

Mother Struggles with Expectations

Says costs are major issue to getting children back

BY MINDY COOPER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Although the Department of Human Services Child Welfare division says income is not a determining factor when deciding if a child stays with their family, one Portland parent said requirements by judges and DHS officials cost too much money, making it nearly impossible for families get their children back home.

"I have a major issue with the unrealistic expectations the Department of Human Services has for families, especially low-income families," said Melissa Vliet, who has been working with child welfare agencies for over a decade.

According to Gene Evans, DHS communications director, the courts are involved throughout the process, and it is the law that within 24 hours that the child is removed from a home, the case will have a hearing.

"DHS then presents information about the safety of the child, and the judge will determine who the child will go home with," he said. "The judge and DHS set out conditions of return, and that varies from family to family."

Some of the required conditions can include peer support and counseling, early developmental screening, parent education, early childhood development, child care, home visits, family resource centers, and job or skills education or training.

"It could be you need to get into alcohol, drug treatment or domestic violence counseling. There are lots



Melissa Vliet plays with her one year old son, Tad in the living room of their northeast Portland apartment.

PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

of different situations, it just depends on the family," he said.

Parents say, however, these programs, although seemingly helpful on the surface, are expensive and often require impossible demands, especially for single parents attempting to get their children permanently back in their home.

As the mother of eight children,

Vliet had her first baby at 17-years-old, but the only child she has been in contact with over the past two-years has been her one-year-old baby Tad, who celebrated his first birthday on Aug. 11.

Working diligently, every day, Vliet said she will continue to do everything in her power to regain even a little time with her children,

but she said she needs help from the department.

"Right now, I have to pay for what services are recommended," she said. "But my understanding is that if DHS requires something for you to do for them, then they are supposed to help you do it."

According to Evans, the level of income cannot be used as a factor to separate a child from their family.

"There are plenty of parents who are poor who are excellent parents," he said. "Just like there are plenty of parent who are wealthy who aren't."

He said, however, the process needs to be better understood and recognizes major need for change.

"There are people out there struggling, who want with all their heart to get their children home," he said. "They are doing the best they can to do that."

He said the goal of DHS is for children to be safe at home with their families.

"Kids come into to Foster Care when they can't stay safely at home," he said. "But reasonable efforts made by the state means that DHS is trying to reunite the family because kids do better when they can stay safely with family members, and most of all a parent or both."

Evans said, however, there are not enough services for low-income families, "That is a fact."

According to Evans, some expenses are covered under health

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Parent's Corner Academic Failure Rate

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demically preparedness of American students state by state. The group's 2009 report revealed the following about Oregon's children:

Among Fourth graders, only 10 percent of black students were able to read at their proficient level or higher. The scores were only 11 percent for Latino students and 33 percent for white students. Among Eighth grade students able to do math at their proficient level or higher, black students scored 28 percent; Latino students 14 percent; and white students 39 percent.

Our children are competing academically with children all over the world. A recent report from

the Children's Defense Fund revealed the following: American 15 year olds rank 23rd in the world for learning science; 17th in reading; and 31st in math. The 15 year olds who ranked number one in all categories were from China.

Peeking behind the language proficiency numbers, we find an all too familiar pattern: Asian-American students ranked 2nd in the industrialized world; white-American students ranked 7th worldwide; Hispanic-American students ranked 43rd, and black-American students ranked 49th, just behind Serbia and ahead of Bulgaria.

The statistics for math and science are equally alarming. Mind you, these are the numbers before

many of the American 15 year olds drop out of high school.

One last statement from the Children's Defense Fund report, "Thirty-five percent of Black and 29 percent of Hispanic high school students attend the more than 1,600 'dropout factories' across our country, where less than 60 percent or fewer of the freshmen class will graduate in four years with a regular diploma."

Portland's four year graduation rate unfortunately fits that description.

Next week we will discuss why this unnatural disaster continually recurs and what steps parents can take to ensure their children do not become one of these horrific numbers.

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