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# Parents use abandonment law to shed teens

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OMAHA — The abandonments began on Sept. 1, when a mother left her 14-year-old son in a police station here.

By Sept. 23, two more boys and one girl, ages 11 to 14, had been abandoned in hospitals in Omaha and Lincoln. Then a 15-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl were left.

The biggest shock to public officials came last week, when a single father walked into an Omaha hospital and surrendered nine of his 10 children, ages 1 to 17, saying that his wife had died and he could no longer cope with the burden of raising them.

In total last month, 15 older children in Nebraska were dropped off by a beleaguered parent or custodial aunt or grandmother who said the children were unmanageable.

Officials have called the abandonments a misuse of a new law that was mainly intended to prevent so-called Dumpster babies — the abandonment of newborns by young, terrified mothers — but instead has been used to hand off out-of-control teenagers or, in the case of the father of 10, to escape financial and personal despair.

The spate of abandonments has prompted an outcry about parental irresponsibility and pledges to change the state law. But it has also cast a spotlight on the hidden extent of family turmoil around the country and what many experts say is a shortage of respite care, counseling and especially psychiatric services to help parents in dire need.

Some who work with troubled children add that economic conditions, like stagnant low-end wages and the epidemic of foreclosures, may make the situation worse, adding layers of worry and conflict.

"I have no doubt that there are additional stresses today on families who were already on the margin," said Gary Stangler, director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative in St. Louis, which aids foster children entering adulthood.

Mark Courtney, an expert on child welfare at the University of Washington, said that what happened in Nebraska "would happen in any state."

"These days there's a huge void in services for helping distressed families," Mr. Courtney said.

When children are abused or neglected, they can be taken by the child-welfare system, and possibly enter foster care. When they commit crimes, they enter the juvenile justice system. In both cases, children and parents are supposed to receive counseling and other aid.

But when troubled children do not fit those categories, they often fall through the cracks, Mr. Courtney said. Even middle-income families with health insurance often have only paltry coverage for psychiatric services and cannot afford intensive or residential treatment programs. The poorest, on Medicaid, often have trouble finding therapists who will take the low rates.

And some parents are reluctant to seek whatever help does exist.

Jim Jenkins, a computer network manager in Lincoln, suffered through years with his teenage son, whom he described as "out of control,"

"I can see some parents getting overwhelmed and deciding that giving up the child is the best thing," Mr. Jenkins said.

The boy's mother died when he was 8, and at age 13 he seemed to become a different person, Mr. Jenkins said, constantly in trouble at school, making threats that led to visits by the police.

"It was just a living hell for years," Mr. Jenkins said. "I didn't know where to turn, and I took it on myself that it was my fault."

Finally, the police made him put his son in a hospital for troubled youth for several days, then told him about a respite program at Cedars Home for Children, which took the boy for a week, giving Mr. Jenkins, his daughter and his new wife a break and starting therapy for the boy.

"After a while, you realize this is not going to end today, there is no 30-minute solution," Mr. Jenkins said.

But after years of therapy, his son turned a corner, has a diploma and plans to go to college.

"I was lucky," Mr. Jenkins said, adding that a parent with more children, a less flexible employer and little money may just throw his hands up.

In July, Nebraska became the last of the states to enact a so-called safe-haven law. Such laws permit mothers to leave an infant at a facility with no fear of prosecution. Nationwide, more than 2,000 babies have been turned over since Texas enacted the first such law in 1999, according to the National Safe Haven Alliance in Virginia.

But Nebraska's version was far broader than all others, protecting not just infants but also children up to age 19.

State Senator Arnie Stuthman, sponsor of the Nebraska bill, said some legislators had said they wanted to protect all children from harm.

"The law in my opinion is being abused now," said Mr. Stuthman, who said he would push for a revision. "There are family services out there, but some people may lack the resources to take advantage of them, and we've got to take a hard look at what more we can provide."

Todd A. Landry, the state director of children and family services, denied that the involved families had not had access to aid — most of the children, for example, were in the state Medicaid program and some had received psychiatric care — and he noted that well-publicized hot lines could direct families to help.

"Some parents had accessed our services but weren't getting the results they wanted," Mr. Landry said.

"The appropriate response is to reach out to family, friends and community resources," he said. "What is not appropriate is just to say I'm tired of dealing with this and drop the child off at a hospital."

Mr. Landry said parents and guardians were mistaken if they thought they could walk away from their responsibilities. For now, such children will be placed in foster care or with relatives, but the courts could require parents to attend counseling and might even order them to pay child support.

He said economic distress was a major issue in only one case, that of Gary Staton, 34, the father of 10 whose wife had died.

Mr. Staton, who gave up all but his oldest child, an 18-year-old girl, remains something of a mystery. His wife died in February 2007 after giving birth to the 10th child. Both parents had sporadic employment.

For nine months, in 2004, the children were taken by child welfare officials because their home was filthy and disordered, and the gas and water had been turned off. The family has since received public aid with rent and utility bills while

Mr. Staton, for unclear reasons, recently quit a factory job.

Their rented yellow wooden house in a low-income area of north Omaha was vacant last weekend and showed signs of disrepair, with part of the roof crumbling and a broken window covered with a blanket.

In a telephone interview, with KETV in Omaha, Mr. Staton mentioned the loss of his wife of 17 years.

"We raised them together," he said. "I didn't think I could do it alone. I fell apart. I couldn't take care of them."

"I was able to get the kids to a safe place before they were homeless," he said. "I hope they know I love them. I hope their future is better without me around them."

Stunned relatives offered last week to take in the children, and officials said they would probably go to two family homes as soon as background checks were complete.

Joanne Manzner, the stepmother of the deceased wife, said relatives had frequent contact with Mr. Staton's family, sometimes taking children for a weekend to give him a rest, and were puzzled that he had not asked for help before taking such drastic action.

Officials and some private agencies differed this week about the adequacy of the state's family programs.

"In Nebraska, as in a lot of states, we don't have sufficient funding to provide a really strong mental health system for kids," said Judy Kay, chief operating officer for the Child Saving Institute in Omaha, which helps families in crisis. "But we do have resources that many parents are not aware of or are not using," including psychiatric counseling with fees tied to family income. .

Some who abandoned children last month were aunts, uncles or grandmothers who had taken custody when the parents were incapable of providing care. Several families had prior contact with social workers and psychologists, but the children remained violent and unmanageable.

Judy Lopez, 48, and her husband took charge of her grandsons here more than three years ago . Both boys had been neglected and physically abused; now, ages 7 and 9, they have severe behavioral problems involving fighting, stealing and lying.

"Some days I just want to pull my hair out," Ms. Lopez said, adding that like many other families, they were slow to seek aid.

The school suggested a free program managed by the schools and the Child Saving Institute, a local nonprofit organization, that combined counseling for parents and for the children. The boys see a therapist, Ms. Lopez said, and the problems have eased somewhat.

"Help is out there," she said, "but people have to know how to find it."