

State Audit Not Enough

continued ▲ from front

audit found was the workload that case workers have makes it difficult for them to spend the time that is needed to help get kids home and put their efforts into reunification," said Evans. "Right now, we have about less than 70 percent of the caseworkers we need to fully do this job."

Evans said the audit also proved the need to continue and increase efforts to keep children out of foster care in the first place.

He said the Department of Human Services has reduced the number of kids who come into state care by 20 percent in recent years, but Oregon remains one of the highest rates of foster care in the country. "On any given day 8,500 are children in foster care in Oregon," he said.

"We do a good job of getting kids back home, but in Oregon, there is more work to be done," he said, adding that more kids also need to be returned home safely to their families.

Still, he said, the audit didn't reveal much that the agency didn't already realize.

"The audit didn't look at issues with families. It really just looked at what child welfare was doing," said Evans. "The audit also failed to look at how we interact with families, or how the decisions are made," he said. "It (the audit) was only about half the picture."

According to Carolynn Smith, her relationship with DHS Child Welfare division began in the mid 80s, after her first grandchild was born. "My daughter had nine children, and I got the first one," she said. "She just kept having babies."

When one baby was put into the custody of the state, Smith was determined to find a way to get the children back into the home of a family member instead of a foster care.

"I almost went through foster training," said Smith, who explained she decided against it because she wanted to raise her family, not someone else's children.

Decades later, however, Smith, now a grandmother of 17 and a great grandmother of 20, is still fighting for the right to keep her family together.

Inside her house in north Portland where she has lived for more than 40-years, images of children decorate the walls and top the bookshelves in the living room. While small, the home, equipped with a full furnished kitchen and four rooms, is filled with toys, games, a TV, and even a barber's chair.

Although a busy woman, Smith

said she enjoys taking care of the people she loves, including her five grandchildren who currently live in her home. "I don't like DHS because of what they have done to me. They took my two babies, and won't give them back," she said.

Smith said she is as determined as ever to gain custody of her two grandchildren, now 11 and 8-years old, who were taken from their mother's home in 2007.

"They (DHS) gave me six of them, but they won't give me two of them back," she said. "I know they're just doin' what they think is right, but I don't get it. I don't understand why they can't stay with me."

Her grandson Taz, a student at Jefferson High School, said he misses his baby brother and sister, who he merely sees staring back at him through rarely received pictures. "I haven't seen them in a long time," he said. "I don't think it is right. They are living with a random family when they could be living

with their granny."

While Smith said she knows there's a state caseworker assigned for the children in her custody, she doesn't get much interaction.

"They aint calling me, and they don't tell you nothing when you need to know something. I have teenagers. I don't get it," she said. "They are playing this game, and as they go along, they are changing the rules. They have changed a lot of stuff, but I keep asking them if I am going to get my babies back, and they keep saying no."

According to Evans, he hopes the state will consider more funding for the agency. He added better communication is also extremely important.

"The more contact, the more ability to bond with the child. That is one of those findings we agree with," said Evans. "We need to find a way and a place to have those parent child meetings more regularly and frequent."

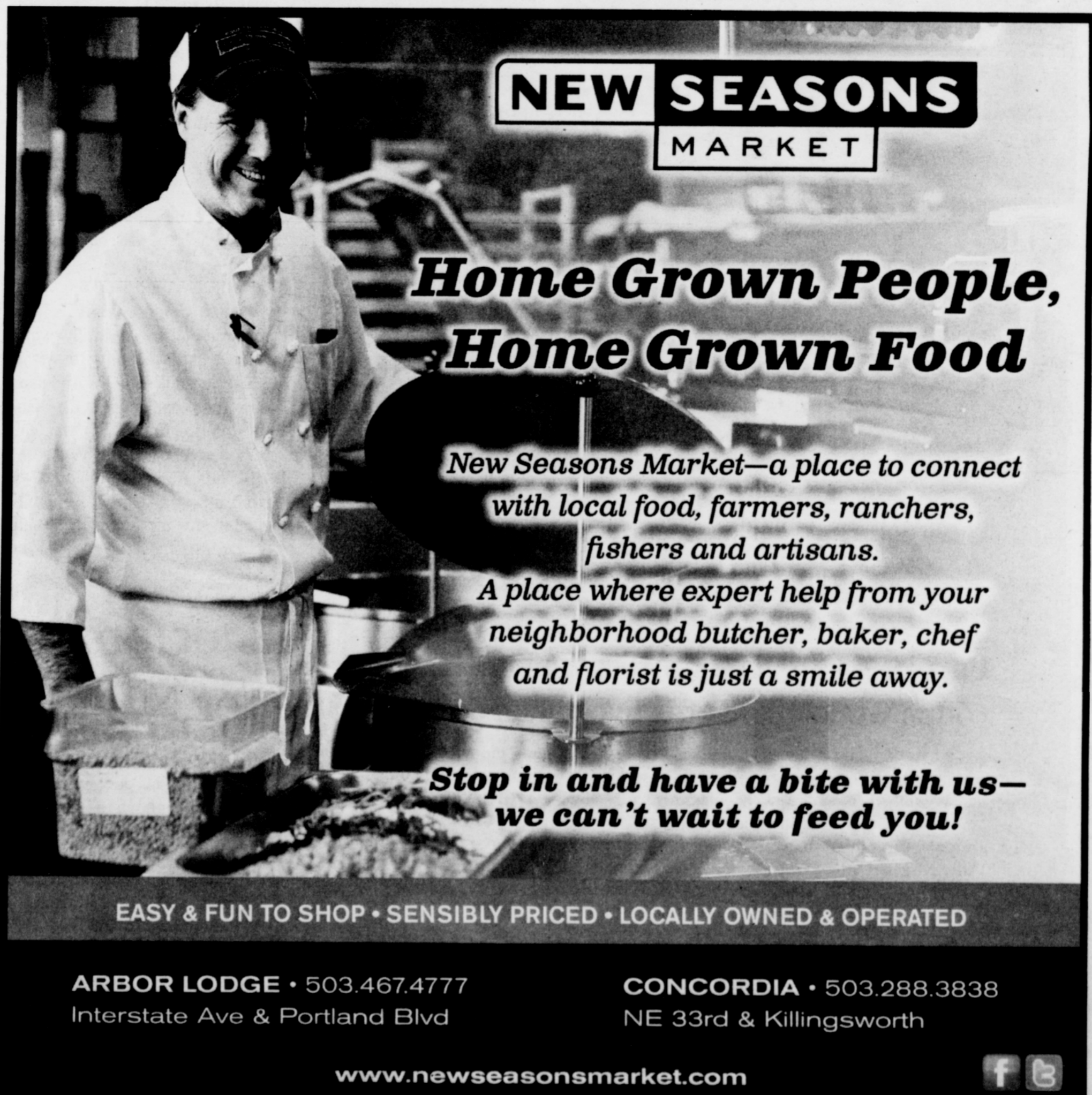
An increase in parent and family contact with the caseworkers is also important, so they can gain more understanding and information to make good decisions, and so children can be reunified with their loved ones faster, he said.

"I think what Salem can do is make sure that we set the expectation and continue to reinforce that message to caseworkers that getting children safely back home is a priority."

We need to do more, he said. "We certainly have work left to do."

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