

Adoption dream shifts to realizing reunification hope

Peter and Lara Luetkehans enrolled in Foster PRIDE training because they wanted to expand their family by adoption. However, what they learned in PRIDE training not only challenged them, it opened their minds to the possibility of foster care. Now they and their 9-year-old twin boys are opening their home to children under the age of eight for foster care, including those with a return home goal.

“I am so impressed with their commitment to the young girl now in their home. They are completely on board with the reunification process. Peter and Lara understand helping the child means helping the family,” said DCFS placement caseworker Vanessa Castro.

She elaborated with examples of how they help the child’s mother stay connected to her infant daughter with phone calls. Lara even placed a letter with pictures and recent development details in the little girl’s diaper bag to surprise her mom at a visit.

“They go the extra mile in keeping her connected with her family. I could not ask for more than that,” said Castro.

The admiration flows both ways as Lara said she appreciates Castro’s monthly visits and how she keeps their family informed about progress in the child’s court proceedings. Licensing worker Richard Echevarria is another



Peter and Lara Luetkehans (left) find support from other families, like fellow caregivers Patty and Dan Ihm, pictured here at the Foster Adoptive Parent Alliance Annual Spring Fling.

valued team member. Lara felt that he took time to explain the licensing process and to make it simple as she and Peter shifted to foster care during training.

“Training was our favorite part of foster care. Our trainers gave us a great foundation to build on. The topics were interesting and so informative,” said Lara.

If there had to be one downside, it is that Lara and Peter found a lack of foster parent support groups where they could hear other foster parents’ stories, and experiences.

Lara said, “Most books I read only tell the negative portions of the system. I

think foster parents have a lot of great stories that aren’t being shared.”

She recently was introduced to a local support group and is ready to share the triumphs and the challenges she faces while caring for another mother’s child.

“As I was writing my Christmas cards, I was thinking about how bizarre and complex things in life are. Yet, when it all comes down to it, we are all in this together. It’s just about families helping families.”

Families find help for school issues

The DCFS Education Advisors Rhonda Best and Robena Morgan are hosting monthly Northern Region Education Network meetings. These meetings are a great opportunity for caregivers and staff to learn more about educational issues. In addition to the topic of the month, time is set aside to problem-solve issues and receive educational updates.

The meetings are held monthly in the Aurora Regional Office, located at 8 East Galena Blvd, 3rd floor, Aurora.

Upcoming topics for 2010 include:

- 1/19 Early Childhood Programs
- 2/16 Effective IEP/504 Meetings
- 3/16 Autism Spectrum and Education
- 4/20 Addressing Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying in Schools
- 5/18 Education while Youth are Psychiatrically Hospitalized or in the Juvenile Justice System

The meetings are held from 9:30 a.m. until Noon. If you are interested in attending, contact Aundrea Nabors, Assistant Education Advisor, at 815-967-3832.

Additionally, the advisors have been holding “drop-in” events called Helping With School Problems on the second Tuesday each month going from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Rockford office, 107 North Third Street. Caregivers are invited to stop by informally to discuss education issues that they may be facing with the children in their care. The advisors will be on hand with general tips and strategies and will make time for individual, confidential discussion as well.

Join a Community Planning Action Team

This past September DCFS Director Erwin McEwen, along with a panel of child welfare professionals, hosted local town hall meetings throughout the Northern Region. The town hall meetings were the first step in a statewide initiative to transform the Illinois child welfare system by addressing permanency issues. The primary focus will be the over representation of children of color within the child welfare system.

Aurora and its surrounding communities has moved forward with its local Community Planning Action Team (CPAT), and already has held four local meetings since November. The community interest and involvement has been impressive, but the committee would like to urge more local foster and adoptive families to attend. There are still many obstacles to work through, but the commitment and knowledge of local resources has already yielded progress.

Meetings for the Aurora CPAT are held on the third Thursday beginning at 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m. The next meeting date is March 18 at Provena Mercy Medical Center’s Behavioral Health Services Building, located at the northwest corner of Sullivan and Rt. 31. For more information on local Action Team meetings in other areas, contact the DCFS Local Area Network (LAN) liaison:

Phil Biage
630-801-3400
(Kane, Kendall, McHenry, and Lake counties)

Sidella Hughes
815-967-3731
(DeKalb, Lee, Ogle, Whiteside, Winnebago counties)

Sharon O’Byrant
815-730-4000
(DuPage, Grundee, Kankakee, and Will counties)

Regional Advisory Council seeks new members

The Northern Region Foster Parent Advisory Council is currently looking for more caregivers to be part of the planning and decision-making for future council projects. These important tasks could include, but are not limited to, drafting the Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan, working on projects that involve caregivers and discussing policy changes that impact caregivers.

Interested caregivers can participate in the Northern Region Advisory Council, on subcommittees, and possibly the Statewide Foster Parent Advisory Council.

The regional Foster Parent Advisory Council is currently planning to meet 12 times a year, with 10 of those meetings done by teleconference, and two in person. The first meeting will be taking place this spring.

Contact Robyn Harvey at 815-986-8672 or robyn.harey@illinois.gov for more details.

If you are interested and would like to obtain a nomination form and more information please contact Robyn Harvey via e-mail at Robyn.Harvey@illinois.gov.



Volunteers help spread holiday cheer around Northern Region

The Walter and Connie Payton Foundation spread holiday cheer in the Northern Region to children and foster caregivers served by the Kankakee and Aurora offices. For 16 years the foundation has carried on the Chicago Bears legend's legacy of caring. It has supported DCFS in providing gifts to children in foster care programs, as well as young people in residential centers, independent living programs, the armed forces and Youth in College Program.

More than 600 families in Aurora and 300 families in Kankakee came to celebrate the season with food, fun and gifts. Dominic's Finer Foods donated pizza in Aurora and many local restaurants donated food for Kankakee's party. It takes months of advance work to compile the lists, collect gifts and prepare to distribute them in time. Volunteers from DCFS

staff and other individuals logged countless hours before, during and after the parties to ensure that every child had a reason to smile.

There was much anticipation, along with the slight chill in the air, as the children and their foster families arrived for the first shared holiday celebration between the Elgin and Glen Ellyn Field Offices. The festivities were hosted by the gracious congregants of the Christ Community Church in St. Charles, in their family-friendly "Kid Zone." Approximately 150 guests from Kane and DuPage counties enjoyed delicious food, games, music and each others' company, making for a memorable day for children and adults alike. The Girl Scouts of Troop 692 stepped up as Santa's helpers and supplied the specially-made gift stockings given to

all of the children who attended. They were also busy ensuring that the young guests had plenty of games to play and prizes to win.

DCFS Licensing Representatives Colleen Woolwine of the Elgin Field Office and Kristina Engel from the Glen Ellyn Field Office, along with their volunteers, would like to thank Jean Woodhouse and Mr. and Mrs. Baldowsky for contributing the food; Piece of Cake for the beautiful and tasty sheet cake; South Elgin McDonald's for beverages and cups; Ms. Rodgers for prizes for the games; Girl Scout Troop 692 and their contributing troops for the gift stockings and their assistance at the party; and Mr. Sutton and the Christ Community Church family for the use of their beautiful facility.

Foster Parent Cafés build stronger families

The Waukegan Field Office is hosting the Northern Region's first Foster Parent Café beginning in February. The Foster Parent Café model has been based on the Strengthening Families initiative being launched by DCFS as a means to provide additional support to caregivers. The goal is to engage families in meaningful conversations that are meant to be supportive, and to provide networking opportunities.

The overall theme of the café is to talk to caregivers about taking care of themselves, being a strong foster parent, and building relationships with their foster children. The Waukegan office will literally be transformed into a café by bringing in round tables, tablecloths, and refreshments. Each table will have a facilitator who will present three questions, as well as a host who will initiate and monitor the conversation based on the questions.

The Waukegan Field Office will be hosting the Foster Parent Cafés in February and March, and again in April and May. The Cafés are by RSVP only. All caregivers are welcome to attend. For more information or to RSVP contact Robyn Harvey at 815-986-8672.

Northern News

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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 Caregiver Training

Foster PRIDE In-Service Modules

All caregivers are welcome to attend PRIDE In-Service Training. The descriptions below will allow you to decide which classes fit your family's needs or circumstances. Advance registration is required for all classes. In addition to the slate of classroom courses, caregivers can also take advantage of Digital Pride modules on CD and the full offering of Lending Library materials.

For the most up-to-date and complete schedule information for classes offered in your area, visit the on-line Virtual Training Center anytime at www.DCFStraining.org or call the DCFS Office of Training at 877-800-3393 during regular business hours.

Module 1 - Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children at Risk (12 training hours)

This module focuses on building self-esteem in children. It covers how kids act when they need recognition, power, freedom, enjoyment, and a feeling of belonging. Caregivers will learn how to listen to what kids say and not what we think they say.

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.

Module 3 & 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 of sexual abuse and ways to help sexually abused children recover.

Module 5 - Supporting Relationships between Children and Their Families (9 training hours)

This training focuses on helping foster parents learn how to help kids attach to caregivers and at the same time stay loyal to birth families. Caregivers learn about how to prepare and support children for and after visits with the birth family and how to share the parenting role with birth parents.

Module 6 - Working as a Professional Team Member (9 training hours)

Foster parents learn team members' roles, when and how to be an advocate for children, what conflict is and their own

personal style for managing it, and how conflict can be a "win - win" situation for everyone involved.

Module 7 - Promoting Children's Personal and Cultural Identity (6 training hours)

Culture includes traditions, values, customs and history. What "culture" means to a child's self-esteem, how to manage cultural diversity in a foster home, how to discuss sensitive issues with children and how to help a child record his or her history are topics covered in this module.

Module 8 - Promoting Permanency Outcomes (9 training hours)

The focus of this training is on families who have children in care and supporting reunification of the children and parents.

Module 9 - Managing the Impact of Placement on Your Family (6 training hours)

In this training, caregivers learn how fostering children can affect family relationships and how to minimize stresses that can result. They also learn about the supports that are available.

Module 10 - Understanding the Effects of Chemical Dependency on Children and Families (15 training hours)

Foster parents study the risk factors for chemical use, abuse, and dependency and understand relapse and recovery and be able to acquire skills necessary to be an active member of the team to support recovery in birth parents.

Module 12 - Understanding and Promoting Preeteen and Teen Development (6 training hours)

This new course assists 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 understand teen brain development and the impact of trauma and loss on preteens and teens. Participants will learn specific strategies that caregivers can use when fostering teenagers in the day to day life of the foster family.

The Teen in Foster Care: Supporting Attachment (6 training hours)

Attachment and the Teen in Family Foster Care will help foster/adopt caregivers to understand how early attachment experiences have impacted the teen's development. The training covers the teen's perspective on how the accumulation of loss, separation and trauma impacts his or her beliefs, feelings, behaviors and relationships. Participants will learn specific tips for helping manage behaviors that develop over time from the teen's adaptive responses to trauma, grief and loss.

Educational Advocacy 6 training hrs.

It is mandatory for 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.