

## Spending time on school matters gets results

Pat and Bill Koniak have provided foster care for over 50 youth in a career spanning nearly 30 years. They are currently a treatment foster home for Children's Home and Aid Society, specializing in older youth with emotional, behavioral, and educational issues.

Each child has unique learning and educational needs, so before accepting placement, the Koniaks assess each child's abilities and skills, evaluate their own knowledge base and if necessary seek out additional information. For example, when one of their foster youth was diagnosed with autism, Pat and Bill attended local conferences and seminars on this condition and used that knowledge to more effectively plan for the child's educational needs. In addition, Pat noted that the conferences provided linkages to other community resources and individuals that they would have otherwise had difficulty locating.

The Koniaks believe that an activist, "hands-on" approach to dealing with local school districts most frequently yields positive outcomes. She recommends contacting a child's teacher two or three weeks after enrollment to check on the youth's progress and, more importantly, to let the

teacher know that the parents are interested in the student's progress. She also established a system of regular teacher/foster parent communications via a daily log or agenda book to monitor a child's performance. The Koniaks attend school activities and keep the school abreast of pertinent changes in the child's circumstances without violating confidentiality. Pat's motto: "If you're a no show foster parent, you'll get NO results."

Pat and Bill have had many foster youth with special education needs, and they have frequently had disagreements with local districts over necessary services. They recommend foster parents maintain an updated file of foster youth's progress reports, homework, and other associated documents, as these may be instrumental in advocating for changes or additions to a youth's educational program. In one instance, Pat noted that maintaining records of this sort was a key component in their successful attempt to have one of their foster children placed in a private, specialized school that was better able to meet his needs.

The Koniaks urge all foster parents to request caseworkers to



*Pat and Bill Koniak*

attend IEP (individual education plan) meetings for special education youth. This sends a signal to the school that the foster parents have the full support of the Department. Foster parents should also make full use of the Educational Advisors. Pat noted a recent occasion where the Educational Advisor and the CHASI caseworker's intervention supported her contentions that a child needed major changes in his plan. Moreover, it also resulted in the school district subsequently treating the Koniaks with a greater measure of respect.

Bessie Peabody, one of two Educational advisors in the Southern Region has worked with Pat and Bill on some complex issues, and had this to say about their efforts, "The Koniaks are persistent and will not take 'no' for an answer."

## Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan gets high mark

The Southern Region's 2005 Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan was evaluated by the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council this Spring and received a score of 101.14 points out of 104. This is an improvement over the previous year's score.

The Statewide Council specifically noted that the 2005 plan was well organized and easy to understand. More significantly, the Southern Region's ability to involve foster parents and staff in further refining the plan was an acknowledged strength.

The Region's Advisory Council recently developed a system of satellite meetings in local field offices that encourage interaction between foster parents and DCFS staff as a means of improving the Region's implementation of the Law. Input and information gathered at these meetings will be used when the Implementation plan for 2006 is prepared later this year.

### Upcoming Council Meetings:

- Sept. 12, 6:30 p.m. Marion FO
- Sept. 12, 4 p.m. Effingham FO
- Oct. 20, 10 a.m. Anna FO
- Oct. 26, 1 p.m. Alton FO

## Wishes come true in East St. Louis area

The Foster Care and Adoptive Coalition in St Louis has implemented its "Little Wishes" Program in the seven-county East St. Louis region. This program allows foster children to have a special wish come true. Wishes can cost up to \$200.00 and may include activities such as dance or music lessons. They could also be for tangible items like bicycles and musical instruments.

Foster parents or caseworkers may make a "wish" on behalf of the child by completing a simple form and submitting it to the Coalition. After insuring that the "wish" is appropriate, it is posted on a special website that can be visited by anyone. Foster children are identified by first name only. Members of the public who visit the site can call directly to grant the wish, or make a contribution via credit card on the Internet. Contributors may also donate to a general "Little Wish" fund whose monies will be used to grant wishes that are not specifically identified. It is the Coalition's hope that no child's wish will go unfilled.

The Foster Care and Adoptive Coalition has been a partner with the agencies comprising the Metro-East Foster Care and Adoption Alliance for many years and participates in recruitment and retention activities in the area. Donations to the general Little Wishes fund or specific contributions for an individual

child can be made by visiting the web site ([www.littlewishes.net](http://www.littlewishes.net)) or by calling the Coalition at 1-800-FOSTER3.

Foster parents and caseworkers in the East St. Louis Region (Madison, St Clair, Monroe, Randolph, Washington, Clinton, Bond Counties) should have already received general information about this program as well as individual child referral forms. Those who have not may contact Coalition representatives Rossi Summers or Tom Kircher at the number above.

### OUR KIDS

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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.

## Southern Region parents of teens get instruction and inspiration



*Regional Administrator Bill Peyton addresses participants at the Caregivers Institute.*

For the better part of a Saturday, 54 Southern region caregivers came together to celebrate and commiserate as they learned more about parenting older youth. The DCFS Division of Clinical Practice and Professional Development prepared this specialized Caregivers Institute, “The Ins and Outs of Parenting Adolescents and Teens,” to fill a pressing need. The parents who attended the training seemed eager for information on how to effectively give love and guidance to young people as they make their way toward a successful adulthood.

The day started with youth involved with the University of Illinois sharing their personal experiences in foster care. In some cases, their poignant stories moved the audience to tears. It definitely set the stage for the adults to better understand the youth’s perspective as they learned how to work together in a family setting. From there, the audience discovered the myriad

resources within the DCFS Division of Service Intervention to help families prepare young people for self-sufficiency. Education Advisor Bessie Peabody then explained various educational opportunities for youth. She also covered how school policies on suspensions and expulsions can affect students with special educational needs and how caregivers can be good advocates.

After refueling with a hearty lunch, the caregivers were ready to learn about the physical and emotional development of older youth. Dr. Dave Matthews, a psychologist and adoption preservation service provider from Herron, explained that there are real biological reasons for sometimes perplexing teen behaviors. In the final session of the day, Listening So Teens Will Talk, Denise McCaffrey of Prevent Child Abuse Illinois offered many recommendations to help adults and teens communicate better.

“This day was so successful, we’re already looking forward to doing it again in Spring 2006. Plans are underway and notice will be in future editions of this newsletter,” said Ray Gates, acting chief, Office of Foster Parent Support Services. The training also included many printed materials. For more information or a copy of the materials, call 217-524-2422.

## Advisory Council satellite meetings are up and running

The Southern Region’s approach to re-energizing the Foster Parent Advisory Council kicked off in February with the Mt. Vernon Field Office hosting the first meeting. Other offices in Salem, East St Louis, Olney, Cairo, Belleville, Metropolis and Sparta held meetings through the end of July. Since each office is free to develop its own agenda, opportunities for foster parent/case-worker team building have been enhanced.

The participants have generally considered the meetings held thus far successful. Foster parents were presented with additional resource information and developed a better understanding of Department procedures. In at least one office, interest in developing an ongoing foster parent support group emerged. Foster parent concerns have been identified, and in some instances may become issues to be addressed by the full regional council or the Statewide Advisory Council. The council distributed surveys asking for foster parent input on a variety of issues including training, knowledge of the Foster Parent Law, and relationships with caseworkers.

All DCFS and private agency supervised families are invited to attend the meeting in their local field office. See schedule on page 2.

