

Adoption trends offer hope, some concern

Tuesday, November 20, 2007

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After years of dismal stories about the plight of children in foster care and their prospects for adoption, there is good news.

The number of children in foster care is down and the number of adoptions is up. "We're making headway," said Charelia Bazemore, a supervisory social worker with the District's Child and Family Services Agency.



"We're meeting our goals and exceeding them."

National trends mirror this positive outlook, said Casey Family Services' Sarah Greenblatt, director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practices.

"While we still have too many kids in care and they move much too often and stay too long, we have seen significant innovations to work out plans that ensure the well-being, safety and permanence of these children," she said.

There are about 2,500 children in the District's foster care system, a 16 percent decrease from last year's numbers.

Adoption figures also reflect positive trends.

Maryland and Washington showed a steady decrease in the number of children awaiting adoption from 2002 to now, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Children & Families.

According to the District's Family Court, the number of adoptions in Washington rose from 464 in 2002 to 802 in 2004.

The number of adoptions declined in 2005 and continued this year, but that's not necessarily bad news, social workers said. Instead, the dip reflects successes in several other efforts to place kids, like reunifying them with their families or having other relatives take care of them, Bazemore said.

"Relatives, aunts, cousins and grandparents, are coming forward and taking the kids," she said.

In fact, placing children back with parents has overtaken adoption as the means for finding permanent homes for children, according to the Family Court's 2007 report to Congress.

Nationally, while the number of children in foster care and those awaiting adoption progressively decreased, the number of adoptions spiked soon after the enactment of the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 but then leveled off at an average of 51,000 per year.

In part, the plateau just reflects the capacity of the child care system to process a finite number of cases, Greenblatt said.

But the numbers also speak to a more disturbing reality, said Rita Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

"There is also a trend of aging children in foster care, and the older they get, the longer they stay," she said.

The trend is especially prevalent among Black children who represent about 34 percent of the foster care population. They stay on average about nine months longer in the system than other children, according to a recent study by the Government Accountability Office.

According to the D.C. Family Court report, at the end of last year, more than four of every 10 children under court supervision were 15 years old or older. About 22 percent of the children never found homes, and instead just grew too old, 18, to stay in the foster care system.

Finding people who want to adopt older children remains difficult, Bazemore said.

"A lot of parents who come through still want children 0 to 5 years old when we really need people for children ages 8 and up," she said.

To address the problem in the District, the Agency created another recruitment unit to find homes for hard to place kids. The teams have flooded the televisions, radios, buses, train stations and other public forums with information about foster care and adoption.

That outreach is what led Wanda Behm and her husband Bob to adopt four siblings last year. The retired Navy communications specialists welcomed siblings Steven, 10, Tatyana, 9; Marcus, 7, and Dion, 6, into their Locust Grove, Va., home.

"When it initially started out, it was like I was babysitting one of my girlfriend's children for a weekend," Wanda Behm said.

Soon, the honeymoon of problems arose as the group of children who had lived without much structure tried to fit into a family that was all about discipline and routine.

Nightly baths and other grooming, fixed bedtimes, balanced meals and actually doing homework were unfamiliar to them, Behm said.

And the Behm's birth children, Derrick, 17 and Melissa, 14, had to adjust to the smaller kids getting more of the attention.

"The challenge for me was: here are four children who could very easily end up on the street doing drugs; the girl could be on the corner and the three boys could kill or be killed," Wanda Behm said. "But here are three kids I get the opportunity to show, 'Hey, look, here's how another household does it.'"

The Behms were hesitant about adopting Steven because of his behavioral/mental problems, which landed him in a psychiatric facility.

To make things easier for parents to take in children like Steven, agencies are increasing the amount of help they give parents after they have taken the children in, Bazemore said.

Another part of the challenge of increasing adoptions is debunking myths and misperceptions about children in foster care and adoptions, such as the beliefs that older foster children are there for juvenile delinquency reasons, that non-traditional families, like gay couples, that birth parents can reclaim their children or that older children don't need family ties.

D.C. Family Court presiding Judge Anita Josey-Herring said it is important for the courts, other government agencies and organizations to continue to promote adoptions, because it is one of the greatest gifts Washington residents can give the city's most vulnerable children.

"If you can imagine a child being in a foster home for years, wondering from day to day whether they will ever have a place to call home, and then having someone adopt them, it's very exciting," she said of the adoption ceremony.

"There are a lot of tears and hugging. It's just wonderful to know that the unresolved and uncertain future the child had will all of a sudden have a happy ending."