



ILLINOIS FAMILIES Now and Forever

Families by Foster Care, Adoption and Guardianship[®]

Department of Children and Family Services[®]



From the DCFS Director

Bryan Samuels

I recently announced a new approach to the way DCFS will deliver services, looking at the lifetime needs of the child. We may hope, but can no longer assume, that a child's stay in care will be short. Thus, we have to make sure children don't miss out on valuable development while they are in our care. We must give youth the tools they will need for a lifetime of success in families and on their own.

There are many changes underway and more to come. DCFS is lowering caseloads to devote more resources to each family. New Integrated Assessment procedures will better identify needs on the front end. We are streamlining the decision making process for delivering services. There will be more resources for youth dealing with trauma and new means to stabilize youth with multiple placement disruptions or time spent "on-run." We redesigned transitional and independent living programs to serve youth leaving care. We also hope to cultivate a group of foster parents devoted to helping older youth transition to adulthood while they live in a family setting.

We are being asked to do more with less, and are making changes to rise to the challenge.

DCFS first agency to earn second "stamp of approval"

This fall, DCFS became the first state child welfare agency in the country to be re-accredited. This achievement comes just four years after achieving the distinction of being the largest agency to gain initial accreditation. The accreditation shows that the agency has met the highest national standards for child welfare practice and delivers services effectively. The Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services (COA) conducts thorough reviews of child welfare agencies around the nation.

Illinois took the regular standards even higher and invited the COA review teams to conduct three-day studies of each local office along with the traditional central office reviews. In the past year, accreditation standards were raised to place more emphasis on monitoring service quality. DCFS workers met the more stringent guidelines while maintaining full caseloads.

"Today's re-accreditation sends the message that, even in difficult times, child welfare agencies can

boost the quality of services," said DCFS Director Bryan Samuels.

Private agencies that contract with DCFS for foster care services must also be accredited. Due to the rigorous demands of the accreditation process, clients should expect high standards of service along with increased participation in decision-making, better case management and more accountability.

The accreditation process included interviews with randomly-selected foster parents and caregivers. However, it is just one of many means that foster parents can use to weigh in with their own "performance measurements." Illinois is also unique in having the Foster Parent Law that contains the Foster Parent Bill of Rights, which requires all agencies to seek foster parent input into their annual Foster Parent Law Implementation Plans. Additionally, DCFS maintains the Advocacy Office for Children and Families and a phone line (800-232-3798) to hear and resolve problems.

From the Editor



Vanessa
James

After the Department expanded the newsletter to include more adoption and guardianship issues, along with foster care information, I was able to do some fine-tuning in 2004. We did our first survey of the 49,000 readers at the start of this year. Judging from the comments, many caregivers find the newsletter to be a valuable resource that you have come to depend upon. Your kind remarks were especially appreciated. Your critiques were also valuable.

In the year ahead, I will attempt to shape the newsletter to address more of the topics that readers said were of greatest interest. To that, I will add a dash of the dinnertime discussions that take place with my own four children. They span from pre-kindergarten to high school, so I am sure I will have plenty of "tales from the front lines" to share with you.

Please accept my best wishes for many joyous times during this holiday season. Snap a picture or keep a journal. If your family is like mine, you'll probably need some "proof of happiness" to keep you going in case (when) things get tough down the line. And when they do, I hope the newsletter can provide some answers.

Assessing Integrated Assessment progress

The Integrated Assessment Program (IAP) has moved from plan to practice. This new initiative is up and running in most of Cook county and will be statewide in early 2005. The program provides extensive screenings to identify a child's needs and determine services for all new cases as they open. It is a fundamental shift in how casework will be carried out through the life of the case.

"We were convinced we could do a better job with more complete and coordinated information on the front-end. But no one anywhere in the country was doing that. In Illinois, we had to figure it out ourselves. I believe that we got it right," said Velma Williams, Deputy Director for Clinical Practice and Professional Development.

Going forward, each new case that opens will go through a comprehensive set of screenings addressing physical health, education and mental/emotional health, as well as domestic violence and substance abuse. These screenings will assess the child and his or her birth parents or other significant caretakers, and will incorporate input from foster parents. The caseworker and a clinical screener will work together to handle the assessments and make recommendations.

Dr. Kristin Velazquez Kenefick joined DCFS in October to serve as the Statewide Administrator for the Integrated Assessment Program. Contracts are now in place with five universities and

institutions to be responsible for hiring clinical screeners in all parts of the state. They are:

- Northern Illinois University for the DCFS Northern region
- Southern Illinois University for Central and Southern regions
- LaRabida Hospital for Cook County
- Children's Memorial Hospital for Cook County
- Erickson Institute, focusing on early childhood concerns

The clinical screeners will collect information on clients and conduct the assessment along with the assigned caseworker.

The pilot program rolled out in Cook County in January 2004, with new cases originating in DCFS offices. Since that time, DCFS has trained the other regional offices, private agencies, juvenile court personnel and other entities on the new assessment procedures. Additionally, the medical professionals who will do the Comprehensive Health Evaluations have also been selected and trained, allowing numerous providers in each DCFS region.

In early 2005, the IAP will expand to all new cases, public and private, throughout the state. Already, clinical screeners are consulting on certain high risk/safety "trigger" cases. These include existing cases where youth have experienced more than two foster care placement disruptions within 18 months. Questions about the IAP can be directed to Dr. Kenefick 312-814-4153.

Talk to your doctor about flu shots

With the cold and flu season underway, caregivers may be concerned about how the shortage of influenza (flu) vaccines may affect the children in their care. This fall, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced guidelines to determine those at highest risk of flu-related complications. The guidelines take into consideration age, medical conditions and other factors that could put an individual at increased risk from the flu. The CDC is working with health officials nationwide to then distribute the available supply of flu vaccines to those who are eligible under the guidelines. Be aware that local authorities can further shape the guidelines to address specific needs in a particular community.

There are some children under DCFS care in foster homes or residential centers who could benefit from a flu vaccination. It is important that caregivers first have discussions with the child's primary care physician to determine if the child is eligible, based on the CDC or local community guidelines. The primary care physician can advise caregivers where to get the vaccination in a specific area.

In the meantime, caregivers can help children stay healthy by following good-sense guidelines such as making sure children wash their hands frequently, dress properly and stay home if they do become sick.



Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council Bulletin

Implementation Plan Monitoring

The Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan is at the heart of the Foster Parent Law. Reviewing the yearly plans that each agency and DCFS region must submit is a main responsibility for the Council. This year the review process has another important component. DCFS and the Council recently completed the first wave of in-person monitoring interviews to make sure the plans are being implemented. It was an excellent opportunity to see how the plans actually translate to the realities of working with families.

Feedback from the reviews is carefully compiled and sent to the agency. Then the organization can modify their implementation strategy for the coming year as needed. Based on the experience of monitoring the first third of nearly 100 plans, the Council was also able to gain knowledge about how well the annual plans are serving foster parents.

New Central Region Member

Statewide welcomes Carolyn DePalma of Normal to the Council. She and her husband Dan have been foster parents to more than 40 children during the 10 years they have held a foster care license. Currently, they work



Carolyn DePalma

with The Baby Fold, where they have been active advocates for youth needing various degrees of resources. DePalma's experience in providing structure, incorporating children into the family fabric and delving into the community for resources will certainly be tapped as she represents Central Region families.

Adolescent issues

Several Council members serve on the adolescent issues committee. They focus on policies that affect older youth. Members of the Council will also serve on the Governor's recently established Task Force on Sibling Rights, working with the Statewide Youth Advisory Board. These volunteers have vast experience with caring for older youth and look forward to sharing their perspective as parents.

Upcoming Meeting Schedule

- January 28 ~ Springfield, 227 S. Seventh Street
- February 25 ~ Bloomington, Hawthorn Suites, 1 Lyons Court
- March 18 ~ Fairview Heights Ramada Inn 6900 N. Illinois

The meetings typically begin at 9:00 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m. The meetings are open for all interested caregivers to attend. Any questions can be directed to the Office of Foster Parent Support Services at 217-524-2422.



Post-Adoption Hint

Medical insurance after the subsidy ends

As all children (adopted, guardianship or birth) approach adulthood, it is important to teach life skills and plan for a smooth transition. That can lead to many factors to consider. When your child's adoption or guardianship subsidy ends, so does the medical card from the Illinois Department of Public Aid.

Private insurance for an adopted child on their parents' plan can often continue to age 23 if the dependent is a full-time student. But, if college is not an option or the student stops taking classes, the youth may be left uninsured.

Employers may offer medical insurance as a benefit, sometimes even for part-time employees. Youth making career choices should add that factor to their list of job criteria.

Youth with disabilities may qualify for publicly-funded insurance. Public-run health facilities and free clinics may offer free or sliding scale services to young adults without insurance.

There is a very real possibility of a medical insurance gap for young adults (even those who were never in care). Start planning early by discussing options with your insurance professional so your family can be informed and prepared for these real world situations.

Illinois Celebrates Adoption

From clowns and tumblers in the halls of Cook County Court to recruitment drives and news articles, Illinois celebrated November as national Adoption Awareness Month in many ways. The efforts helped to show adoptive families how much they are appreciated and let the public know more about adoption.

The Illinois Celebrates Adoption events were spearheaded by a collaboration of DCFS, private agencies and the Chicago Bar Association. The celebration started in full swing with a special event at American Girl Place in Chicago. Young girls and their families were treated to a private shopping experience and brunch in the café. The event helped launch the new doll, Nellie, which has her own adoption story.

The following week, the Richard J. Daley Center in Chicago was alive with entertainment, music and food to add even more excitement to the families appearing for



Adoptive families (and their dolls) were the special guests at Chicago's American Girl Place for a brunch and private shopping.

adoption proceedings. Along with the proceedings the crowd gathered in the lobby saw a rousing performance by the rap group Uhlich Voices, telling of life as a child in state care. A slate of honored speakers included First Lady Patti Blagojevich, Merri Dee of WGN Television and presiding Judge Michael Murphy.

The morning's highlight came when the Watson family of Rockford described their happy and hectic life after three adoptions through DCFS along with two children by birth. Nearly 50 new families became "official" at Cook County on November 19.

Around the state, many communities also planned adoption awareness events and other celebrations. Many adoptive parents went on record with local newspapers and television stations to demonstrate the need and the benefits of building a family through adoption.



Director Samuels and First Lady Patti Blagojevich after her remarks during the news conference in the Richard J. Daley Center.

Meanwhile, more than 50 families were in the Cook County adoption courtrooms becoming "forever families."

Bridging birth and foster families makes happier holidays

The winter months bring a good measure of excitement and holiday cheer. However, this time of year also can intensify feelings of longing for children in the foster care system because it emphasizes the separation from their birth families. Often, these children create memories of idealized parents. It may make life a little more bearable for them to imagine that their birth families are exemplary and that life before foster care was happy. Although this often does not match their real experiences, this type of imagination is common and serves as a kind of emotional protection for them.

Sometimes, when they face the reality of their situation, children will exhibit sadness and significant emotional distress caused by separation from their birth families during the holidays. Often, older children are more vulnerable to intense feelings of sadness and anger during the holiday season because they have more memories of the rituals and traditions of their birth families during the holidays. Also, these older children often functioned as “pseudo-parents” before the removal from their families and, as such, they tend to worry about their younger siblings and continue to feel responsible for them.

It is important to provide a healthy bridge for children who may be saddened during the time of year that brings so much joy to others. Failure to acknowledge

the feelings may cause them to be more acute. It is often helpful to create a bridge that connects the birth family, either literally or figuratively, with the foster family to compensate for the feelings of separation that occurs during this time.

Following are a few suggestions to bridge the gap:

1. Ask the child about different holiday dishes that their birth families enjoyed during the holidays. Ask them to help prepare them or share your excitement about preparing them.
2. Take a picture of the entire foster family, including foster and birth siblings as well as foster parents, and display this picture as part of the holiday decorations.
3. Help the children create holiday cards for their foster and birth siblings and mail them.
4. Help the children create an ornament that represents their birth family and display it with the other decorations.

There are numerous, creative ways to bridge the birth and foster families to create feelings of comfort and joy during the holiday season. The most important suggestion is to listen. Children often will let you know what they need if you listen closely enough. Although feelings of longing and sadness can surface during the holiday season, feelings of happiness and joy are contagious.

Submitted by Dr. Bernice Collins, Ph.D.

Vacation fun and learning

With the children home for the holidays, it helps to have a few aces to keep minds sharp and hands busy. Take a look at these web sites for ideas for free activities and inexpensive craft ideas.

Sharpen Math Skills

Keep math skills sharp with free printable math worksheets. The sheets use fun winter themes and graphics to quiz basic math skills. Choose the grade level (from 1 to 5) and type of activity your child will like. www.kidzone.ws/math/winter/index.htm.

Countdown to Christmas

Write to Santa, read stories, enjoy Karaoke, send e-cards, find recipes, play games and puzzles, and print stories to color at www.northpole.com.

Crafts to count on

Fill those school-free days with lots of winter crafts that are easy to do. Take a peek at www.kidsdomain.com/craft/_winter.htm for ideas on neat pictures, cool hair accessories and lots of craft projects to pass away the time constructively.



Tell it like it is: Readers respond

Families Now and Forever wants to hear the “real deal” on caring for children from those who know best – you! Here is what you had to say to the question: **What does your family do to minimize stress around the upcoming holiday season?**

I first start the season with prayer to keep Christ as the focus...I start buying gifts on December 28th for the next year and when possible even wrap them. But if I don't get them wrapped, they are here way before the rush, and I can use the time for planning get-togethers with friends and family.

Linda McMullen

There is no such thing as stress-free. Between nine families with the 14th grandchild due and with traveling from out of state, we are glad to just sit down to dinner. Having family together is the final stress breaker.

Adrienne Welenc

I take my kids on a “time out” overnight trip to keep the holiday stress from getting too much. We drive two hours to St. Louis, get a room with a pool, go ice skating, swim, eat foods we can only get in St. Louis, and come home the next day with a brand new, and less stressful, perspective of the true meaning of the holiday.

Susanne Loss

Editor's Note:

Because we have several birth family members still involved in our sons' lives, we use the holiday break for visits. Over time, we have cultivated the relationships and set expectations so we can feel secure about the visits. We keep the stress down by making travel plans and purchasing tickets in advance. When the kids are gone, they can have a good time with their folks, and we get a parenting “time-out” while they are away. Everybody is happier when we are back together.

The new question is...**What would you say to encourage someone you know to become a foster or adoptive parent?**

You can contact me with your response by e-mail at vjames@idcfs.state.il.us or by phone at 312-814-6824. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Vanessa James, Editor



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Now and Forever*

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A family for me

Amanda [C7409] Amanda, 16, is a sweet young lady who loves to attend church and church-related activities. She is very social and cooperative, and she enjoys helping others. Amanda is also a talented creative writer who likes to compose poems and short stories. She keeps a regular journal where she records her thoughts about each day.

Her worker said Amanda is kind and considerate, and she puts forth a good effort to reach her goals. Her teacher said Amanda likes being successful and responds well to praise. The parents for Amanda would be understanding and nurturing, and encourage her to develop her talents and abilities. Amanda said she wants to be loved and would like to have brothers and sisters.

Christopher and Chrishon [C7370-71] These smart, creative youngsters are looking for a loving home! Christopher (left) is a bright, articulate young man who likes math and science. In his free time, he engages his imagination by drawing, coloring, and playing with army figures. Christopher, 9, is very energetic and loves to play sports and participate in outdoor activities. He adapts well to new situations. His brother, Chrishon (right), is a sweet young man who has a great ability to communicate with other people. He likes to entertain, and he is a good singer and dancer. Chrishon, 7, also has artistic talent and enjoys drawing and coloring in the company of his older brother. When his foster family has game time, he likes to play Uno and Candyland.

Their foster parent said that Christopher is smart, charming, and helpful. Chrishon has great manners and a good sense of humor – and he’s always willing to lend a hand. The family for these two would be loving, supportive, and patient. You can know when to be flexible and when to be firm with your guidance. Christopher said he’d like a “happy” family who will “take us places and do things with us.” Chrishon said he’d like a family who will “help with our homework” and “take great care of us.”

Brianna [C7067] Brianna, 12, loves to take care of animals. She even has a collection of stuffed animals that she looks after when no real ones are around! As you might imagine, Brianna hopes to join a family that has a dog or a cat so she can continue to learn about being a good caretaker. In her free time, Brianna likes to express herself by singing along to Disney songs. She also enjoys being outside, especially when she can swim or play basketball.

Brianna’s foster parent and her teacher said they enjoy spending time with her. She has a great sense of humor and likes to do activities with adults. The family for Brianna can give her lots of love and attention. You can provide her with a safe, structured environment and close supervision. Be sure to let Brianna know she is an important part of your family. She will do best as the youngest or only child.

Christopher [C7002] Christopher, 14, is a creative, articulate young man. He loves to spend time sketching and has been widely praised for his work. “He has a wonderful gift for drawing,” said his teacher. Christopher also communicates well with others, and his charm and sense of humor have won him many friends.

His worker said Christopher shows care and interest in other people. His foster parent said Christopher can be very hard-working. The right family for him would love and nurture Christopher, provide him with good guidance and be patient and understanding as he adjusts to your home. Christopher said he’d like to join a family that is “fun, nice, and talented.”

Cornelius [C5959] Cornelius, 16, is a huge basketball fan, and he loves to get out on the court whenever he has the chance. After a hard-played game, he’ll often relax by listening to his Walkman. He enjoys singing along with the music and has even begun writing his own songs. Cornelius, whose nickname is C.J., pointed out some of his hidden talents: “I’m very good at caring for animals, especially dogs, and I’d love to have a dog for a pet someday.”

His teacher said C.J. has a lot of enthusiasm and “a desire to improve himself.” His worker said he is fun to be around and is a good teammate in sports. The family for C.J. would be loving and supportive, and you can help him with his schoolwork. Cornelius said he’d like to play board games with his adoptive family or “just sit and talk.”

If you are interested in adopting one of these children or learning about other children waiting to be adopted, please call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois at 1-800-572-2390, or see the AICI web site – www.adoptinfo-il.org.

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Call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois 800-572-2390.



Amanda [7409]



Brianna [7067]



Christopher and Crishon
[7370-71]



Christopher
[7002]



Cornelius [5959]

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Call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois 800-572-2390.