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Group aims to encourage foster parenting

By Whitney Bashaw Staff Writer Nov 1, 2017



"Give Hope a Home" is a campaign to educate and encourage adults to consider becoming foster parents. The campaign was launched this year by Albany's Northern Rivers Family of Services, the parent organization to Northeast Parent and Child Society and Parsons Child and Family Center.

Will Marszalek, executive program director for Northern Rivers, said the campaign is an effort to dispel negative perceptions of foster care. Northern Rivers is a nonprofit social services organization.

"There are a lot of people out there afraid to make that call to foster a child, seeing the negative things about foster care in media and entertainment. We want people to realize what good comes out of this system," Marszalek said. "Lots and lots of children out there now have good homes or are reunified with their family."

In the Northern Rivers program, Marszalek said between 60 and 70 percent of children return to their parents.

The organization serves 250 fostered children in its geographic area, which covers 36 counties.

Public, state-funded social service programs are also in need of foster parents.

Otsego County Department of Social Services has 33 children in its custody and 11 certified foster homes, according to Samantha Augur, secretary to the Otsego County Commissioner. Augur confirmed not all of the children are placed in foster homes within the county.

Marszalek said counties will call as many agencies as possible to find the best match.

"The needs are set by the child and the reality is when there are no resources to meet the child's needs, we have to move them further and further from what is familiar," Marszalek said, "We try to minimize school and doctor transitions, and keep kids as close to their communities as possible."

Situations can often be urgent. When this is the case, the more foster parents there are to reach out to, the better chance the child has of a less disruptive transition.

"You always need to take as many types and situations so children can be placed close to home," Marszalek said.

Reasons for children being placed in foster care vary, Marszalek said, but the majority of children that come through the foster care system are there because of abuse, neglect or substance abuse.

Data from the New York State Office of Child and Family Services says 4,625 children were admitted into foster care last year in upstate New York — a decrease of 293 from the previous year and part of a steady decline for the last 20 years.

While rates of children entering the foster care system are down, that doesn't necessarily equate to fewer children in need.

"We would not contribute the decrease in the number of children in foster care to a decrease in the number of reports regarding abuse or neglect," Mary Jane Waters, director of Otsego County Department of Social Services, said in an email on Monday. "There are less children in foster care because of the way cases are handled and because of the utilization of relative placements."

Before foster care, the state tries to place the child with a relative, known as kinship care. When that isn't possible, children are put into foster care.

Marszalek said foster parents usually stay in the system for three to five years.

Foster parents go through training and certification to become eligible, and undergo background checks and home visits to ensure the protection of the child.

The Northern Rivers program requires a 30-hour training curriculum augmented to fit New York state guidelines. During this training program, potential foster parents determine what level of commitment they can make. Recruiters encourage calling a service provider to learn more about foster parenting.

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