

# Illinois Families Now and Forever.®

Families by DCFS Foster Care, Adoption & Guardianship



## Letter from the Governor



### OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

JRTC, 100 W. RANDOLPH, SUITE 16-100  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60601

**BRUCE RAUNER**  
GOVERNOR

Dear Foster Parent,

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude for all that you do to improve the lives of the children in your care. The role that you have chosen to take is an essential part of our society and provides acceptance and stability for the most vulnerable among us.

As the new Governor of the state of Illinois, I am committed to working with the General Assembly, state agencies and other groups and organizations to ensure that you have the assistance you need to continue the important work of improving the lives of the children in your care.

I am sure that you are aware that our state is in the midst of troubling economic times and that shared sacrifice will be needed to help the state fulfill its most basic of duties. I will do everything in my power to keep the needs of the children a top priority. These needs include strengthening our state's school system, particularly in lower income and rural areas; ensuring that medical services are available and accessible for the most vulnerable and that our state agencies have the appropriate staff in place to provide you and children in care the stability and consistency that is so desperately needed in foster care.

Again, thank you. The work you do each and every day makes a huge difference in the lives and the futures of our children, and you should be commended.

Sincerely,

Governor Bruce Rauner

## DCFS Scholarship clears path to college for youth in or after care

The DCFS Scholarship program started with just four awards in 1964. It expanded to 48 annual recipients. This year that will increase to 53 students, with four awards reserved for the children of veterans. Scholarship recipients receive up to five consecutive years of tuition and academic fee waivers to be used at participating Illinois state community colleges and universities, a monthly grant of \$511 to offset other expenses and a medical card. Currently, the 48 recipients from 2014 are pursuing degrees with the support of the DCFS Scholarship program and the staff in the DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services. More than 200 students applied for the competitive scholarship. It requires a lengthy and thorough review process to select the finalists, based on their academic achievements, community involvement and personal successes.



The 2014-15 scholarship recipients gathered before heading to school.

### Applications DUE March 31

The DCFS Scholarship Program is open to youth who are currently in DCFS care, whose cases were closed through adoption or guardianship or who aged out of care at 18 or older. Youth at least 16 and not yet 21 on March 31 can apply for the 2015-16 academic year. The application process includes a form, SAT/ACT test reports, documentation of legal relationship with DCFS, three letters of recommendation from non-relatives, high school (college) transcripts or GED.

### Applications are available:

- at any DCFS regional office,
- on the Department website at [www.dcf.illinois.gov](http://www.dcf.illinois.gov) (on the bottom of the home page under "DCFS Features")
- on the DCFS Youth In Care website at [www.youthincare.illinois.gov](http://www.youthincare.illinois.gov)

Call 217-557- 2689 (Springfield) or 312-814-5959 (Chicago) for more information.

## DCFS 2014-15 Scholarship Recipients

Aaron K. Albrecht  
Tramell T.M. Albritten  
Elias J. Allen  
Tabitha Birtell  
Haley R. Blankenbeckler  
DeShawn J. Bloom  
Diane R. Blue  
Ayonna M. Britt  
Kaylia M. Brown  
Tonda K. Chasteen  
Matthew P. Chausse  
Barretta C. Chullen  
Dea D. Deja  
Annalise C. Dunsmore  
Christian S. Gomoll  
Destiny D. Gray

Jamie M. Griffin  
Terry J. Gruns  
Tarina L. Hargrays  
Dumar J. Harris  
Edmond L. Hogan  
Amber M. Holt  
Mark E. Kroll  
Frederick H. Laroc  
Alexa N. Lawson  
William W. Lenz  
Charmaine A. Levenson  
Nyssa A. Markham  
Medalya L. Martinez  
Dominique M. Matthews  
Helena B. Mattson  
Chelsea M. Mehegan

Senoria A. Mitchell  
Bre' yah J. Moses  
Alexus D. Murden  
Malik A. Nailing-Yamini  
Tashawna M. Nash  
Chaqueatta Neal  
Shaun M. O'Hara  
Kali R. Pray  
DaShae J. Rodriguez-Harris  
Demetrius J. Ruffin  
Alexus K. Rusk  
Hayley A. Shaver  
Mariah D. Stewart  
La'Rie S. Suttle  
Thelma Trujillo  
Shaun M. Wollenweber

# Adoption and foster care can open opportunities at tax time

The decision to support children through foster care and adoption can bring benefits as tax time nears.

## Child Tax Credit

Caregivers may qualify for up to \$1000 credit per child, depending on the household income, if the child:

- the child is your son, daughter, stepchild, foster child, brother, sister, stepbrother, stepsister, or a descendant of any of them (for example, your grandchild, niece, or nephew). An adopted child is always treated as your own child;
- the child was under age 17 at the end of 2014;
- the child did not provide over half of his or her own support for 2014;
- the child lived with you for more than half of 2014;
- the child is claimed as a dependent on your return;
- the child does not file a joint return for the year (or files it only as a claim for refund); and
- the child was a U.S. citizen, a U.S. national, or a U.S. resident alien.

See *IRS Pub. 972 Child Tax Credit* for more details.

## Charitable Deductions

If you itemize deductions, you may be able to deduct unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses to care for a child in foster care.

## Adoption Tax Credit

Legislation in 2012 made the Adoption Tax Credit permanent. A family adopting from foster care in 2014 can claim up to \$13,190, the maximum amount allowed under

the credit. Families with incomes under \$197,880 are eligible for the full credit, which diminishes gradually at higher incomes. Beginning with 2012 tax filings, the credit was no longer refundable. So people who do not owe taxes will not get the credit, which can only be used to offset tax liability.

## Earned Income Tax Credit

- The federal credit for low income, working families can be as much as \$496 to \$6,143, depending on the number of qualified children. To qualify: the household income must be under \$14,590 - \$52,427, depending on family size and filing status.
- you must have earned income – usually wages or self-employment.
- In some cases taxable disability benefits qualify as earned income. See *IRS Publication 596* for details.

## Dependency Exemption

The exemption for dependents could lower your income tax, and lead to benefits in these areas: child care credit – for working parents (IRS pub. 503) education credits – based on out-of-pocket college expenses (IRS Pub. 970) head of household filing status for unmarried parents (IRS Pub. 501)

Be sure to explore these topics more at [IRS.gov](http://IRS.gov) or with a professional tax advisor. Additionally, the Center for Economic Progress provides free tax preparation services for families with income under \$50,000. To find a location, go to: [www.economicprogress.org](http://www.economicprogress.org).

## ADOPTION TAX CREDIT ONLINE COURSE

Adoption Learning Partners offers a broad catalog of online courses for current and prospective adoptive families. The adoption tax credit is one way the federal government promotes and supports adoption. Though the adoption tax credit provides a very valuable benefit to adoptive families, it is also a complicated tax law provision.

The course will help adoptive families:

- Determine their eligibility for the adoption tax credit
- See how the adoption tax credit works with different types of adoptions and financial situations
- Track and document expenses
- Prepare for year-end tax planning and work with a tax professional.

This course is available for free. Caregivers can register at [www.adoptionlearningpartners.org](http://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org)

# Financial aid options for youth who have been in DCFS care

Students planning to attend college must apply for financial aid. This is done by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). After submitting the completed FAFSA form, the student will receive the Student Air Report (SAR) which will list a number called Expected Family Contribution (EFC). The schools use the EFC to determine what type and how much financial assistance can be offered to the student towards the Cost of Attendance to attend that particular school. It does NOT mean that the student can plan to attend any school and only pay the amount of EFC listed on their SAR. A student will still need compare schools' awards to determine if they can afford to attend a specific school based on the amount of financial aid being offered, the amount and type of possible loans and the cost of the school.

For students who have been or are still in the child welfare system, the major factor for determining the type and amount of financial aid is the student's status as a "dependent" or "independent" student. As an independent student, the parent's income will not be included in the formula which typically results

in eligibility for more financial aid. When calculating financial aid, foster parents' income or the board payment is not considered on the application. There are two child welfare-specific questions on the FAFSA used to determine "dependency" status. One question asks "At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?" A youth who is currently in foster care, adopted at age 13 or older, or who reunited with the parent after age 13 should answer this question "Yes" and parental information will not be requested on the FAFSA filing. The other question on the FAFSA is "As determined by a court in your state of legal residence, are you or were you in legal guardianship?" Those students who had been in a guardianship relationship are also considered "independent." Most students will be required to prove this independent status. Many school financial aid departments will accept a letter on agency letterhead as documentation or some may ask for the actual court document.

It is important that each youth submit their FAFSA applications

as soon after January 1 each year as possible as many grants are "first come, first served." Students can access the FAFSA application at [www.FAFSA.gov](http://www.FAFSA.gov) (not .com). The student's high school and local community college can assist in filing the application. In addition the DCFS Education Advisors and Transition managers can also help families make plans for college. For more information contact DCFS at 312-814-5959.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid [www.fafsa.gov](http://www.fafsa.gov)

Fastweb scholarship search [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com)

Foster Care to Success [www.fc2success.org](http://www.fc2success.org) (formerly Orphan Foundation of America)

United Negro College Fund [www.uncf.org](http://www.uncf.org)

Scholarships for black students [www.blackstudents.com](http://www.blackstudents.com)

Hispanic Scholarship Fund [www.hsf.net](http://www.hsf.net)

Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute [www.chci.org](http://www.chci.org)

Illinois Student Assistance Commission [www.isac.org](http://www.isac.org)  
(Look for free college workshops across state and assistance in choosing a college for your major)

## New Count Down to 21

DCFS is "counting down to 21" to make sure that a young person leaving DCFS care can emancipate with a firm foundation to transition to adulthood. The goals for the Countdown to 21 program are to enable young adults to:

- have connections to family, community and social supports
- live in a safe, affordable and sustainable housing situation
- be employable, (and/or in college full-time)
- to manage money effectively

• be registered to receive health care

At age 19 and again three months prior to discharge, every youth in placement will participate in a Discharge focused Clinical Intervention Placement Preservation (D-CIPP) staffing. The transition team, including the youth, caseworker, supervisor, transition manager and other supporters, will meet with a professional facilitator. The team will assist the youth to develop a comprehensive, realistic plan for transitioning from foster care. Countdown to 21 also includes the

requirement that at 19 the young adult participates in a Department-approved course on financial literacy. The course is designed to help youth prepare to manage funds during the time left in placement and throughout their lives after discharge. Youth who successfully meet the "Countdown to 21" requirements and demonstrate that they are likely to safely manage funds will receive \$1,200 in emancipation funds to assist them in financing elements of their transition plan.

# DCFS education and work programs prepare youth for adulthood

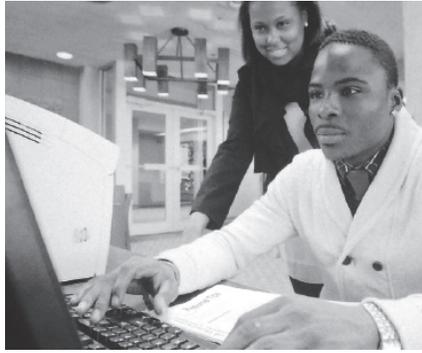
There are several education and employment programs for older youth who are still in DCFS custody, offered by the DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services. Youth who achieved permanency through adoption or guardianship typically fall outside of eligibility. However, they can apply for the DCFS Scholarship program and the Education and Training Voucher is available to youth adopted after 16. To clarify eligibility or for further information, DCFS has transition coordinators assigned to each region. These individuals can help youth and their families explore different educational and employment resources from DCFS and in the community. To contact a regional transition coordinators, call the office in Chicago at 312-814-5959 or in Springfield at 217-557-2689.

## Youth In College/Vocational Training Program

Students may choose to attend an accredited vocational school, four-year college or community college. They receive a monthly grant in the amount of \$471 provided each month for up to four (4) years. Medical cards are provided to Illinois students until the participant reaches the age of 21, with eligibility for extended coverage to age 26. Reimbursement is available for books not covered by financial aid. Benefits are available until the earlier of four (4) years, or the semester of the 23rd birthday.

### Eligibility Requirements:

- Be at least 16 years old, and not yet 21
- Be under court-ordered, legal responsibility of DCFS
- Maintain at least a “C” average each semester
- Maintain full time status and submit a class schedule and grades each term



*Derrick Wright, a 2010 DCFS Scholarship recipient, is doing well at Southern Illinois University.*

## The Employment Incentive Program (EIP)

The Employment Incentive Program is designed to provide financial and supplemental services to help adolescent youth gain marketable skills through on-the-job work experience or through job training programs. Participants receive a monthly stipend in the amount of \$150.00 for a maximum of 12 months. They may also be eligible for start-up funding of work-related items (e.g., tools, work clothing, etc.). Funding is need-based and limited to a one-time disbursement of up to \$200.00.

### Eligibility Requirements:

- Be 17 years of age, and not yet 21
- Have a high school diploma or a GED certificate
- Be under court-ordered responsibility of DCFS
- Complete Casey Living Skills assessment
- Be involved in job training through a certified job skills training program or be employed for at least one month prior to applying for the EIP and working a minimum of 20 hours per week

## Education & Training Vouchers

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program assists youth with post-secondary education related expenses not covered by financial aid grants and scholarships. Qualifying students can have access to funds up to \$5000 annually for education related expenses such as tuition, fees, books, supplies, uniforms, equipment, and/or transportation not covered by other grants or scholarships. Funding is available until age 21. However, if the student is enrolled in a post-secondary program before age 21, has used ETV prior to age 21 and is making satisfactory progress toward completing the program, funding is available until age 23.

### Eligibility:

- Youth for whom DCFS is legally responsible or who aged out of care at age 18 or older
- OR
- Achieved permanency at age 16 or older through either subsidized guardianship or adoption.

## DIGITAL DELIVERY

Many caregivers have decided to skip the paper and request electronic versions of the newsletter, Illinois Families Now and Forever. We will email you each time a new issue is online.

When you move to the online version, you still receive all the same valuable information with more benefits. It comes faster, is easier to file, saves money and protects the environment. To make the switch, send an email to

[vanessa.james@illinois.gov](mailto:vanessa.james@illinois.gov)

*(there is a dot before “james”) Be sure to include your name and mailing address.*

# New online training keeps brothers and sisters connected

DCFS recently launched a new training prepared specifically for children and youth in foster care who have brothers and sisters who are also (or used to be) in foster care. The training provides information on the new law for sibling rights and the new policies and procedures.

In child-friendly terms, the course explains the importance of sibling relationships and the youth's rights to be connected with their brothers and sisters. It also discusses the ways the adults involved in a child's life will support the connections between brothers and sisters.

The training takes about 10 to 15 minutes. It is available on demand on the DCFS Virtual Training Center at [www.dcfstraining.org](http://www.dcfstraining.org). It is included under the public content



menu so children will not need to have a VTC account. They or their caregiver can simply select the course and begin watching.

After a short introduction, there is a point to choose to continue viewing the information for children or for the adults. Caregivers may even want to do both and spend

some time talking about what you learned. This training complements the training that staff will receive so all can work together to support connections between brothers and sisters during and after their time in care.

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## Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council Update



*New members: (front) Pauline Barlow, Kurt Kalas (back) Kelly Fargher, Pamela Webb, Stephanie Jones, Kellye Norris and Charlene Burris*

The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council met in Joliet for the January meeting.

### Update from Training

The council reviewed and provided feedback on the revamped PRIDE curriculum, now called PRIDE Illinois. The pre-licensing training will be offered in the classroom and in a hybrid model that includes portions of guided

computer portion and in-person group sessions. Social media information is included in this new training and other foster parent suggestions are being implemented. The new version will be rolled out in September.

### Implementation Plans

One key task is to receive and score the Foster Parent Law Implementation plans from all foster care programs. The council has completed the review of the plans and will be recommending standout plans for awards. The policy committee is also reviewing proposed changes to streamline the evaluation process. Later this spring the group will conduct on-site reviews at specified agencies. These ensure the programs put into practice the rights and responsibilities they include in their implementation plans.

The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council was founded in conjunction with the Illinois Foster Parent Law. Membership consists of caregivers representing the DCFS regions, agency representatives and other experts in child welfare, who are appointed by the DCFS Director.

### THE NEXT MEETING

of the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council will be March 20 in Alton at 9:00 a.m.

Call DCFS Caregiver and Parent Support at 217-524-2422 for details.

# Illinois Adoption Advisory Council Update

## *Illinois Adoption Advisory Council recognizes individuals for contributions to adoption cause*

At the November meeting of the Illinois Adoption Advisory, members marked National Adoption Month with a twist on a tradition. Each year the council recognizes an individual for his or her contribution to adoption and adoptive families. This year the council selected two people to show special appreciation.

Vince Champagne recently retired from DCFS where he served as an administrator in the Office of Health Policy. He was a reliable advocate on behalf of the council. He evaluated and recommended state and federal health policy changes that took into account the potential impact on adopted children. He also made significant efforts to keep the council informed of changes in store and to listen to

the concerns that the council raised on behalf of adoptive families across the state. Due to his responsiveness, many adopted youth had more avenues for medical care and mental health available to them and also avoided obstacles that would have diminished their care.

The council also recognized the contributions of Ray Gates of DCFS. As a statewide administrator, Gates helped establish the council's role as a designated advisor to DCFS. He assisted the leadership in adopting its by-laws and growing in stature as a well-structured advocacy group. Gates supported the council professionally in his DCFS role and in spirit as a fellow adoptive parent. He was instrumental as a liaison between the council and several DCFS entities crafting the recently passed Sibling Rights legislation. Gates has been re-assigned to other duties in DCFS. The council made sure that he knew how much his years with them were appreciated.



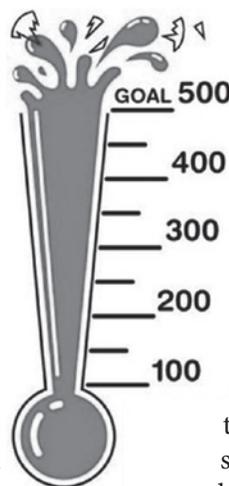
*Adoption council co-chairs Elizabeth Richmond (L) and Jim Jones (R) presented appreciation awards to Ray Gates and Vince Champagne for their outstanding support of adoptive families.*

**THE NEXT MEETING**  
of the Illinois Advisory Council will be April 10 in Springfield at 10 a.m.  
Call DCFS  
Caregiver and Parent Support  
at 217-524-2422  
for details

## DCFS moves more than 500 cases to adoption in 50 days

As 2014 came to a close, DCFS had one more important milestone to hit during the agency's 50th anniversary year. Former Acting Director Bobbie Gregg announced an ambitious and important goal to mark National Adoption Month in November. DCFS was going to help 500 children currently living in foster care find loving and permanent homes, within 50 days, through adoption and guardianship by January 5, 2015.

The "500 in 50" project rallied those on the frontline with families, high-level decision makers and partners with private agencies and the court system to remove barriers and identify resources that would open the path to permanency. The project's efforts were



focused on two primary populations: the 307 children statewide with cases in the final stage of approval for adoption or guardianship; and the 374 children statewide who were waiting for a court date to finalize. In all, 512 children found their forever home.

"Illinois DCFS has done a tremendous job of recognizing the significance of permanency," said Anita Shannon, of Casey Family Programs. "For DCFS to accomplish a big task in such a short timeframe shows dedication and leadership."

## Finding family connections to better outcomes

DCFS is in the fourth year of a five-year federal grant designed to link children in foster care with family members. In partnership with Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. the grant provides intensive family finding services in Cook County. It focuses on new cases of children ages 6 through 13. The goal of the demonstration project is to confirm that locating and engaging family members at the beginning of a child welfare case will decrease the likelihood of placement disruptions,

decrease the length of stay in care, and will improve permanency outcomes.

Kin Connection Specialists will start working with the birth family immediately after the court grants temporary custody. They will work to identify family members who can act as resources for placement, back-up placement, hosting sibling visits, or mentoring the family. That information will be shared with caseworker and be part of the child's records.

“The Kin Connection Specialist contacted me once the kids came into foster care and I was able to reconnect with them. I can help them and their mom,” a grandmother said about the program.

An evaluation team from Loyola University follows the treatment group to determine if early family finding efforts have contributed to keeping children connected.

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## Fresh Start offers youth free surgery



*Medical staff volunteer weekends for youth surgeries.*

DCFS has entered into a partnership with Fresh Start, a California-based nonprofit that provides free reconstructive surgery and related healthcare services to infants,

children and teens with physical deformities caused by birth defects, accidents, abuse or disease.

Fresh Start has expanded into Chicago by partnering with the University of Chicago Medical Center's Comer Children's Hospital. In February, a young man in DCFS care will be part of the surgery weekend in Chicago. His ear is severely deformed.

He is eagerly looking forward to a brighter future with a family and without the detraction of his injured ear.

Fresh Start sponsors surgery weekends three times each year for multiple children.

Children do not have to live in Chicago to be eligible for the program. If you would like to refer a child to Fresh Start or have questions about the application process, including completing the application, go to [freshstart.org](http://freshstart.org) or ask your caseworker for more details.

### LENDING LIBRARY IS BEING PHASED OUT

After many years of operation, the DCFS Foster Parent Lending Library has been suspended and will be closed by July. The need to monitor the breadth of materials and ensure they were all in line with the evolving standards of best practices and DCFS policy proved to be beyond the scope of the program.

Caregivers will still have an avenue to receive credits hours for educational materials they obtain from local libraries or other sources to help to care for the children in their home. After finishing the book, complete the Training Credit Approval Form (TCAF). A copy of the table of contents must be included to determine applicability of the information to the care of children. When approved, the eligible hours will be part of the caregiver's transcript. Caregivers can view their transcripts and download the TCAF at the DCFS Virtual Training Center at [www.dcfstraining.org](http://www.dcfstraining.org)



## A year after devastating tornado, Adams family rebuilds home



Chad, Lexi, Makannah and Kim Adams now know a tornado can't destroy a family.

Successful foster families demonstrate compassion, resilience, versatility, and perseverance, along with the expected parenting skills. Chad and Kim Adams of Washington, Illinois built a family on those qualities. However, they didn't know that those very strengths would help them through one of the most devastating events: the complete loss of their home due to a tornado.

Kim and Chad began their journey in foster care eight years ago in Oklahoma. Kim worked at a dental clinic and witnessed situations in foster care that required an extra dose of compassion. Kim knew that she and Chad could give children in foster care love, and a future. In the beginning, Chad and Kim took only younger children. They also were parenting their daughter, Makannah, (Chad's biological daughter from a previous marriage) who was only beginning grade school. Soon enough they began to take children of all ages for respite and emergency placements.

While doing respite they met Lexi.

She was 15 years old and Kim said that they "just clicked." Not too many months after Lexi's arrival Chad and Kim needed to relocate to Illinois. Chad moved ahead of the family and Kim stayed behind for a year

because of children still in their care. They managed Lexi's case so that she could move with them and continue family visits toward reunification. When reunification could not take place before Lexi turned 18, Chad and Kim knew that they wanted to remain in Lexi's life. They adopted her as an adult. Now Lexi at 18 is studying at Illinois Central College with plans to transfer to Bradley University. Her goal is to work for the FBI in the Behavior Analysis Unit.

On November 17, 2013, Lexi was working when the EF4 tornado hit Washington and destroyed their home. Kim remembers that she and Chad were at church, and how hard it was to confirm that Lexi was safe. The search through wreckage of what was once their street and home was a test for their family unit and their emotional resilience. Loss

is part of the foster care experience, but this certainly was not a loss that they had expected. As parents, they worried that the gravity could trigger emotions their children had experienced from previous losses.

A local support system surrounded the Adams family and helped them through the initial difficulties and trauma. Kim attributes the generous contribution of many of the supplies and household items to the efforts of their Foster Parent Support Specialist, Elizabeth Richmond. Their church immediately offered up their parsonage for the Adams to use as they rebuilt their home. Kim made sure to seek counseling for the girls to help them process the traumatic event.

Kim said that many people tell her that they couldn't be a foster parent because the loss of returning a child

*"A natural event in the form of a tornado, gave Kim and Chad Adams a different perspective."*

home is too much. Kim's response to that is, "If everyone said that, they (the children) wouldn't have anywhere to go." A natural event in the form of a tornado, gave Kim and Chad Adams a different perspective on the profound generosity that people can demonstrate when someone needs the safety of a home.

## Central Region sent 8 off to college with DCFS scholarships

This academic year, eight students whose cases were served by programs in the DCFS Central Region headed to college with the benefits included in the 2014-15 DCFS Scholarship program. The scholarship includes a waiver of tuition and mandatory fees that students can use at one of the nine

Illinois state universities or an Illinois community college. They also receive a monthly maintenance grant of \$511 and a medical card.

Scholarship recipients were chosen statewide on the basis of scholastic aptitude, a written personal statement and demonstrated

community involvement. The 2015 scholarship application process began in January and ends in March. Contact the youth's caseworker or the DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services at 312-814-5959 for more information on the scholarship program.



**Haley Blankenbeckler**, from Bloomington, is a graduate of Normal Community High School where she earned a 3.91

GPA on a four-point scale. In high school she was a member of the Softball team, speech team, and peer leadership team. Haley aspires to be a forensic psychologist. She is student at Eastern Illinois University and plans to major in psychology and minor in criminology.

She attends DePaul University and plans to major in accounting.



**Tonda Chasteen** graduated Lewistown High School where she earned a 4.15 GPA on a 4.0 scale and was valedictorian of her class. While

in high school she was a member of the Lewistown Student Senate, coordinated a blood drive for the Red Cross, and tutored struggling students. She has also volunteered as a kindergarten teacher's aide, been in Spanish Club, and competed at the state level with the Lewistown Science Olympiad team. Tonda attends the University of Illinois at Springfield. She is in the honors program and plans to major in biology.

**Matthew Chausse** of Aledo is a graduate of Mercer County High School where he earned a 3.18 GPA on a 4.0 scale. While in high school he was the Vice President of his class all four years, had perfect attendance, and was on the Academic Honor Roll. Matthew has been on mission trips to West Virginia and Honduras,

and has been the announcer and technician at WRMJ Radio in Aledo. Matthew is a student at Blackhawk Community College, majoring in communications.

**Malik Nailing-Yamini** is a graduate of New Berlin High School where he earned a 3.69 GPA on a 4.0 scale. While in high school he was a member of the track and field team, and participated in art club and Key Club. Malik has earned multiple awards for his painting and sculpting in art competitions at the State Fair, Sangamon County Fair, Springfield Art Association, and Rembrandt Society.

He is a student at the University of Illinois at Springfield and plans to major in environmental science.



**Ayonna Britt** of Champaign graduated from Central High School where she earned a 3.63 GPA on a 4.0 scale. While in high school she was a

peer mediator, a member of Student Council, Upward Bound, Yearbook Club, African-American Club, and the One-to-One mentoring program. Ayonna has helped to raise money for the Crisis Nursery by working concessions at the Illini football games and has also interned at The News Gazette and a law firm.



**Tashawna Nash** graduated from Richwoods High School where she earned a 3.36 GPA on a four-point scale. While in high school she was a member

of the National Honor Society, the Track and Field Team, Captain of the Cross Country Team, and in the Gospel Choir. Tashawna has also been a tutor at the Carver Center

*(continued)*

## Scholarships (con't)

and the Tri-County Urban League, and volunteered in Washington, IL with a tornado relief program. Tashawna attends Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and plans to major in mathematics.



**Kali Pray** of Groveland is a graduate of Morton High School where she earned a 3.38 GPA on a 4.0 scale. While in high school she was

a member of the state champion marching band and color guard, the service leadership Key Club, and the community involvement group called Interact. Kali has been involved with the organization Catholic Heart Workcamp that fundraises for the poor and completes mission trips. She is a math tutor, and is American Red Cross CPR certified. Kali attends Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, majoring in electrical engineering.



**Alexis Rusk** is a 2014 graduate of Normal Community West High School where she earned a 3.71 GPA on a 4.0 scale. In high school she was a

Presidential Scholarship winner, a member of the French club, marching band, Music to Share group, and jazz band. Alexis has also had the privilege of studying under two professional chemists through Project SEED, by the American Chemical Society.

Alexis is now studying music education at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.



*Susan Jensen,  
Regional Administrator*

## New Regional Administrator with 30 years DCFS experience

Susan Jensen is Central Region's new Regional Administrator. Jensen takes on this role with 30 years of experience with DCFS. During her years at DCFS she served on several policy writing committees including a significant amount of time on policy concerning permanency. Jensen is especially proud of her work on the Life Books committee. "For many years, we didn't recognize the importance of a child history, but children need to know about their past to build on their future," she said.

Jensen counts her 14 years as a foster care worker as "the most rewarding job that I ever held." She feels strongly that foster parents should be treated as a part of the team. She would like to see more done to "bridge the gap between foster parents and the biological parents."

## Breaking the ice with parents gets easier

Working with birth parents is one of those concepts that sounds good and seems right, but can still be tough to do. The Central Region's foster care program will be implementing the IceBreaker meetings, a format to bring together the foster parents, parents and an agency staff person within the first weeks of a new placement. The goal is to reduce the child's trauma from being removed from their family by building a healthy relationship between the

parents and the caregivers in the child's life. The meetings create an avenue for communication so that the foster parent can receive information about the child and the parent can know more about their child's care taker while the child is in substitute care.

In most cases, this initial meeting at the start of a placement will serve the caregiver, the birth parent and the child well. However, if there are safety issues, the meeting will not

take place. Furthermore, the meetings are never held at the foster parent's home, but at a DCFS or agency office or other community location. Only first names are used and no phone numbers or addresses are exchanged.

The IceBreaker meetings take 20 to 30 minutes and follow a structured format to keep the meeting on track. A facilitator will contact the foster and birth  
*(continued)*

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## Holiday memories to last the year



*Santa, Princess Elsa and Olaf were highlights of the DCFS holiday party.*



*Families enjoyed dozens of donated cookies.*

The holiday season spurred celebrations on behalf of foster families served by DCFS and private agencies across the Central Region. Following is a small sampling of how staff made certain the holidays were happy.

On December 10, children and foster families served by Child Youth and Family Solutions celebrated the season with a party hosted by First Christian Church of Champaign and The Forgotten Initiative of Champaign County. The youth ministry of First Christian Church provided gifts for 300 children.

The two groups again combined efforts for families and children served by Lutheran Social Services in Champaign.

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The DCFS staff serving families from the Champaign office hosted a Frozen-themed Christmas party for children, foster parents and intact families in Champaign County. Stonecreek church in Urbana hosted the event and helped provide a pizza dinner. As has been the tradition for several years, Champaign County CASA donated dozens and dozens of homemade Christmas cookies

and Champaign County employees donated gifts for all children served by the local office.

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On December 15th Cunningham Children's Home of Urbana celebrated the Christmas season with foster parents and children at Savoy Methodist Church. A delicious dinner was catered from Hickory River Smokehouse. All children received stuffed animals to take home and each family received a handmade quilt. Families also played games and left with many donated gifts.

## Breaking the ice (con't)

parents before the meeting and review the discussion guide. When the meeting takes place, they will have a chance to ask questions to help everyone adjust to the new placement. The parent can let the caregiver know about the child's likes, favorite toys, allergies or bedtime habits. The facilitator is primarily there to observe and document.

The IceBreaker meeting will be effective when all the participants remain focused on

the child's needs. The facilitator will point out the importance that the other individual has in the child's life. It is also important to respect the feelings, opinions, cultural differences and ideas of others. Finally, everyone should also remember to keep what is said during the meeting as confidential. Caregivers beginning a new placement can work with the facilitator or the caseworker in advance of an Ice Breaker meeting.

### CENTRAL REGION CUSTOMER SERVICE LINE

The number for the DCFS Central Region Foster Parent Customer Service Line is **866-368-5204**. This toll-free line is operational Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., excluding state holidays. The line is equipped with voicemail.

This is not set up to be an emergency response line. If a caregiver has an urgent request, it is best to call the field office or the after-hours number.

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## Local advisory councils give caregivers a voice in foster care

Following are updates from recent local council meetings.

### Urbana Field Office

Foster parents from the Urbana Field office enjoyed a meal out for the last meeting of 2014. Foster parents met at El Toro restaurant in Rantoul. During the meeting foster parents learned about the importance of lifebooks for their foster children. Each foster family received a lifebook binder for their children, along with ideas for beginning a lifebook. The Urbana Local Advisory Council next met on February 9. The topic for training was autism.

### Danville Field Office

Foster parents from the Danville Field Office were invited to a training and Local Advisory Council meeting in November. Foster parents participated in a training presented by Julie Cebulski

titled "*Discipline Through the Building of Relationships*." Foster parents enjoyed refreshments and were given the opportunity to share concerns about foster parenting. The February meeting for the Danville Local Advisory covered the subject of autism.

### Decatur Office

The Decatur Field Office Local Advisory Council's last quarterly meeting featured hosted speaker Cindy Bardeleben from Babytalk. Babytalk is an organization that focuses on developmental issues and parenting for children birth to three years. The presentation covered ways caregivers can ease holiday stresses.

### Bloomington Office

The Bloomington advisory council meets on the second Tuesday of every month at 11 am. Meetings are held at the DCFS office located

at 401 N. Brown. The group is pleased to have representation from most local agencies as well as the DCFS program. Each month the group discusses a portion of the Foster Parent Law and welcomes suggestions from foster parents.

### THE CENTRAL REGION LOCAL ADVISORY COUNCILS

meet quarterly and provide opportunity for foster parents to bring forward issues they may be experiencing and to address the Central Region Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan.

The region is made up of seven areas. To take part in an area advisory council meeting, find the schedule, or review the minutes, call the nearest area office or the Central Region Foster Parent Help Line at 866-368-5204.

## Central Region Training

DCFS has scheduled sessions of in-service training modules and other courses in locations across the region.

To get specific dates and locations, visit the on-line Virtual Training Center (VTC) anytime at [www.DCFstraining.org](http://www.DCFstraining.org). Click on any of the links under Training Schedule to access course descriptions, in-service training and Educational Advocacy Training or call the DCFS Registration Line at 877-800-3393 during business hours.

The Virtual Training Center (VTC) is your tool to:

- See training news and general information
- Check available trainings
- View/Print your training transcript
- Register for courses
- Download course materials to use in class or to access after training
- Take online courses including all PRIDE in-service modules for licensed caregivers.

### DIGITAL TRAINING MATERIALS AVAILABLE



DCFS has made many PRIDE materials easily available on the home page of the Virtual Training Center at [www.DCFstraining.org](http://www.DCFstraining.org).

Anyone may print the materials or download them onto almost any electronic device and bring their device to training class. Trainees who have no digital access should speak with their trainers when they arrive in class, so we can accommodate everyone.

## Who do you call when...?

**...A child in your home is having a psychiatric crisis that may require hospitalization?** Call the CARES line at 800-345-9049. However, if a child is a danger to himself or others, call 911 first. The CARES line is available 24 hours a day, everyday.

**...You want information on becoming a foster parent or on adoption?** The Adoption Information Center of Illinois (AICI) can answer your questions and connect you with a licensing agency. The toll-free number is 800-572-2390. AICI also maintains information about the children who are featured in the newsletter.

**...You have questions about your board check?** Call the DCFS Central Payment Unit at 800-525-0499 if your check comes from DCFS. If your check comes from a private agency, contact the agency.

**...You need to report a child missing or have information about a youth who has run away?** To report information on missing youth call 866-503-0184. The toll-free number is available 24 hours a day every day of the week. If you feel the child is in danger, call 911 first.

**...Your adoption or guardianship is final but you have questions about the subsidy?** Call the subsidy worker assigned to the case or the Adoption

Support Line at 866-538-8892 or 312-808-5250 so you can be connected to the right individual for help.

**...You feel you aren't being treated fairly by DCFS or a private agency?** If you've already tried to resolve the issue by going up the chain of command with the caseworker and supervisors, then call the Advocacy Office at 800-232-3798.

**...You have questions about your child's medical card?** Call 800-228-6533.

**...You need to find a phone number for a caseworker?** Call the main switchboard in Chicago at 312-814-6800 or the State Operator at 312-793-3500.

**...You are having family problems with an adopted child?** Contact the Adoption/Subsidized Guardianship Preservation Program that serves your area. Call the Adoption Support Line at 866-538-8892 or 312-808-5250.

**...You are having a hard time getting services for your child at school?** Most private agencies have an Education Liaison, and each DCFS region has Education Advisors who can help. Call your agency or nearest DCFS office to be connected to the right educational resource for your area.

## A family for me: Call 1-800-572-2390 for more information



### Ethan

Ethan, 13, is friendly, outgoing, and eager to join a forever family. He is determined to be the best he can be, and is motivated by the various goals he sets for himself (as well

as the goals other people set for him). He can become frustrated at times, but responds well to structure and support from loving, trusted adults. Ethan's hobbies include playing video games, tossing around the football, and taking care of dogs.

Ethan's worker says he is a well-mannered child who would thrive in a home that gives him the resources he needs to succeed, and also encourages him to maintain contact with members of his birth family.

To be the right match for Ethan, you can make sure he has plenty of structure in his life, and suggest goals for him to strive toward. You can also help him maintain a relationship with his brother, including regular visits. Ethan would like to join a family with "a mom, a dad, and older brothers." Other children in the home should indeed be older than Ethan. [8199]



### James

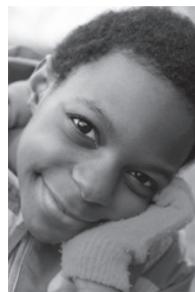
This young man brings new meaning to the phrase "multi-tasking!" James, 12, likes to keep himself busy at all times by playing, laughing, talking, and interacting with

others. He becomes distracted easily, but usually responds well to redirection. James prefers to play inside, and is especially partial to toys, including Transformers and LEGO pieces. He has been diagnosed with autism, and can become overwhelmed when confronted

with loud noises or other excessive stimulation.

James' worker says he is an outgoing child who is both friendly and well-mannered. He has a wonderful imagination, and can entertain himself for hours on end.

James needs a loving, caring home environment. A potential parent, you can monitor his behavior and provide redirection to help him stay on task. You can also learn about autism, so you can become an effective advocate for him, both educationally and emotionally. The ideal family would include children who are roughly the same age as James, and would also help him maintain relationships with his siblings, including regular visits. [8015]



### Joyanna

This outgoing young lady loves spending time with people. Whether she's singing, dancing, or playing with her siblings, Joyanna, 10, likes to be in the middle of the

action. Her enthusiasm extends to school as well, where she does well academically and regularly volunteers to answer questions in class. During her quieter moments, she enjoys playing cards (especially Uno) and video games (especially Wii Sports).

Joyanna's worker says she is a caring child who enjoys helping others, and goes out of her way to assist younger children. The right parents for Joyanna will be able to remain patient as she adjusts to her new, permanent family. You can also help her maintain relationships with her siblings, including regular visits. Joyanna would like to join a family that is "nice" and "likes to have fun." Other children in the home should be older than Joyanna. [7743]



### Sharena and Jamesetta

These young ladies are ready to join a forever family. Older sister Sharena, 14, is an intelligent child who does not need to be reminded to complete her homework or focus on her schoolwork. She is also a creative child who enjoys reading, writing, dancing, and playing with small dogs. Jamesetta, age 13, is a sweet child who gets along well with others. Her hobbies include singing and playing with her tablet computer.

The girls' teachers say they are good students who like to help out in the classroom. Their foster parent says they are generally well behaved and helpful at home.

The forever family for these sisters can provide a loving, nurturing home environment. You can support them as they adjust to their new, permanent family. You can also help them maintain relationships with their brother, including regular visits. Sharena and Jamesetta both state that they would like to join a family that will "love us and treat us nice." Other children in the home should be older than Sharena and Jamesetta. [8117-18]

**If you are interested in adopting one of the youth featured here or want to learn more about other children who are waiting to be adopted, please call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois at 1-800-572-2390 or visit the AICI website at [www.adoptinfo-il.org](http://www.adoptinfo-il.org).**



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## Illinois Families Now and Forever®

Bruce Rauner, Governor

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