

## **Hot Topic: Why Arent' There Enough Foster Homes?**

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### **Why can't the state attract and keep more foster parents?**

There are not enough foster homes in the state to take care of all the children who need homes.

Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) is taxed with overseeing children in the state's custody. But DCF has been under court supervision for 20 years now, stemming from a class-action lawsuit, called Juan F., against the department. The state recently asked that the supervision be removed, but a federal judge declined the request.

One of the areas in which DCF is not meeting the needs of children is foster care. According to the most recent report from the court monitor, DCF had agreed to add 850 foster homes to its roster over two years. That deadline was in July, and DCF fell far short of its goal. According to the court monitor's report, DCF had only a net gain of 48 new foster homes since 2008, with a loss of 300 foster homes in the last four months alone.

Governor Dan Malloy has appointed state Supreme Court Justice Joette Katz to take over DCF. Katz will have her hands full, and one major thing she needs to accomplish is recruiting and retaining more foster parents to take care of the state's children.

#### **What do foster parents do?**

Foster parents are stand-in parents for children who've had to be separated from their parents due to neglect, abuse or other problems. Foster parents are given a monthly stipend of between \$745 and \$822 a month, depending on the child's age. The parents are expected to feed, clothe and care for the kid, with additional state help for things like day care and school lunch payments.

As of October, 2010 there were 2,475 DCF-licensed foster homes and 955 private foster homes, which tend to take in kids with more complex needs.

#### **Why are foster homes so important?**

For one thing, foster care is much cheaper than residential care. To treat one kid at Riverview Hospital, a state psychiatric hospital for children, costs \$829,000 per year. Jeanne Milstein, the state's child advocate whose agency oversees DCF, says some children who don't need the type of care that Riverview offers end up at the hospital anyway because there's nowhere else for them to go.

Milstein equates it to a traffic jam. "We see kids in hospitals, kids languishing in residential facilities and kids being sent out of state. The impact is devastating for these children. There's a logjam: If you don't have foster homes, kids can't get into the hospital who need hospital level of care. And kids deteriorate if they're there too long."

Foster homes are "the lynch pin," says Martha Stone, who heads the Center for Children's Advocacy and was one of the original lawyers who filed the 1989 Juan F. lawsuit. "Until you fix that spoke in the wheel you're not going to be able to fix the system," Stone says.

In November, 2010 there were 462 children in residential treatment facilities — where kids live, eat and study without interacting with the community — and 301 Connecticut kids living out-of-state because there's nowhere in-state for them to go. "When I filed the lawsuit in 1989, this was a problem," she says. "Twenty-one years later it's still a problem."

#### **Why can't the state meet the demand?**

Last year, nearly 2,200 possible foster parents called the recruitment hotline — 1-888-KID HERO (543 4376) — run by the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAP).

Jean Fiorito, CAFAP's director, says CAFAP refers those interested to DCF, which screens and does a background check on the potential parents. Those who make it through that process returning to CAFAP for a three-hour a week, 10-week training session. "The question is what happens with the 2,200 people who were interested," says Fiorito. Some may not have enough space in their homes or the income to support another child even with state financial assistance, she suggests. Others may have disqualifying arrests, or are otherwise unfit to take care of someone else's children.

"We're trying to figure out where are we losing the bulk of people," Fiorito says. "We don't know that yet."

According to a 2008 focus group study done by University of Connecticut's Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, many foster parents complained that DCF does not give them enough support or respect. That's a problem when it comes to retaining and recruiting foster families. Many current foster families said they were prompted to open their homes because they knew other families who had done the same. According to the report, current foster families with positive experiences are the best public relations tool.

Fiorito says lack of respect and support used to be the number one reason people quit being foster parents, but she hears less of that now. More recently, the most common reason for people quitting the system is because they've adopted a child, she says. Last year, 600 kids were adopted in Connecticut.

Even so, Milstein says she still hears foster parents complain about the lack of respect and support from DCF.

"It's an enormous issue for the department," says DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt. Kleeblatt thinks retention is difficult because some foster parents adopt and then opt out of the system and because others don't get the support they need. "Are we doing everything we can to support our foster parents? Undoubtedly we can do better," he says.

"Being a foster parent is a very rewarding and a very challenging thing," says Kleeblatt, who encourages those interested in foster care to visit [ctfosteradopt.com](http://ctfosteradopt.com).

### **What should DCF's next commissioner do?**

"My first piece of advice for recruiting and retaining foster parents: be courteous, kind, respectful and call people back," says Milstein. "And engage them." It sounds obvious, "but we're not seeing that happening, and that's why we're losing so many parents."

Stone has a few specific ideas aimed at recruiting and retaining families:

- DCF could help foster parents host informational and recruitment parties and then quickly follow up and work with interested families;
- DCF needs to quickly return all phone calls from foster families and offer 24/7 support to families with difficult kids who may act out during non-business hours;
- DCF should pay for more billboards and set up kiosks at the mall every month to recruit families;
- DCF should pay some foster parents to stay home and be professional foster parents (other states do this);
- DCF should relax the regulations — like minimum bedroom size and allowing children of different age groups to sleep in the same room — to allow foster kids to stay with relatives.

"This has dogged all previous eight [DCF] commissioners I've worked with," Stone says. If [Justice Katz] puts a laser focus on this problem, I think she can make a significant dent."