

# Family's plea: 'Give Us Our Children Back'

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parenting and required classes, which were made mandatory by family court administrators and judges.

Still, after years of experiences working with the state, they said their struggles have gotten them nowhere, and they claim the system doesn't work hard enough to try to reunite Aveana with her relatives.

"I haven't been able to see her for over a month, and there is a lack of understanding and communication," said Jawanda Griffin, Aveana's mother. "I would love to have full custody, but if I'm not able to do it then I would appreciate if they would give my family, my grandmother or my aunt, a chance."

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, federal law has long required state agencies to demonstrate that reasonable efforts have been made to provide assistance and services to prevent the removal of a child from his or her home, and to make it possible for a child who has been placed in out-of-home care to be reunited with his or her family.

Although many stakeholders believe state statutes have a broad definition of what constitutes reasonable effort, some parents are unable to make the changes necessary to get the child back home, said Oregon Foster Care Program Manager Kevin George.

"This is a big issue," George said. "Children in the foster care come from every county and community across the state."

Children who can't remain safely

within their homes enter the foster care system most commonly as a result of their parent's actions, not the behavior of the child.

George said the court determines if child welfare officials are making reasonable efforts to prevent the child from going into foster care or to assist in the reunification of the child with their families. The challenges of suitable guardianship are multiplied by a lack of state services that could help prevent the child from going into foster care to begin with.

"When the child comes in, the court asks if there are other services to prevent the child from going into foster care," he said. "But it gets challenging when there aren't more services to be offered to the families."

Aveana's mom, who is now 16-years-old, gave birth to her daughter at Emanuel Hospital when she was 13-years-old. Looking back on the day she gave birth to her daughter, she still sees a lot of confusion.

"I explained to the hospital what was going on, and they used this against me," she said. "I have never understood how they can take the child away at two days of age when my family was there with me at the hospital."

Although she recognizes she was too young at the time of the birth to have been a mother on her own, she doesn't understand why DHS felt her family couldn't help her raise the child.

Over the past three years, several members of her family, even when they didn't feel the court orders were justified, have followed numerous instruction and completed several classes to put them in

a position for adoption.

Curtis said she was ordered to attend Alcohol Anonymous and domestic violence seminars even though she was not a violent person and doesn't drink.

Her daughter Carol, who works as a caretaker at a nursing home, also attended parenting classes to prove to the state she is a capable person to care for the baby. But even with her own apartment in north Portland, and after three attempts to have the baby in her custody, the state turned her down citing her character, said Curtis.

"She has never been in jail and doesn't have a criminal history," she explained. "They said it wasn't right, but they never said she failed the evaluation, and they still haven't sent her paperwork."

There have long been controversies surrounding family preservation and child protection.

According to the National Coalition of Child Protection Reform, reasonable efforts exist to help return a child to their parents or relatives, but the reality is that little effort is actually made to return children to their families.

"But even after all this," said Curtis. "I want the baby to come home into the family for my daughter."

In Jawanda's opinion, the main problem in Aveana's case has been a lack of communication between DHS with her family.

"I know it takes a village to raise a child, and my family has always been supportive of the situation and willing to help with anything they can," she said. "And they never took that into consideration."

In 1980 Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which required efforts to prevent the removal of children from their homes; but in 1997, Congress passed The Adoption and Safe Families Act that changed the requirements, such as the amount of time a child is in foster care, and allowing children to be put into adoptive care faster.

"The courts make these decisions," said George. "What often people don't realize is how heavily involved the court system is."

He said if children are removed by the police, it's up to a judge to determine, within the time frame of the next court day, whether or not the child stays in foster care or returns to the family. If the child has just been born, the child will go into foster care and, once again, the judge will make a determination. These kids remain in care until the state can be assured the home is a safe place for the child.

Although new challenges have emerged, George said the requirement to make reasonable efforts to reunite families has improved the child welfare system.

"A long time ago people would go into foster care and never come home," he said.

According to Oregon Children, Adult and Families Division officials, the state has made notable improvements in their efforts to involve families and relatives in custody cases, prevent re-abuse of children, and create stability in foster care placements for children who can't remain safely at home. The state has also attempted to shorten their response

time to in answering reports of child abuse and neglect.

But a 2010 report also highlights the need for improvement in reducing the number of children in long-term foster care and reducing Oregon's high foster care placement rate.

The number of children entering foster homes rose last year by 3.9 percent, while the number of children leaving foster care decreased by 9.9 percent, officials said.

George said the research shows that relative or kinship care is really where children should be raised if they can't be with their parents.

"Kids have biological connections to their parents and relatives, and most people need to grow up with others who look like them and share cultural traditions," he said.

The Family Rights Association explained that maintaining families has historically been the central goal in child welfare, which is grounded in the belief that the best place for a child is within their own homes where they will be cared for by their parents.

Since Aveana was born, she has been placed in two foster homes, both with white couples. Although the family says the adoptive homes were good to the baby, they believe it is important for Aveana to be raised by a family of her own ethnicity.

While Jawanda explained her deep desire for her daughter to come back into her own family, she said if Aveana is raised by others, she wants her to be brought up by parents who are African American, and she doesn't believe DHS understands how important this is to her.

"They want us to trust them, but they don't trust us," she said.

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## Children's Hospital Rises

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ing nearly 100,000 visits a year, Burchell said Oregon's two children's hospitals are often at full capacity.

Designed with state-of-the-art medical technology, architects for the new hospital aimed to provide patients, aged birth to 18, with family-centered care and a more holistic healing environment for earlier recovery.

This includes private rooms with large windows and acoustical separation walls to reduce sounds, two stories of glassed-encased Lantern lit lounges for visitors, workout rooms for long-stay families, and resource and art therapy rooms for kids' homework, games, and activities.

While Legacy Health has generated \$220 million for the project, it falls \$25 million short of final costs, leading the Children's Hospital Foundation to launch a public

fundraising campaign.

"There will be the same number of full-time employees as now," said Public Relations specialist Maegen Vidal, when asked about the prospects of job creation, though 250 workers from Hoffman Construction were hired temporarily for the hospital's manufacture.

Hoffman Field Superintendent Aaron Jones says his connection to the hospital is more near and dear to the heart than simply construction, "My son has juvenile diabetes and has been in and out of hospitals—I'd like to see other people get the same kind of care that he got."

The hospital specialized care units will be divided colorfully by Oregon landscapes; The Cascades, The Coast, The Desert, and the Willamette Valley—with each floor representing a local animal—the first a dragonfly and the ninth a salmon.

Young patients can also expect to watch movies with friends and family in the hospital's new Starlight Theatre and take a stroll in the

terrace garden that will be located on the third floor.

As the largest provider of pediatric inpatient and trauma services in a green-invested Oregon, it's no surprise Legacy touts that the new medical tower will follow the latest in sustainable energy efficient features.

Using its own built-in utility plant, the new building will heat and cool itself. Bioswells and storm water treatment will flow through planters and drip rainwater into a water fountain at the children's terrace garden.

In addition, an adjoining community garden will help provide the local Eliot neighborhood with more than just medical care.

The Children's Hospital will also feature a new Children's Emergency Department, separate from Legacy's adult ED, a 22-bed Children's Day Surgery Unit, a new Neonatal Intensive Care department with 31 single rooms and additional rooms for twins, triplets and quadruplets, and a new Pediatric Intensive Care Unit.