

Many ways to help foster kids

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

Whether opening up your home or being their cheerleader, there are many ways to help foster children.

Children in foster care have varying needs, from a temporary place to stay to therapy for emotional and behavioral issues.

Some people help foster kids as Court-Appointed Special Advocates, or CASAs. These volunteers will spend time with and get to know a foster child, serving as a friend and stabilizing force for them. CASAs will speak on the child's behalf at court hearings, based on the time they've spent with them.

"By visiting with the kids, it gives us the ability to advocate for what's in their best interest," said Judi Allison, a recently sworn-in advocate. "Most likely they'll say, 'I want to be with mom or dad.' That may not be in their best interest. But we have that time to be able to invest with them."

In Umatilla and Morrow County last year, there were 83 foster youth paired with 42 special advocates.

Once a child enters foster care, they will be assigned an advocate who is usually with them all the way until they find a permanent home.

"Even if a kid moves from home to home, their CASA is ideally consistent," said Jesus Rome, executive director of Umatilla and Morrow County CASA.

The advocate meets with the child at least once a month, whether at their home, school, or at the child's extracurricular activities. They also communicate with the other people in the child's life — foster parents, caseworkers, teachers.

"It removes that sense that they're a number," said Maureen McGrath, director of Umatilla Morrow Head Start, CASA's parent organization.

Steve Frazier, an advocate in Hermiston, noted that often they are the only consistent person to spend



CASA volunteers take the oath of office from Umatilla County District Court Judge Lynn Hampton in August at the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton.

time with a child through the life of their case.

"There's a lot of pieces to the puzzle," he said. "We have the opportunity to make sure things are going OK."

Advocates can choose if there's a certain age group they like to work with. Frazier said he tends to work with teen boys, while Allison is currently working with several elementary school children.

CASAs can't transport children, but can meet them at their foster homes, school, or at sporting events or activities.

While many CASAs are over 55, Rome said anyone can do it, whether a young, single person or a retiree. CASA is offering a training starting April 2.

Deeper needs

The Department of Human Services contracts with various behavioral rehabilitation services for some of the higher-needs children. One program is Therapeutic Foster Care, run through the coordinated-care organization Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, Inc. Children will be referred to

that program if they meet the DHS definition of having a "debilitating psychosocial or emotional disorder."

Adam Rodakowski, director of the program for GOBHI, said the TFC program faces many of the same challenges as DHS, including recruiting parents willing to take on the responsibility of a high-needs child. Throughout their service area, which includes Eastern Oregon, the Columbia-Pacific region and parts of the Willamette Valley, Rodakowski said there are about 25 children in the program, and 23 therapeutic foster care families.

He said they've found the most success recruiting through current foster parents. Once a child is in the program, Rodakowski said they typically stay anywhere from six to 18 months, but there is no maximum length of time. Children in the program usually have some sort of treatment plan, which parents help facilitate.

The goal, he said, is to transition the child out of the program. "That doesn't necessarily mean into a different foster

home," he said. "It may mean parents choose to adopt the child."

He said one component of training foster parents receive is in collaborative problem solving, an intervention strategy which is taught by GOBHI employee Kate O'Kelley.

The method is used in foster care as well other settings, such as school and juvenile justice.

"The primary philosophy is that people will do well if they can, and that if people are struggling, it's because there's some situation that's hard for them," O'Kelley said. "They don't have the [cognitive] skills in that moment."

O'Kelley said collaborative problem solving helps children develop those skills by shifting away from blaming them for their behavior, and instead trying to help them understand why something may trigger them. They work with children on behaviors ranging from aggressive outbursts to understanding boundaries to impulse control.

"We give them simple prompts — OK, you're mad. What made you mad?" O'Kelley said. "Building new cognitive skills — it does take time."



Jesus Rome

Hermiston choir earns trip to state competition

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

The Hermiston High School Chamber Choir will sing for a shot at the state title in May. At the district regional competition in La Grande on Wednesday, Hermiston placed first in their division, and will get a chance to show their stuff to a state audience at George Fox University on May 4.

Choir Director Jordan Bemrose-Rust said the students had to get a score of 85 or above from two of three judges at the event. The group received an 87, a 90 and a 92 from the judging panel, putting them in first place. There were four competitors in Hermiston's 5A divisions, but 15 1A through 5A schools at the competition.

Bemrose-Rust said the students sang four songs, including a French folk song, an Indian classical piece and an African-American spiri-



Photo contributed by Robert Luke

The Hermiston High School choir placed first in its division at the district regional competition in La Grande on Wednesday and will perform in the state competition at George Fox University on May 4.

tual song.

The Hermiston High School Chamber Choir has 38 students, ranging from sophomores to seniors. Several choir students are traveling to Disneyland over spring break for a choir trip that will include performing at one of the Disney parks and recording music. When

they return, they'll continue to practice for the state competition.

"They're super excited," Bemrose-Rust said. "The kids have been working very hard."

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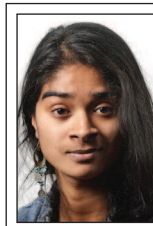
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Most reporters I know aren't used to seeing their names in print outside of a byline, and many try to keep it that way. Thus, it can be hard for us to accept subjects who don't want their names printed, no matter how significant the story.



JAYATTI RAMAKRISHNAN
Comment

For several weeks, I have been working on a piece about the state of foster care in Umatilla and Morrow counties. It finally came out on Thursday, but looked almost unrecognizable from the story I initially thought I'd write. It had lots of relevant, important information from people who work at the Department of Human Services, the agency that handles foster care. I hope the story shed some light on the challenges the agency faces, and left readers with an understanding of how strained current employees are.

But the article lacked a key perspective — of foster families and children themselves. I tried and failed several times to speak with parents and children in the system.

There are some good reasons for that. Confidentiality issues prevent DHS from releasing names, or from discussing a child's home situation. For both children and families, there's a sense of fear that comes with the limbo of being in foster care, and having your name or story splashed across the front page can compound that anxiety.

When I first started researching the story, I focused on a specific type of behavioral rehabilitation called Therapeutic Foster Care, which is geared toward children with high psychosocial and emotional needs. I was able to speak with a local couple about their experiences as foster parents.

They were candid about the challenges. They said they were concerned, at first, about the impact bringing a high-needs child into the home would have on their own young son, but that he was involved in the interview and training process. They discussed the involvement parents have in the child's rehabilitation, helping the child set goals and using social stories to teach behavioral skills. They talked about the difficulty with saying goodbye, and efforts to keep in touch that are sometimes hampered by

outside factors.

These stories and others offered me a look into the foster care system I didn't otherwise have. But the parents made clear that they didn't want to be named.

The EO's policy is to identify sources, because it's important for our readers to

know where we get our information. So even though I had a powerful interview, I couldn't use most of it.

Jesus Rome, the executive director of Court-Appointed Special Advocates, a group of volunteers that work with foster kids, said many children don't want to let peers know they're in the system.

"There's almost a shame there," he said, adding that the stigma exists for both foster children and parents.

It's sad that's the case, and makes it all the more understandable that children and parents would hesitate to be identified in a story. But it's also why I wish the parents I spoke to would have been willing to use their names.

The foster father I spoke to said he grew up in the system as well. He said after a series of homes, some OK and some bad, he had one good foster home experience that changed everything for him. Though he was only there for two weeks, he said it reset his entire world view. That experience, and the ability to empathize with kids going through foster care, made him want to be a foster parent.

He tells the story much better than I do because he's lived it. And while I respect his decision not to use his name, I also wish others could have heard his telling of the story instead of mine.

And that's why, though his hesitation is valid, I still believe it's important for us to identify our sources in a story like this one. Those in the foster care system offer a perspective you can't pretend to understand from the outside. Reading about another family's experience may encourage someone to become a foster parent. It may assure a foster child that there are others out there who can relate to them. Or it may educate someone on a topic they knew nothing about. But it's most powerful if they hear it from the people who've been there.

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