

Hobbs family thrives when you don't sweat small stuff

Sheila and Dave Hobbs of Granite City celebrated their 10th anniversary as foster parents in June. It all started as they watched close friends raise a family through foster care. Sheila and Dave grew to admire the couple's pragmatic approach to parenting. It inspired the Hobbses to believe that they too had something to offer children.

As Sheila says, "I have always been a caregiver. I need that. It's my fuel."

The couple began their fostering career with the DCFS-supervised program, but later transferred their license to Catholic Social Services after Dave became a state employee. They decided to pursue additional training to become a specialized foster home. All of the 16 children they have fostered in the past decade have been identified as having a range of special needs, most frequently behavioral or emotional issues. Though there are a few circumstances that their home cannot handle, they have become, in many instances, the home of "last resort." According to Dave, "If kids can't make it in our home, they are probably going to need residential care."

The Hobbses are energetic and remain very supportive of all the children placed in their care. They attend training whenever possible,

stay alert for new community resources, and tirelessly advocate for children experiencing problems at school. They also make certain that older youth receive hands-on life skills instruction, such as cooking, cleaning and laundry.

"When you teach kids how to live, it gives them purpose," noted Dave. "We like to get our kids interested in activities and hobbies so they have something for themselves."

They are especially proud of their ability to shepherd youth through secondary school. The majority of youth placed with them have graduated from high school or received a GED. They are also proud of older youth who have "aged out" of the child welfare system and continue to make progress. One of the first children they took care of is now a young adult. He has enlisted in the military, is now a father and continues to rely on Dave and Sheila for advice and support. Others check in periodically and occasionally participate in family events.

Dave and Sheila attribute these positive, lasting relationships under tough circumstances to maintaining a practical, yet caring approach.

"Too many foster parents take their kids' behaviors personally,"



Sheila Dave Hobbs

said Dave. "We don't. It's how they are sometimes. It's become their survival mechanism." Sheila supports this perspective wholeheartedly. "Youth come into our home with a clean slate," she noted. "We don't judge them on their previous behaviors."

Their pragmatic attitude is only possible when caregivers can back it up with a healthy dose of self-care. Sheila and Dave make use of their respite options whenever feasible, and are known to take off for a week of camping in their RV. They have also participated in a local support group since they were licensed. The down-time, peer support and training all help them maintain a clear-minded and effective approach to fostering.

Help connect 3 - 5 year olds to pre-K

Children ages three to five can improve their odds of success in school thanks to the DCFS School Readiness Initiative. This push to enroll all young learners in Head Start or another educational pre-school program will lay a platform for academic, social and emotional growth. To make this feasible, DCFS is working with the agencies that coordinate these programs, which are often operated across multiple locations and municipalities. The collaboration will result in easier connections to the programs for children and their caregivers.

Staff from the DCFS foster care program, private agency programs and Head Start staff came together for five cross-training sessions during the spring. The purpose of the "Suite Talk" training was to enhance communication between early childhood providers and child welfare workers. Specific topics included understanding the basic elements of the Southern Region DCFS/Head Start Collaborative Agreement and the respective roles and responsibilities for increasing the participation in early childhood programs.

When armed with knowledge, caseworkers can support caregivers to identify and enroll young children in these important educational programs. Foster families with children ages three to five who are not involved in an early childhood program should contact the child's caseworker.

New Training Liaison coordinates PRIDE classes with emphasis on relative caregivers

Cathy Small assumed responsibilities as the Southern Region's Foster Parent Training Liaison in January. Her primary responsibilities are scheduling and coordinating PRIDE pre-service classes and the on-going module training. She is also available to discuss other training options with foster caregivers, but encourages them to discuss this with their licensing representatives first.

Small brings a wealth of expertise and energy to her position. She previously organized the Southern Illinois Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support group in

the 13 southern-most counties. She plans to share information about this group and its activities at up-coming relative foster parent training in the East St. Louis area. She is also interested in assisting anyone who would like to develop a similar group. Additionally, she would like to cultivate better supports for the increasing number of relative caregivers, and again would be interested in assisting to develop a support group.

Small is housed in the Marion Area office and can be reached at 618-993-7139.

Foster care staff thanked caregivers in May

With May designated as National Foster Care Month, many foster care programs in Southern Region put forth special effort to make caregivers feel appreciated. Most of the events were spearheaded by staff members who volunteered their time and in some cases, donated funds. It would not be possible to list every special event, but countless families throughout the region received an extra measure of gratitude, entertainment and relaxation in May.

For example, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois held their annual foster parent picnic on May 22 at the City Park in Energy. This long-standing event was well attended and featured a picnic lunch, raffle and activities for children.

DCFS Southern Region staff in the Anna area sponsored an appreciation event on May 1 at the city park in Anna. The picnic included a cookout, prizes and activities for children and an opportunity for foster parents to meet other foster parents and DCFS staff members in a relaxed setting.

Mt. Vernon DCFS staff (including those who recently worked in the Salem office) held an appreciation event on May 10 at the Grace Church in Salem. The picnic featured a barbeque, activities for children on the church's playground and an opportunity for foster parents to meet staff. The children especially enjoyed playing various games and preparing homemade ice cream.



New Marion-area Education Advisor helps sort out school concerns

Robin Vann assumed responsibilities as the Southern Region Education Advisor covering the Marion area. She comes with 20 years of experience in special education during a career at Northern Illinois University. She joins fellow Education Advisor Bessie Peabody from the East St. Louis area as an important resource for caregivers throughout the Region.

Educational Advisors advocate for students at all educational levels with wide-ranging educational needs. They support all caregivers in DCFS foster care programs and those who moved to adoption and guardianship. The advisors can help by initiating requests for special education services, enrolling children after placement changes, attending meetings relating to school issues, and advocating for children to avoid suspension or expulsion.

Vann also calls on her expertise as a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor to comprehensively evaluate the

children she assists.

“Education is not always about paper, pencils, and books,” she said. “It’s also about a unique individual with varying perspectives and experiences. My job is to assist everyone who touches a child’s life to promote healing and independence while having an opportunity to be successful today and throughout their life.”



Robin Vann

Education Advisors can help caregivers whose homes are supervised by the DCFS foster care program, families that have moved to permanency and private agency homes without an assigned education liaison. Reach Robin Vann in Murphysboro at 618-687-1733 or Bessie Peabody in the East St. Louis Regional Office at 618-583-2125.

Youth Summit shares resources to help teens move to adulthood

The Southern Region held its annual Youth Summit on June 4 at Kaskaskia Community College. The theme for this year’s event was Be Strong Be Bright – Getting My Life Right.

The event is developed for older youth in DCFS care. Approximately 75 young people attended, easily the largest turnout in the past five years. A full day’s worth of activities kept them engaged and inspired. The day started with addresses by DCFS Director Erwin McEwen, Assistant Regional Administrator Valda Haywood and Deputy Director Daniel Fitzgerald from the Division of Service Intervention. One special highlight was brought by Michael Simelton, who had been in foster care as a youth. Now, as an adult he frequently provides motivational addresses to youth in care, encouraging them with his experiences.

The remainder of the morning allowed youth to attend their choice of workshops. Topics for the workshops included maintaining a positive attitude while in substitute care, preparing for life after leaving DCFS

care, planning for educational/vocational goals, and developing healthy relationships. Foster parents who attended also had an opportunity to meet with staff from the DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services to learn more about the services available to older youth.

The afternoon was filled with a talent show produced by and starring youth in attendance. A DJ and dance concluded the day.

Our Kids

Sponsor: DCFS Southern Region Administration



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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 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.