

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 (on the bottom of the home page under "DCFS Features")
- on the DCFS Youth In Care website at 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 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.

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

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 (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

Fastweb scholarship search www.fastweb.com

Foster Care to Success www.fc2success.org (formerly Orphan Foundation of America)

United Negro College Fund www.uncf.org

Scholarships for black students www.blackstudents.com

Hispanic Scholarship Fund www.hsf.net

Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute www.chci.org

Illinois Student Assistance Commission 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

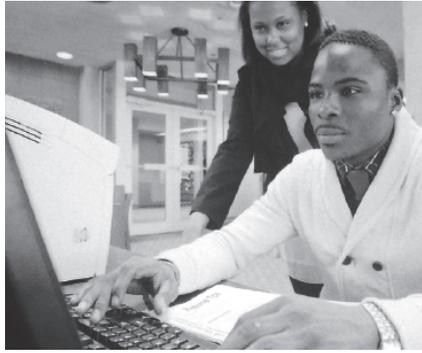
There are several education and employment programs for older youth who are still in DCFS custody, offered by the DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services. Youth who achieved permanency through adoption or guardianship typically fall outside of eligibility. However, they can apply for the DCFS 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

(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. 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.

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.



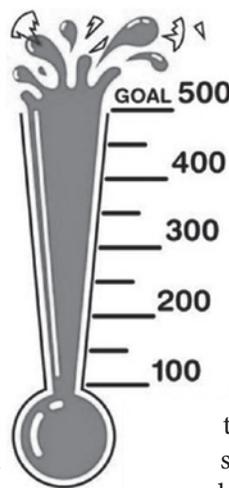
Adoption council co-chairs Elizabeth Richmond (L) and Jim Jones (R) presented appreciation awards to Ray Gates and Vince Champagne for their outstanding support of adoptive families.

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.

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 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



McNeely family is built on more than a decade of commitment



When Melody McNeely of Shiloh decided to become a foster parent 11 years ago, her reasoning was to provide companionship for her son. However, she and her son had no idea how their hearts would be won over by their experience in foster care. Three of the children who came to their home for foster care eventually became her adopted daughters. Her son, who graduated from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville last summer, became a great older brother and mentor for many of the children who have been with them.

Melody credits her family, especially her mother who has since passed away, and her church family for her success in fostering. That support system was vital. As Melody's

family grew, she continued with her education. She earned her master's degree while working full time at her job as a teacher and coach and fostering many children. Melody says her family always pitched in to assist in any way that was needed.

Claudia Dancy-Davis is a DCFS Foster Parent Support Specialist who has worked with Melody since she was licensed. She complimented Melody for offering emotional and academic support for each child coming into her home.

"Melody's home is warm and inviting and one where children thrive and grow. Melody is a foster parent who makes a total commitment to each child placed with her," Dancy-Davis said.

The concept of commitment often extends to the child's family. Melody always works cooperatively with the children's birth parents when the goal is reunification. She said it is very important to find the right method of communication with the birth parent and to talk with them as peers with the child as the common interest. She always gives out her cell number to the birth parents. She feels that is a great way to communicate that still achieves a degree of safety and confidentiality for the foster home if needed.

Melody also looks for ways to help parents stay connected while their children are with her. She sends parents pictures of their children throughout their stay with her, as well as school papers and awards. She encourages the children to write letters to their birth parents as a way to keep connections close between the child and birth family. Melody admits that the hardest part of foster care is always wondering how the children are when they return home. She tries to lay a foundation that will keep communication flowing and help everyone manage the transition.

*"...never give up.
Children, like all
adults, are not perfect."*

—Melody McNeely

Her advice to foster parents is to never give up. Children, like all adults, are not perfect and their behaviors may be a little challenging at times, she believes. They still need stability and unconditional acceptance while they are in foster care.

Southern Region sent 7 to college with DCFS scholarships

This academic year, seven students whose cases were served by programs in the DCFS Southern 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.



Aaron Albrecht is a graduate of O'Fallon Township High School. He earned a 3.19 GPA on a 4.0 scale. While in high school he

was a multi-year Tae Kwon Do champion and earned a second-degree black belt. He also started a community Tae Kwon Do Club and taught youth and adult classes. Aaron volunteered his time with the Ainaid Shriner Brass Band playing trumpet, and doing boot drives that helped to raise over \$3,000 for the Shriner Hospitals. Aaron is studying at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and plans to major in engineering.

Elias Allen graduated from Carmi-White County High School, where he earned a 3.30 out of 4.0 GPA. Elias was voted all-conference in football in his senior season, and achieved honor roll status multiple times. Elias was a wrestling and football instructor for the Illinois Kids Wrestling Foundation and the Junior Pro Football Program. He was also a member of Future Farmers of America for four years. Elias attends Southeastern Illinois College and plans to major in atmospheric science and engineering.



Barretta Chullen is from Thompsonville. She graduated with a 4.80 GPA out of five points. While in high

school she was a member of student council, drama club, art club, yearbook committee, and Future Homemakers of America. Barretta was also elected homecoming queen, and she graduated with high academic honors. Additionally, she gave back to her community by volunteering at local food programs.

Barretta is now studying at Rend Lake College with plans to major in fine arts.



Destiny Gray, of Washington Park, graduated from St. Louis Senior High School, where she earned a 4.12 GPA on a 4.0 scale.

While in high school she was an administrative assistant at Carolyn's



DISCOUNT ON CLOTHING FOR ST. LOUIS-AREA FAMILIES

(RE)FRESH is a resale boutique with a collection of clothes and accessories that ranges from designer items to vintage finds. (RE)FRESH makes special accommodations for foster families, which include discounts for youth still in DCFS custody and for foster parents.

A Discount Approval Form is required. Caseworkers can download it at www.foster-adopt.org/refreshdiscount and fill out the form so the foster parent can bring it when shopping. Call 314-881-0331 for more information.

See more at the **(RE)FRESH** website www.refreshstl.org. The store is located at 1710 S. Brentwood Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63144. Store Hours: Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday noon to 5 p.m.

Scholarships (Con't)

Child Care, worked with the patients at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, and was active with the Belleville Humane Society. Destiny was also an honor roll student. Destiny is now studying biology at Eastern Illinois University.



Amber Holt, from Worden, is a 2014 graduate of Edwardsville High School. While in high school she received the Prairie State

Achievement Award, was a member of the National Honor Society and was named an Illinois State Scholar. She earned a 3.70 GPA on a four-point scale. Amber's volunteer endeavors include supporting the Edwardsville Public Library, Camp Free-to-Be autism summer camp, and the Metro Community Church Fusion Youth Group.

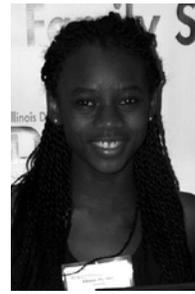
Amber is now a student at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, majoring in computer science.



Mark Kroll of Albion, graduated from Edwards County High School, where he earned a 3.52 GPA on a 4.0 scale. In high school he

was a member of Future Business Leaders of America, Future Farmers of America, choir, and the prom committee. Mark has worked at the Navigator Journal and Register, and volunteered at a local nursing home. He received academic honors and a special teacher recommendation for being a student that consistently performs good deeds.

Mark is studying finance at Wabash Valley College.



Alexis Murden

is a graduate of Carbondale Community High School where she earned a 3.44 grade point average on a 4.0 scale. While in

high school she was on the Honor Roll with a 3.44 out of four points GPA. She was a three-sport athlete, and participated in international club, anime club, and Sisters for Science. Alexis volunteered at the Boys and Girls Club of America, and participated in the work-study program at The Museum of Science and Industry.

Alexis is now at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, majoring in chemistry.

Southern Region Foster Care Advisory Council Update

The Southern Region Foster Care Advisory Council meets each quarter to discuss DCFS policies and any issues that relate to foster parenting. At the fall meeting in October, participants went over the draft for the Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan. The plan will be scored by the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council.

The January meeting agenda included follow up discussion on the policy concerning compliance with pools and water features.

Caregivers can attend all meetings in person beginning at 6:00 p.m. at these field offices:

- Belleville • Cairo • Effingham
- Marion • Mt. Vernon • Wood River

If transportation to an office is not convenient, caregivers can also dial in to the meetings at 1-888-494-4032 with access code: 1884403034.

New Foster Parent Representative to Adoption Council

Karla Blake was appointed in November to represent the Southern Region on the Illinois Adoption Advisory Council. Karla and her husband Warren live in Herrin. Warren is a Herrin police officer, who is now the Crisis Intervention officer for the department. Karla is an Early Intervention Developmental Specialist who works with children from birth to three years of age that have developmental delays. Karla is a DCFS trainer and is also a Foster Parent Support Specialist, serving DCFS foster families in Franklin, Williamson, Union, Perry, Jackson, Johnson, Alexander, Pulaski and Massac counties.

The Blakes have been a foster family for eight years. She and Warren have two birth sons and one daughter by adoption. They have previously fostered four other children, all under the age of five.

Holiday cheer extended to homes across Southern Region

There was much holiday cheer throughout the Southern Region as staff from DCFS and private agencies, worked hard to assist foster families in providing a little extra happiness for the children in care. Some of the Holiday Celebrations throughout the area included:

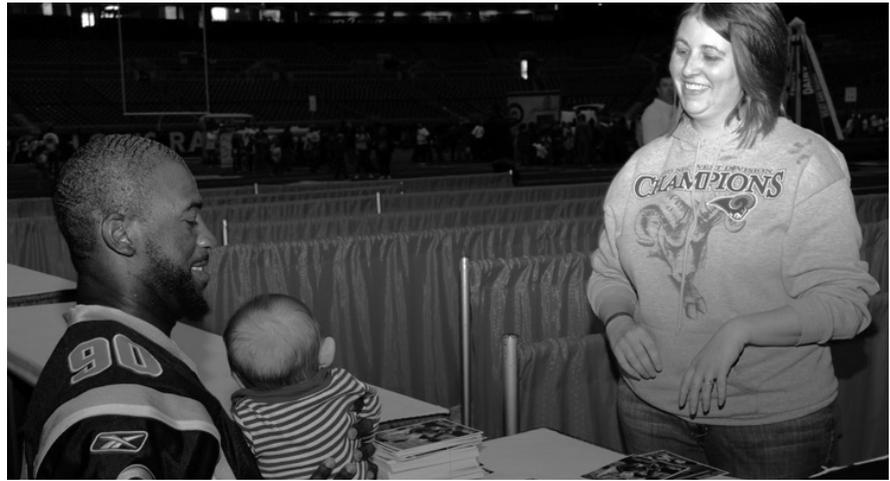
Madison County

The DCFS foster parents in Madison County were treated to a Christmas Party on December 9th. Area churches sponsored the party.

Illinois Mentor, serving the East St. Louis area, hosted a Holiday Skating Party on Sunday, December 14th at the Fun Spot Skating Rink in Belleville. Foster families were treated to dinner, skating and additional fun activities.

The Foster & Adoptive Coalition, which covers St. Louis and Metro East St. Louis area, hosted their annual Holiday Motion for Kids Holiday Party. The event took place on December 20th with the St. Louis Rams football team. Each child attending enjoyed meeting the Rams football players and the cheerleaders. All children under the age of 17 received a Christmas gift and a visit with Santa. Motion for Kids is a joint project of the Bar Association of Metro St. Louis (BAMSL) and the St. Louis Rams.

The Foster & Adoptive Coalition also provided more than 600 Christmas gifts to the children in the metro east area through the Little Wishes program.



Michael Brockers of the St. Louis Rams signed autographs for foster and adoptive families served by agencies in the Foster Adoptive Coalition.

United Methodist

Families from United Methodist Children's Home Foster Care Program in the Mount Vernon area enjoyed a cookie exchange on Thursday, December 13. The agency also hosted a "Live Nativity/Festival of Trees" on December 5. Families had the opportunity to drive through the campus of United Children's home in Mt. Vernon, then voted on the best decorated tree.



United Methodist cookie exchange.

Lutheran Social Services in the Marion area, hosted their annual Christmas party for foster children and families, Friday, Dec. 5th at the Carbondale Civic center.

DCFS Caseworkers and Staff in the offices of Murphysboro, Sparta, Marion, Harrisburg, Anna, Cairo, Metropolis, Effingham, Olney and Mount Vernon purchased, wrapped and presented the gifts to the children served by the regional foster care program.

The DCFS staff in the East St. Louis and Belleville area donated gifts, along with Toys for Tots. Staff hosted a Christmas party at the Caseyville Township building on Friday, December 12. There were many activities including games and face painting for the children. Snacks were provided. Each child that attended went home with a Christmas stocking, book and present.

Harrisburg-Area family group

Strengthening Families Illinois has established a group to serve families in the southern portion of the DCFS Southern Region. The organization conducts Parent Cafés, which are open discussions about the foster care experience led by a trained facilitator. Robyn Harvey led the first café in August, followed by meetings in October and December.

The meetings are held at the Carrier Mills Methodist Church in Carrier Mills. Dinner and childcare were provided. This was a great opportunity for foster parents in the southern region to get to meet each other, de-stress, talk and learn. Foster parents also receive two hours of credit towards their licensing renewal. Along with the discussion, there were refreshments and activities for children. The next event is scheduled for March. Contact Susanne Loss at 618-521-6387 for more information.

The Poshard Foundation makes the season bright

The Poshard Foundation distributed \$50,000 to 22 agencies that serve abused, abandoned and neglected children. The DCFS Southern Region office used its check to purchase gifts so youth in DCFS regional foster care program were guaranteed presents on December 25.



DCFS Supervisor Courtney Field and Area Administrator Bob Cain gratefully accepted a donation from Pat Benton and the Poshard Foundation.

Foster Parent Support Specialists on call to serve DCFS-supervised homes

The DCFS Foster Parent Support Specialist Program is a unique way to assist families in the DCFS regional foster care program. The team of foster parent support specialists has been hired to work directly with other foster parents, providing information and support. In addition to their skills, they bring the first-hand knowledge that can only come from having walked the path of foster care.

The Southern Region recently hired new Foster Parent Support Specialists to work with and support their foster families.

Angela Walta is from Sandoval. She and her husband James have two daughters by birth. They have been foster parents for four years. They have fostered eight children and are currently in the process of adopting their five-year-old son. They are also fostering a one-year-old boy. Angela

Walta will be serving the counties of Jefferson, Marion, Clay, Wayne and Washington.

Karla Blake is from Herrin. She and Warren have two birth sons and a daughter by adoption. They have been fostering for eight years. Karla Blake will be serving homes in the counties of Perry, Franklin, Jackson, Williamson, Union, Johnson, Alexander, Pulaski and Massac.

Susanne Loss has been a Foster Parent Support Specialist for the past year. In her decades of foster care and adoption, she is also a master trainer. She will be serving homes in the counties of Pope, Hardin, Saline, Gallatin, Hamilton, White, Edwards, Wabash, Richland, Lawrenceville, Fayette, Effingham, Jasper and Crawford. Her contact number is 618-521-6387 and email address is susanne.loss@illinois.gov.

Claudia Dancy-Davis, who has been a Foster Parent Support Specialist for several years, will be serving the counties of Bond, Clinton, Randolph, Monroe, St. Clair and Madison. Her number is 618-531-7300.

Caregivers in the DCFS regional foster care program who have questions about providing care, need help finding services or seek advice can turn to a support specialist. Susanne Loss and Claudia Dancy-Davis are both team leads and can connect families. The support specialists are only assigned to homes served by the DCFS regional foster care program. Homes licensed by private agencies should contact their agency directly for resources.

Southern 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. 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.

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.



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Illinois Families Now and Forever®

Bruce Rauner, Governor

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DCFS Office of Professional
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Editor: Vanessa James
Phone: 312-814-6800
Fax: 312-814-4131
E-mail: vanessa.james@illinois.gov

Regional Reporters

Central: Julie Cebulski
Northern: Colleen Woolwine
Southern: Susanne Loss
Cook North: Edith Cruz & Desiree
Benbenek
Cook South: Angela Barber
Cook Central: Alice Couch

Production

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Vanessa James, Editor
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