers are volunteers who respected and treated as the important partners they are. We will continue to support regular listening sessions in each district on

a regular basis to keep a pulse on the experiences of caregivers. Staff, in their various roles will be supported and expected to collaborate with caregivers.

Data Informed Decision-Making Changes

- Use the District Practice Profile for our Key Infrastructure Elements for Diligent Recruitment to determine how well district practice compares to recommended practice in DR.
- Use data to select specific recruitment activities and to stop engaging in activities that are not effective
- Increase consistency in data collection to understand and improve initial system response
- Provide DR data to the local districts to support ongoing planning, management and CQI monitoring

Communication and Marketing Changes

- A person skilled in communication, marketing and branding has been hired to support ongoing DR implementation. The expectation is that this support will lead to the development of a comprehensive DR communication plan, create a unified brand and message and will limit the multiple and varied messages that are currently shared.
- Caregivers receive routine communication via e-news twice per month
- FSD has increased its presence on social media. 60% of the new inquiries received are coming from Front Porch Forum, a neighborhood building service unique to Vermont
- FSD has developed relationships with the Vermont Association of Broadcasters and Vermont Public Radio. Ads are being aired at reduced rates.

Major Next Steps

- By September 2019, implementation with the three selected pilot regions will have begun.
The Core Team will finalize the District Assessment and Practice Profile tool that will support the districts (both pilot and statewide) to explore their current practice related to the Key Infrastructure Elements. This information, supported by consultation with the Foster Care Manager, will guide the district in selecting strategies designed to improve their recruitment and retention outcomes in the priority areas identified by the project. Taken together, with the addition of specific change targets, these tools will support both initial pilot site implementation and ultimately statewide implementation. The DR Core Team will set specific targets for improvement now that baseline data is available in some of the priority area. For other priority areas, baseline data still needs to be collected. Change targets for these priority areas will be selected once the baselines have been established.
- A data display will be developed to support the presentation of this information to the districts. Through consultation with the Foster Care Manager, district offices receive coaching related to what the data is “telling” them so that they can

make mid-course corrections if their trends are not moving in the direction they expected. Having regular access to kin care data, placement stability data, timely system response data, unplanned move data and caregiver satisfaction feedback combined with coaching will allow our system to take an important step toward addressing the recruitment and retention needs of the division.

- We will revise the Voluntary Closure Survey and routinely re-administer it. We will also develop a caregiver stay survey to better learn what caregivers have to say about what makes them choose to continue caregiving. Additionally, we will develop a similar survey for kin caregivers to determine how their experience of the FSD system might differ from the experience of non-relative caregivers.
- A Comprehensive Communication Plan will support overall communication with both internal (staff and caregivers) and external partners (community partners, the court system etc.)
- The Core Team will develop a plan for ongoing evaluation and progress monitoring. The plan will identify who needs to be involved in ongoing evaluation and progress monitoring.
- The Core Team is comprised of both direct service and operational level staff who are able to make key decisions. It will be necessary to ensure that the group continues to be configured in this way to support well balanced, realistic decision making.
- The overall success of the DR implementation plan will continue to rest with this Core Team, with the team being convened quarterly to ensure that we are sustaining our attention to implementation benchmarks and adjusting the plan as needed to meet our outcome goals.

APPENDIX B

Diligent Recruitment Theory of Change

