

# New Lifeline for Foster Youth of Color

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er and chief executive officer April Johnson told the Portland Observer.

The agency currently has five kids in their care, three for boys and two for girls. The five separate homes are located in Multnomah and Washington counties, but the agency is gearing up for an increased capacity and plans for a group home and shelter home. All of the foster parents are people of color, mostly black, and one Hispanic single mom.

Last year, a landmark state audit on Oregon's Child Welfare department found a number of systemic issues with the foster care system, most notably a larger number of foster kids than there are foster parents who can provide care.

As a result, foster kids often end up experiencing longer stays at hotels than is considered normal and placement in out of state facilities. 83 kids in the system now live out of state, Johnson said, many of whom are kids of color, LGBTQ kids, and those with behavioral issues who are traditionally harder to place.

In Oregon, 20 percent of the 8,000 kids in foster care are kids of color, according to state child welfare data from 2013. African American and Native American children, in particular, are in foster care at higher rates than other children, the report stated. Though African American children make up just 3.3 percent of Oregon's total child population, they make up 7 percent of the children served in foster care.

Johnson was a former program policy development specialist and later executive manager of the Oregon Health Authority. Her career has largely ebbed and flowed between child welfare, substance abuse services, and behavioral health.

Johnson said problems in the child welfare system often result in a pipeline to a more disadvantaged life for the kids, with about 70 percent of folks in prison in Oregon having been in foster care, according to state prison data.

"All these kids are being funneled through a system by no fault of their own," she added.

One child who came under



PHOTO BY DANNY PETERSON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Assigning foster kids of color to quality foster families of color creates strong bonds, says parent Denzel Davis (left), a foster dad, and pictured with April Johnson, chief executive officer of Youth Unlimited, the Gresham foster agency that helped him become a foster parent and one that is dedicated to supporting youth of color.

the care of Youth Unlimited could not even spell his own name, at the age of 12.

"I sat there and cried," Johnson said. Now, that child can spell his name.

One of the foster dads for Youth Unlimited, Denzel Davis, met Johnson by chance. They got to chatting and soon Davis was enlisted.

The new foster parent emphasized the importance of having culturally-specific resources to help children of color succeed.

"I just feel like it's a great way for them to know their culture, their traditions...so they can know who they truly are and their background...and where they come from," Davis said.

The certification process for foster parents of the agency involves multiple steps, including attending information sessions, applying to be a foster parent, passing a background check, attending 30 hours of foster parent training, and completing a home inspection.

"What we have done is made sure that the families that we are recruiting are number one, high quality families, families who are responsible and productive members in the community," Johnson said. "You don't have to be rich. You just have to be wealthy in how you live your life," she added.

Once someone is accepted as a foster parent, they receive support from the agency such as a \$60 per day stipend for each child in their care for

reimbursement of expenses. The agency also pays for two nights of respite per week, coordinates birthday and back to school events where backpacks

are provided, and 24/7 on call support for parents.

The agency is also part of a state-supported foster agency collaborative, called Foster Plus, which includes 13 agencies total.

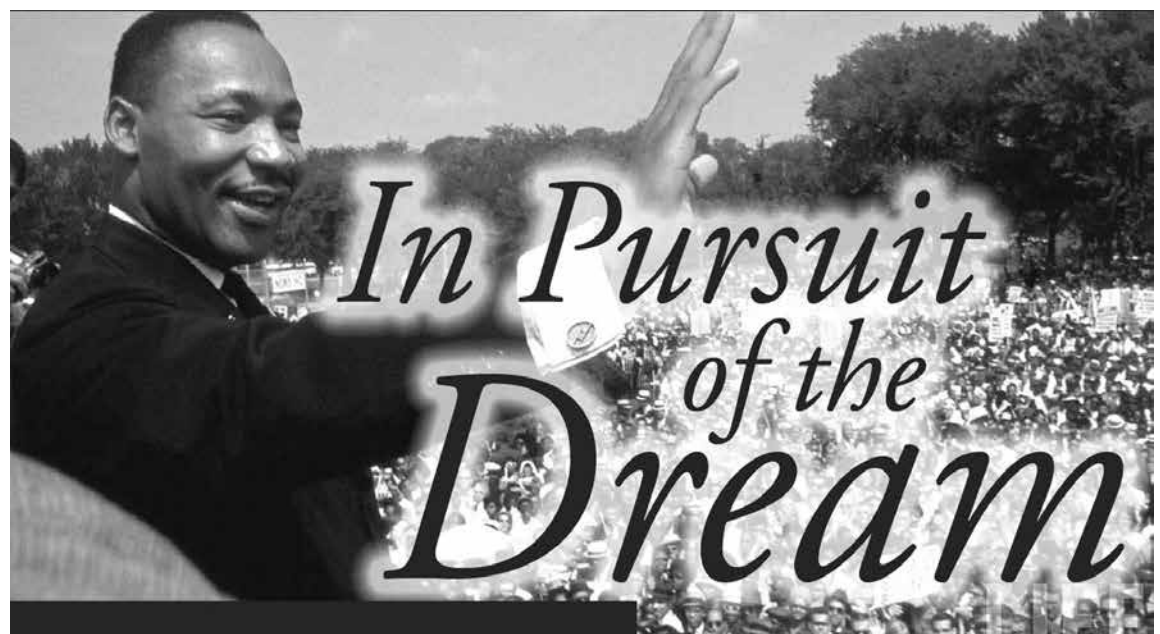
Youth Unlimited is located in Gresham in order to better connect with the many displaced people of color from Portland that have moved there in the wake of gentrification in Portland, Johnson said.

Though the staff and foster parents of Youth Unlimited total only about 20 people, Johnson has aspirations for opening a group home for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and a shelter home, as the agency expands.

Though Davis has only been a foster parent for only a year, he said it has already been a rewarding experience.

"The joy that I get from seeing the kids, knowing that I contribute to their happiness, that's really been a great part of being a foster dad," he said.

More information about Youth Unlimited can be found by visiting [yuioregon.net](http://yuioregon.net).



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