



Friday, September 21, 2007 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Wanted: good foster parents

By Maureen O'Hagan
Seattle Times staff reporter

To Joey Charlton, a supervisor at the Children's Administration office that handles the placement of abused and neglected children from King County, Wednesday was a good day — only seven crises for his team to handle.

That's seven kids who were pulled from their parents' homes and were in need of immediate placement — immediate, as in *right this minute, today*.

On any given day, Charlton's five placement coordinators also juggle dozens of other cases they consider long-term, where there is perhaps an extra day or two before the youth gets out of juvenile detention, or a week before a foster parent calls it quits.

Last week, Charlton said, it took nine straight hours of phone calls before they could find a temporary home for a 3-year-old boy. Not long before that, they had to find a home for six siblings whose parents had been arrested — and who spoke only Cambodian.

It is a difficult job under the best of circumstances. But it's made even tougher because Washington has a shortage of foster parents.

State workers first try to find relatives; next, they look for a nearby licensed foster home that will accept the child. When that doesn't work, they're sometimes forced to go across the state to find space.

Statewide, only three in 10 of these children stay in the same city. For those who wind up far from home, their trauma is magnified. Not only do these kids lose their parents, but they lose most everything else they know: their teachers, their friends, their local park.

"The common denominator is they're all scared and they're all loyal to their families," Charlton said.

Now, DSHS has launched an agencywide focus on foster parenting, recruiting foster parents in places and in ways they never have before, reaching out to everyone from struggling migrant workers to well-paid Microsofties.

In addition, they're urging people in the community to get involved with abused children's lives in other ways. And they're turning to unusual tools, such as marketing campaigns and demographic studies, to improve the statistics.

"It's a unique arrangement for a state to have put this kind of priority on recruiting," said Judith McKenzie, a consultant with AdoptUsKids, a project funded by the federal government to encourage adoptions.

The state is being spurred along by more than a simple desire to help foster children. It's under legal obligation to increase the ranks of foster parents by 10 percent annually as part of a lawsuit settlement in 2004. The suit was filed on behalf of Washington children who had been bounced among foster homes, separated from their siblings and who languished in inappropriate placements. Increasing the number of beds is expected to have a ripple effect throughout the system, helping the state meet its many other requirements, such as keeping siblings together and ensuring they get to visit family.

Not an easy sell

Until recently, recruiting potential foster parents meant setting up a table at the Puyallup Fair or a mall, said Ross Dawson, director of program and practice improvement for the Children's Administration. The state tried to interest whoever happened to stroll by.

It was never an easy sell.

Many families don't think they're able to foster a child, especially when two parents work and the costs of child-rearing outpace the \$400-\$550 monthly reimbursements foster parents get for an average child. "And the kind of needs foster children bring don't make it everyone's first desire," Dawson said. Emotional or behavioral issues are not unusual in these kids, who've all experienced some sort of trauma.

To find new foster parents, Dawson said, the first step involves identifying traits shared by longtime foster parents. Are they churchgoers? Neighborhood activists? Are they empty-nesters or childless?

"If we can understand what characteristics make those families stay committed, then we can begin to focus recruitment in those areas," said McKenzie, who will help DSHS analyze the data.

Community help sought

Behind the scenes at DSHS, there's another shift going on. Instead of putting the fate of abused or neglected children entirely in the hands of the "experts," as it has in the past, the state is now asking for help from the community.

In presentations to groups around the state, DSHS is making maps to help with their pitch.

The agency recently began using a simple and inexpensive program, Microsoft Streets & Trips, to map the homes children are removed from and where they wind up. Show where the need is, the thinking goes, and people may step up to help.

Migrant families in Pasco did that following a meeting last month, said Brian Cox, a state coordinator for these efforts in Southeastern Washington.

Before about 40 families at the Pasco 1 Center, a child-care facility, Cox displayed the map.

Nearly 70 red dots were clustered mainly in one corner of town. That's where children were removed from their parents. The homes the kids went to were symbolized by tiny houses, which were scattered well into other cities and even across county lines. Forty-eight of the children left not only their schools but Pasco itself. "We were able to see, wow, there's a lot of children placed outside our community," said Esther Serrano, the center's director. "It was really an eye-opener."

By the end of the presentation, Cox and Serrano said, more than half of the audience wanted to get involved

— by doing everything from reviewing more neighborhood data to becoming full-fledged foster parents. Maps like this will soon be used in recruiting efforts statewide.

King County shortage

The foster-parent shortage is particularly acute in King County. As housing costs have risen, many foster families have been forced to move to outlying areas.

Take one day this week, when, even though there are 500 state-licensed foster homes in King County, only 43 were accepting emergency placements. But placing a child isn't as simple as finding an empty bed. Some homes take only infants to 3-year-olds; others take only teens; still others take only kids on weekends. And DSHS can't, for example, place a physically aggressive teen in a home with a 6-year-old. It can't place a medically fragile child in a home with an untrained caregiver.

The foster-home count is so low that state licensors in King County have expanded their jobs to include recruiting, as well. They've taken a targeted approach, and so far, it's paying off, said area administrator Paula Bentz.

A Lummi tribal member was hired last spring to recruit Native American families and so far has found 15 interested in becoming foster parents, Bentz said. For years there hadn't been a single new Native American foster family that Bentz knows of.

Another licensor is targeting African Americans and a third focuses on Latinos.

Yet another recruiter is looking for Microsoft employees.

DSHS said its efforts are working. As of July, there were 262 more foster homes in the state than there were a year earlier, according to a state spokeswoman.

Still, the problem remains.

"As a community, we need to sit back and say, 'Where was I when that child was being hurt?' " said Ruth Graham, one of several private contractors the state has relied upon to recruit foster parents. "If we weren't doing anything, we need to examine ourselves."

Maureen O'Hagan: 206-464-2562 or mohagan@seattletimes.com

Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company