

Need for foster families continues to grow

By Joseph LaFave For The Northern Virginia Daily Jan 26, 2023

The need for foster parents throughout the Shenandoah Valley is still at a historic high.

There are currently about 5,400 children living in foster homes across Virginia, including 24 in Shenandoah County. But social service agencies are constantly looking for willing families to volunteer their time, their homes, and their hearts to help at-risk children out of difficult situations.

From Winchester to Harrisonburg, Children's Services of Virginia is the private entity contracted to administer the foster care program. These professionals are responsible for both recruiting and training new volunteers.

Children's Services of Virginia offers free and no obligation training classes that are available to anyone in the community who may be interested in fostering a child.

“It's a great opportunity for people who have been questioning if they want to do this,” said CSV Resource Parent Recruiter Rebekah Schennum.

In this area, the need for families willing to foster sibling groups and older children — those between 10 and 18 — remain the most critical.

Placing siblings together is always particularly hard, said Schennum, since it can be difficult to find a family that has adequate space for several siblings.

Although both CSV and their partners in the department of social services work hard to place siblings — or at least some siblings — together, this isn't always possible. But Schennum said the whole team works to place the groups close together and encourage frequent visits.

Maintaining familial relationships is critical to providing foster children with the support they need.

And although Virginia does have a kinship guardian program, where non-immediate family members can serve as temporary guardians, more than half of the children in foster care in Virginia live with a non-family foster parent.

The reasons children end up in foster care are different and complex.

“A lot of times there are a multitude of things,” said Schennum.

These can include things like substance abuse problems, physical and sexual abuse, financial strain and poverty, and mental health concerns.

One thing that is almost universal between the children who enter foster care is their exposure to adverse childhood events.

An adverse childhood event, known simply as an ACE, can be anything within a person's childhood that causes trauma. Research published on the topic in 2018 found variables such as abuse, neglect and unsafe living environments can all result in an ACE.

Experiencing multiple ACEs in childhood can contribute to a multitude of poor health outcomes. They can damage the brain and can stunt its development. It can cause problems with the body's endocrine system — the system responsible for producing and regulating hormones.

Those with multiple ACEs are also more likely to develop unhealthy habits in adulthood such as cigarette smoking and alcohol use.

That's why Schennum says many of the foster parent training sessions focus on trauma-informed care. Taught by a former caseworker with years of real world experience, the training prepares new foster parents for different challenges.

"It really touches on trauma and the behaviors you might see, the obstacles you might face," said Schennum.

There is no such thing as the perfect foster family.

Some fosters are couples, some are single adults. They come from all walks of life, all different faiths and all different ages.

And although Schennum said that many believe fostering to be too hard because of the emotions involved with caring for a child, she said that's the whole point.

"Families say they might get too attached but that's what foster kids need," she said. "They need that person in their corner who is rooting for them, who will not give up on them and who is looking out for their best interest."

Despite foster care being a temporary measure by design, more than 60% of foster children in Virginia end up being adopted by their foster family.

Still, the average time a child will stay in foster care ranges from one to two years. In that time, the foster parents not only support and care for the children, they work with the biological parents to keep everyone as unified as possible.

“Foster parents know it is temporary but they also provide that space and that constant for that child and a lot of foster parents will tell you they love these children as their own and they will support them no matter what their journey looks like,” Schennum said.

While Schennum admits there are bad days, she also said that there are just as many if not more good ones.

“You see a child rise above their circumstances or you see improvement or see them grow and form healthy attachments.” she said. “You get to celebrate the success of the child with them.”

Interested in fostering a child?

For more information, email treatmentfostercare@csv-inc.com or call the Winchester office at 540-667- 0116.