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## CAP now recruiting, training families online in preparation for foster children

By: Velvet Spicer May 1, 2020

For those of us cloistered with our families 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we may be looking forward to a time when we can have some separation. Kids in the foster care system are looking for the opposite.



McKnight

“What we do know is there are 140,000 children across the country in foster care, and upwards of about 20,000 waiting to be adopted in New York State alone,” said Lauri McKnight, executive director of Children Awaiting Parents (CAP) and the Donald J. Corbett Adoption Agency, a local nonprofit that helps connect families with children in the foster care system, some of whom have languished there for years. “Locally, the last figure we saw was about 475 children in (foster) care in Monroe County.”

The CAP team’s worry is twofold, McKnight said.

“One is that children may be maltreated or abused, and it is not being reported if they’re not in social settings,” she explained of kids still living with their biological families. “And that leads to the projection that after this ends we may see an increase in children who may move into the foster care system, which is why we are preparing families as much and as quickly as we can, based on that projection.”



So CAP has taken its foster/adoptive parent training online in an attempt to encourage would-be adoptive parents to come forward. "Deciding Together" is a free, highly personalized, trauma-informed family preparation and selection program that assigns those interested to a trainer who will meet with them virtually weekly for seven weeks.



Black

"We build healthy families. We train our families, prepare them, make sure that they're equipped with the skills needed to successfully parent our children," said Veronica Black, CAP adoption specialist and program manager. "We make sure we're able to identify our families' strengths and needs, which will help them to successfully parent the child that's been in the foster care system or who has experienced trauma."

A new report from Kids Count, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, shows that there were nearly 425,000 children in foster care nationwide in 2018, although only a portion of those children were available for adoption. The report noted the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the foster care system by suggesting that the curtailed in-person contact among children, families and social workers has left systems struggling to function.

"It's a scenario that leaves a vulnerable population — children in foster care — even more vulnerable," the report stated.

"Although we're at a standstill, our children who are currently in the foster care system, their lives continue. Life doesn't stop for them," Black said. "Right now we are working really hard to recruit families, families who are interested in giving back and loving children unconditionally."

CAP begins the process of adoption by training prospective parents for foster care, called the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting, or MAPP. CAP then starts the match and search process to connect children with families. A Home Study follows, which includes a family background, financial statements, educational background, relationships and daily routines, among other things.

The typically in-person process has had to be revised due to social distancing policies during the unprecedented pandemic.

"We can't stand still, we can't stop moving. Children are still out there in need of forever families," Black said of the supports the agency is providing. "We have families right now who have been matched and were visiting children before COVID-19. Those families are devastated because they had to stop visits. And the kids don't understand. It's

hard for a child eight or nine years old who has been visiting every other weekend, getting to know their new forever family, then all of a sudden everything comes to a stop. It's almost like being abandoned again."

CAP has five children whose placements are on hold, McKnight noted. One of those children is a 17-year-old who needs to leave congregate care and be placed for adoption.

"Situations like that create a lot of anxiety and uncertainty for children," McKnight said. "If we're not placing kids in supportive, loving families, they're leaving foster care with that trauma unresolved."

In fact, children who age out of foster care without being placed experience increased trauma leading to homelessness, unemployment, lack of education and even jail time.

"Our goal is to prevent that, to increase and improve our society and the productivity of our youth," McKnight said.

Added Black: "We do them a disservice when we allow them to age out of the foster care system and end up on the street. We're taking care of them in another way, through the judicial system or social services or welfare. Children need the resources and foundation that a family can offer. Without that we cannot expect them to be successful."

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