

## Time in orphanage softened mother's heart for tough job of foster care

Maria Geier has been a foster parent for four years. With help from her 10-year-old daughter, Maria has provided care to six children. The hardest part, she says, is accepting that one day, despite the love you give and the bond you form, you will eventually have to let them go. However, Maria is willing to make that sacrifice if it means that her presence in their lives will make a difference.

That point became clear when nine-week-old Evelyn first came to her home. During the next 18 months, Maria watched her take her first steps and heard her first words. When it came time for Evelyn to return home, it was difficult to deal with emotionally, but Maria understood that sometimes that is how it must be.

Growing up in a Catholic orphanage in Honduras gave Maria a unique perspective on foster care. She lived with 150 other girls. She developed a close relationship with Sister Francesca, a nun whom she thought of as a mother. This relationship taught her that motherhood is for anyone who has it in their heart to give to

a child the gift of love, and is willing to share it—no matter how much it might hurt. As an adult, she is a living example of how important it is for a child to have someone to depend on for love.

In the short time Maria has been a foster caregiver, she has worked with parents towards successful reunification. She maintains contact with children's relatives and sometimes provides respite care for the parents and for other foster parents as well. Maria's love of children does not end at fostering; she is also a licensed day care provider.

From toddlers to teenagers, Maria has seen how much children need loving guidance. She once provided care to a young girl who had been rescued from human traffickers that took her from her home in Mexico. One Sunday, soon after coming to Maria's home, when the family went to church, the girl excused herself and did not return. Panicked, Maria called the police, searched on her own and returned to the church to pray. A short time later Maria left the church to drive home, and she happened to look



*Maria Geier and her daughter find caring for children to be a worthy purpose.*

down a side street. She saw a small figure sitting on the sidewalk. Her foster daughter was cold, wet, and teary. The girl explained that she was not running away. She just wanted to walk a bit to clear her head, but had lost track of time and realized she was lost. She told Maria that she had sat down and started to pray, then she looked up and she saw Maria.

Eventually, the teen left Maria's home to return to her family in Mexico. Maria's involvement with this girl solidified her beliefs that her own life has a purpose. She cherishes her own experiences, because through them she learned how to be a mother to children, and she can embrace motherhood in all forms.

## Save March 14 for the Permanency Symposium



Northern Region is planning a series of events to highlight ways to work toward better permanency outcomes for children. The Permanency symposium is a Region-wide event that will be held at six locations. The goal of this project is to share information on the importance of building a partnership with caregivers, parents, community-based organizations, private and public child welfare professionals, and court personnel to improve permanency outcomes, safety and stability for children in the care of the state.

Foster caregivers are invited to lend their expertise and experience to the discussion. A primary focus of the project is for key stakeholders to create and identify new strategies to support struggling families and increase and improve reunification, adoption and subsidized guardianship rates and outcomes.

Invitations will also be available through the mail with details on times and locations. Meanwhile, caregivers can mark their calendars to hold March 14 open for the Permanency Symposium.

## Donors plan Christmas to remember

Santa arrived early this year in Northern Region to deliver gifts to children in DCFS care. He first arrived at the Kankakee Elks Clubs on December 12. On the next day, he and his DCFS elves landed in Aurora at the Prisco Park District Center. Staff volunteers worked countless hours to plan, set up and decorate so that everything was ready for the kids' arrival. In the blink of an eye, some kids were busy coloring or eating pizza, while others were sizing up the pile of presents. Even the skeptical few got excited when Santa Claus appeared to take pictures and hear Christmas wishes. One child only hoped for a Spider-Man toy. He was more than happy to unwrap that present and others that were not on his list.

These Christmas events were made possible by the Department's partnership with the Walter and Connie Payton Foundation, Safeway Corporation, Home Star Bank and many more contributors. Connie Payton, wife of the Chicago Bears legend, keeps her husband's spirit alive through a continued commitment to children in need. For 14 years, the foundation has helped collect and supply nearly 800,000 gifts to youth in care throughout Cook County, and for the first time in 2007, Aurora and Bourbonnais. The Holiday Gift Giving program covered youth in foster care and also included youth in residential centers, independent living programs, the armed forces and college students. Connie Payton and her son Jarrett



attended the events and spoke to families.

"Working closely with the DCFS, we strive to help boost these children's self-esteem and give them a reason to believe that tomorrow can be different and that tomorrow can be better," said Connie Payton.

Judging from the smiles on little faces as they filed home loaded with presents, things were already looking better, thanks to all the contributors and volunteers.

### Northern News

#### Regional Reporter

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Anyone can call the regional reporter with foster parent association news and schedules; local training notices; features on foster families and community members working for children; photos; and ideas for news articles or supportive services that would be helpful for caregivers to know.

## Northern region caregivers air hot topics at council meeting

DCFS Deputy Director Arthur Bishop joined the Northern Region Foster Parent Advisory Council at the DeKalb field office for its last meeting of 2007. Co-chairs Debbie Freke and Robyn Harvey, both foster caregivers, lead the group with guidance from Regional Administrator Deborah Palmer-Thomas. The title of the night was "Hot Topics," and caregivers were encouraged to ask Bishop any question they wanted answered.

As a warm up to the question session, the meeting started with a light dinner and a short business meeting. Foster caregivers and adoptive parents from both DCFS and private agencies joined staff from placement, investigations, and the Local Area Network teams to accomplish the agenda. Palmer-Thomas explained the process for developing the region's annual Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan. The group also discussed the mission of the local advisory council and its role as a conduit to the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council. Then, Robyn Harvey introduced Deputy Director Arthur Bishop, and his assistant deputy Larry Chasey. The attendees had many questions about specific practices and controversial Department decisions. Some of the topics discussed were:

1. Decision process for the Foster Parent Reimbursement Program
2. Need for scholarships for developmentally-disabled children who would not qualify for existing programs,
3. Concerns regarding licensing practices in DeKalb County and adherence to the Foster Parent Law.
4. Vacancies in the Foster Parent Support Specialist positions.

Bishop also asked questions of the group. He wanted to get a read on the caregivers' reaction to the Department's reunification initiative. The response was mostly favorable, as many caregivers had already been working cooperatively with parents toward a return home goal.

The night concluded with Harvey asking Bishop and Chasey their opinion on the hardest part of being a foster caregiver. Chasey mentioned the bad press that colors the public's perception of all caregivers.

"There is nothing easy about being a foster parent," said Bishop. "The system, the children, all of it is difficult."

He thanked the foster parents at the meeting for their continued dedication and compassion to the children in care.



*DCFS Deputy Director Arthur Bishop and Council Co-Chair Robyn Harvey fielded questions from caregivers.*

### **DCFS Northern Region Foster Parent Advisory Council 2008 Meeting Schedule**

All meetings start at 6 p.m. with a light dinner. Training credits are available at each meeting.

- February 12, Joliet Field Office
- March 11, Waukegan Field Office
- April 8, DeKalb Field Office
- April 15, Rockford Satellite Office
- April 15, Aurora Field Office
- May 13, Joliet Field Office
- August 12, Waukegan Field Office
- September 9, DeKalb Field Office
- September 16, Rockford Satellite Office
- September 16, Aurora Field Office
- October 14, Joliet Field Office
- November 11, Waukegan Field Office

Please call Robyn Harvey at 815-986-8672 to reserve your seat and to verify that the meeting is occurring. If attendance is repeatedly low at certain DCFS field offices, the meeting will be cancelled and relocated to a different area.

# Northern Region Training Calendar

## Foster PRIDE In-Service Modules

All caregivers are welcome to attend PRIDE In-Service Training. Advance registration is required. Training dates, times and locations are subject to change.

### Module 2 - *Using Discipline to Protect, Nurture and Meet Developmental Needs* (9 training hours)

*This workshop provides practical information to foster parents about how to use effective discipline techniques such as I-messages, natural and logical consequences, time out and how to catch kids being "good" and what to do to encourage positive behavior.*

**Lockport**      *SOS Children's Village*  
Feb. 5, 7, & 14 (Tue/Thu) 10 a.m.-1 p.m.

**Aurora**      *Comfort Suites City*  
Apr. 5, 12 & 19 (Sat) 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

### Module 4 - *The Sexual Development of Children and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse* (9 training hours)

*Participants learn to differentiate normal from problematic sexual behaviors in children and youth, signs and symptoms*

## Child Trauma

4 training hrs.

This four-hour course helps caregivers recognize the signs of trauma and understand how to work with children who have experienced trauma.

**Aurora**      *Comfort Suites*  
March 15 (Sat) 9:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.

**Glen Ellyn**      *Super 8*  
March 4 & 6 (Tue/Thu) 6:30-8:30 p.m.

**Elgin**      *Judson College*  
March 29 (Sat) 9:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.

*of sexual abuse and ways to help sexually abused children recover.*

**Glen Ellyn**      *America's Best Value Inn and Suites*  
Mar. 10, 12 & 17 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.  
(Mon/Wed)

**Lockport**      *SOS Children's Village*  
Apr. 8, 10 & 15 (Tue/Thu) 10 a.m.-1 p.m.

### Module 11 - *The Teen in Foster Care: Supporting Attachment* (6 training hours)

**Rockford**      *Children's Home + Aid*  
March 8 (Sat) 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

### Module 12 - *Understanding and Promoting Preteen and Teen Development* (6 training hours)

*This new course will assist Caregivers to identify developmentally appropriate ways to best promote healthy development for preteens and teens who have experienced abuse, neglect and trauma. This six-hour module will help foster/adopt caregivers to understand the teen brain development and the impact of trauma and loss on preteens and teens. Participants will learn specific strategies that caregivers can use fostering teenagers in the day to day life of the foster family.*

**Glen Ellyn**      *America's Best Value Inn and Suites*  
Apr.16 & 23 (Wed) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

## Educational Advocacy

6 training hrs.

It is mandatory for at least one foster parent in each family to attend Educational Advocacy Training in order to be re-licensed. Educational Advocacy Training is offered following each Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE training and many additional times. This six-hour course covers information foster parents need to know so that they can advocate for their foster children's educational rights and needs.

**Aurora**      *Comfort Suites*  
Feb. 25 & 27 (Mon/Wed) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

Mar. 18 & 20 (Tue/Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Glen Ellyn**      *Super 8*  
Feb. 27 & Mar. 5 (Wed) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Kankakee**      *Kankakee Comm. College*  
March 1 & 8 (Sat) 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

**Rockford**      *Children's Home + Aid*  
Feb. 19 & 21 (Tue/Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Rockford**      *Camelot Comm. Care*  
Mar. 4 & 6 (Tue/Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Romeoville**      *Comfort Inn*  
Mar. 24 & 26 (M/W) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Waukegan**      *Ramada Inn*  
Mar. 25 & 27 (Tue/Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Caregivers must register to attend any of these training classes.**

**Call the DCFS Office of Training**

**877-800-3393**  
**toll free**