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says they worked diligently to make the boys feel they were loved and wanted. "You treat them like your own children," says Stark.

That's why, he says, after all the reassurances they gave the boys, to then turn them over to a stranger would go against all their initial efforts.

"There has to be a sense of betrayal there," he says, leading the children to ask, "Why'd you give up on me? I already lost my mom or my dad, now why am I losing you too? Why don't you want me? It instills a fear."

This reality has led to a phrase he often tells foster kids in his care. "You can be certain that we love you," - and I hate having to add this part," he says, "and we are going to care for you as long as the state lets us."

Stark emphasizes the bill would not give preference to foster parents, only allow for them to be considered for adoption alongside relatives. Its passage would have no effect on his case, as an agreeable outcome has been reached, he says.

There are exceptions, although rare, to DHS's current rule. The department's permanency director Prouty says DHS does create "an exception for relatives and foster parents to be considered together if it is in the best interests of the child or children."

These exceptions must come at the request of the child's caseworker and cannot be made by the foster parents. In Prouty's four-year tenure, she says she's received a total of 17 such requests, two of which she denied.

Stark says there are branches of DHS that don't allow for exceptions at all. "I've been told many of the counties have somewhat of a blanket, 'No we don't do that.'"

DHS's preference for placement with relatives is backed by numerous reports spanning the past 20 years. Studies find that when a child is placed with or adopted by a relative versus a non-relative foster parent, the outcomes - at least statistically - are better. They are more likely to be placed with siblings, they have fewer behavioral problems, do better in school, and they are more likely to report they always feel loved - 94 percent versus 82 percent of children in non-relative foster care.

Data pulled from an expansive, federally-funded study of 5,501 foster children, The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, published in 2010, was used to compare parenting by relative and non-relative foster parents. While both groups of parents scored well across the board, relatives were more likely to encourage hobbies and education, according to the study sample.

Relative - or kinship - foster parents have their own challenges, as well. They were statistically found to be older than other foster care givers - 61 percent were the child's grandmother - to have fewer years of education, were less likely to be married and were more likely to be living below the federal poverty level.

According to Mark McKechnie, executive director of Youth, Rights and Justice - a nonprofit law firm representing children in

the foster care system - there were 42 foster kids in Oregon last year who had lived with their foster parents for more than 12 months prior to being adopted by a relative. During that same period, DHS received four requests from caseworkers asking for exceptions allowing foster parents to be considered for adoption.

"I think it would be more," says McKechnie, "but the foster parents aren't allowed to ask."

In 2013, more than 12,000 children spent at least one day in Oregon's foster care system. That same year there were 4,229 certified foster homes statewide. According to DHS spokesperson Andrea Cantu-Schomus, the department is always in need of additional foster homes. With a wide variety of needs among the children they serve, she says, the best matches are found when there are a lot of placement choices.

Debbie Albright, president of Oregon Foster Parent Association, says foster parents often become frustrated with what she says is a lack of respect for their rights and their time from the state, making an already challenging role as a foster parent more difficult. In her circle, she says, the greatest challenge for foster parents came when Oregon began to shut them out of adoption placement proceedings when a relative is involved.

"They stopped taking into account what was in the best interest of kids and just always went toward that relative," says Albright. "It's my own personal story. It's the story of hundreds of families I know across the state who have lost kiddos after a year or two years of them being in their home to relatives that have no contact or connection to these children other than biology."

In Albright's case, she and her husband had fostered a boy since infancy. After both his parents died from drug overdoses, the Albrights were on track to adopt him, she says. But when DHS found a second cousin living on the East Coast who was willing to take him, the decision to allow the Albrights to adopt was overturned. At age 18 months, the child was sent across the country to live with a second cousin he had never met.

"We'd had him his entire life," says Albright, "and so that was definitely trauma for everyone involved. That was five years ago and we've never seen or heard from him again."

Meghan Bishop is a juvenile law attorney in Washington County who's represented foster parents in disagreement with DHS adoption placement decisions. "The only mechanism to get them a seat at the table has been to file for intervention," she says, "and that's a very difficult hurdle to overcome."

She figured out this approach to intervening after the outcome of a child welfare case early in her career had a profound effect on her.

She had strongly disagreed with a DHS decision to place her foster child client with

a relative, but realized there was nothing she could do legally to stop it.

The child she represented in that case, Zachery, had been in the care of "Natalie," a foster parent outside of Portland who asked we not use her real name, and her husband ever since they picked him up from the hospital when he was just 2 days old.

The couple had raised him for eight months when DHS asked if they would like to adopt him, says Natalie.

"We said of course, because we just loved him, and at that point, we gave the rest of our hearts - all of our hearts - because you always kind of hold back a little bit knowing that they're going to go," she says.

Zachery's pending adoption coincided with DHS's rule change. Natalie says six months later DHS told her the adoption was off because it had found relatives who were interested in adopting the child.

Zachery was nearly 2 years old when it was time for him to go live with his new parents - cousins from out of state. The whole process, from the introduction to his new family, whom he'd never met, to his departure, took only three days.

"It was a horrific three days," says Natalie. "In the end, they came to our house - and he saw their car drive up - and he ran to us and would not let go. He buried his face in us, and when it came time, they pried him off of us and shoved him in his car seat. They couldn't get him in because he was flailing and screaming."

She came back into her home to find her four biological children in distress. Her oldest daughter, who was 12 at the time, was sobbing so deeply she began to throw up.

"We spent the next year trying to get our kids through the grief process," she says. "It's like a death."

Zachery's Court Appointed Special Advocate, who spoke on condition of anonymity, says she advocated for Zachery to stay with the foster parents. She said, "I was incredibly upset with the solution that DHS came up with. Placing Zachery with people he did not know, only because of the current law, was very unfair, to both Zachery and the foster family. The final decision was almost as hard on me as it was on the foster family."

Sen. Chip Shields (D-Portland) introduced a package of bills to reform foster care this session. He says it's a system that "desperately needs to be improved." And one area his bills target is foster parents' rights. Shields and his wife are foster parents.

"We really, really need to step up how we see foster parents," he says. "I think that all too often, foster parents are seen as kind of an after thought in how to really help kids heal."

He believes giving foster parents more rights, training and support will help Oregon to attract and retain a greater number of

active foster homes - an objective shared with DHS.

Shields took a lead role in championing the bill that will give equal consideration to foster parents in DHS adoption hearings.

DHS has taken a neutral position on the bill, says Prouty.

"I think we've gone a little bit too far in trying to reunify families at all costs with a relative no matter how distant," Shields says, "and I think this brings us a little bit back toward center where we really put the best interest of the child first."

In the meantime, filing a court motion to intervene in an adoption is one of few options foster parents have. That's what the Sisks did when they were faced with losing Caleb.

According to Emily Sisk, an evaluation of Caleb by clinicians at the Children's Program determined his transition into his aunt's care needed to be very slow, with many visits in between. A transition plan that seemed impossible with 2,000 miles between the Sisks' and Caleb's aunt's home.

Emily Sisk says she and Caleb's DHS caseworker attempted to initiate in-person and Skype visits between the child and his aunt in order to make the transition less damaging, but his aunt was unresponsive to requests for contact.

Worried the abrupt uprooting from their home and move to an out-of-state house full of strangers would cause irreversible damage to Caleb, the Sisks paid \$3,000 to retain a lawyer so they could fight to keep him under their care - not an option every foster parent has at their disposal.

Court documents show a Washington County judge ultimately removed Caleb from DHS's custody so the Sisks could adopt him, citing that "it is the only home (the) child has known for the past three years. Removal will cause irreversible harm." Neither Caleb's aunt nor DHS appealed the decision.

Youth, Rights and Justice director McKechnie says removing a child from DHS custody is not unprecedented, "but it's kind of a drastic move" and one of only a few tactics available.

"The trade-off is that you're losing all the resources that DHS has at its disposal, and it's really only foster parents who have the financial means to care for their child - without any support from DHS - who have that option," he says.

As an operations coordinator at OHSU, Greg Sisk is able to support his patchwork family comfortably, giving Emily Sisk the ability to dedicate her time to caring for the children. Without a subsidy from the state, they are still able to give Caleb everything he needs.

When Street Roots visited the couple's new, five-bedroom home in Woodburn, Caleb was happily playing Legos with his brother in the family's fully-stocked playroom at the front of the house. As he ran around, through the kitchen and living room, smiling and laughing, it was easy to see - he was home.

The names of all the foster children in this story have been changed to protect their privacy.

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