

## Foster Care Program Regroups, Pulls Together To Help Children

■ Recruiting foster families is top priority

By Ron Karten

With the closing of the emergency shelter facility and the loss of staffer Danis Bazy-Bucknell to the joys of motherhood last fall, the Foster Care Program in the Tribes' Social Services Department has been resting on the shoulders of Program Coordinator Melissa Sampson-Grier.

The shelter provided temporary rests for stressed-out parents and children. "When the shelter was open," she said, "we had time to do an extensive relative search. Without the shelter, a lot (of foster kids) are going first into emergency placements."

As a result, the program is working hard both to find new long term foster families and families to serve as temporary emergency placements.

Still, the loss of the shelter and one staffer came from a model program that has been very successful in the face of an increasing case load and an economy that has hit the state social services programs hard.

"When the economy is down," said Social Services Director Dave Fullerton, "that puts more pressure on programs like ours. It's the bubble effect. When you push in one side, it comes out another. As the unemployment rate rises, that puts more stress on families."

The state has cut fees for foster families by 7.5 percent, said Sampson-Grier. At the same time, Tribal fees have held steady so that today, the Tribe pays more to foster families. In a tough atmosphere for low-income families and thus for the kids most likely to face the foster care system, this slim ray of light means that foster families are theoretically better disposed to the Tribal program.

"More for the older kids, it's almost an incentive," said Sampson-Grier, although the Tribal program has not yet experienced a significant increase in interest. Foster care families that have

been involved for a decade or more and know the system well have been the first to contact the Tribal program, said Sampson-Grier.

The 85 Tribal children in foster care today is up from 35 in the program four years ago. And four years ago, the program "was lucky to get 25 percent" into Tribal foster homes while today, with more than twice the number of kids, half are in Tribal homes.

The growth in the number of kids in foster care is more a factor of greater awareness, Sampson Grier believes, than because more families have problems, although a poor

Association has been another valuable professional source. "They (NICWA) provide technical assistance," said Sampson-Grier, "and they review the structure of the program."

In mid-March, the program solved one of its problems by hiring Matt Bucknell to replace Bazy-Bucknell. It was a case of husband replacing wife in this case.

For the six months that the position was empty, the situation was kept under control by the nature of the staffers throughout the department.

"Staff at Social Services really help each other out, regardless of job title,"

child care and respite care (which might provide parents a weekend off from their children if things get too stressful), and in addition, money is provided to foster families for children's clothing, to purchase beds, and for transportation.

When foster care is necessary, the children, depending on their age and maturity, may be asked for their choices of families they'd like to stay with. The first goal is to keep them at home, but state law requires a permanent solution within 12-15 months, so when home is not possible, relatives are often a next best solution.

Before leaving her Foster Care Recruitment position to become a full-time mom, Danis Bazy-Bucknell provided some insights into this vital piece of the Social Services puzzle.

"We're always in need of foster families," she said. "Every family and every kid is different. We want the right fit, so a resource list (of foster families) is important."

"We're always looking for houses in different areas, too," she said, "so kids can stay in the same area when they are removed from home."

When a move has to be made, the first choice is always with relatives. Second to relatives, the ideal placement will take all of the kids that need to be moved, but that is not always possible. Otherwise, caseworkers strive "to make sure that there is sibling contact," said Bazy-Bucknell.

The job also includes working with foster families to make sure they have the skills and facilities they need to house and care for the children in the program. That could mean education and it could mean funding, and on the kids side, it definitely means picnics and other activities that bring siblings together as often as possible and take their minds off - for the time being - the more difficult issues that have invaded their lives.

*"We're always in need of foster families. Every family and every kid is different. We want the right fit."*

~Danis Bazy-Bucknell

economy always puts additional pressure on families. The growth in the number of kids living with relatives and other Tribal members rather than strangers is a credit to the professional quality of the program, specifically to the relationships it has built with the state program and the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), said Sampson-Grier.

The Tribal-state relationship is "ideal," according to Sampson-Grier. By keeping current with Tribal-state agreements and keeping contact with Tribal-state advisory boards, the Tribal program is able to provide "consistency of service."

"A lot of Tribes," said Sampson-Grier, "don't have any contact with the state."

Tribes sometimes harbor distrust of the state but long-term relationships between Tribal and state staffers here have helped diffuse that distrust.

The National Indian Child Welfare

said Bucknell. "Everybody pulls together."

Now that he is on the case, Bucknell is working on two projects: an appreciation dinner for foster parents in the program and an outing for foster kids in the program.

As lead Before and After program tutor, Bucknell worked with many of the same issues that he will face in his new position. "There's always a level of stuff the kids talk to you about," he said, "especially mentoring kinds of things."

The priority for the department, however, is recruiting foster care providers. "We need to develop an entire recruitment plan," said Sampson-Grier.

That plan will likely include community activities to raise awareness of the program.

The program provides reimbursement for foster care, but in an effort to forestall the need for foster care, the program also provides parents money for

## Apparent Suicide Attempt On Highway 18 Leaves Police Baffled

■ A sad story about a distraught OSU student left on the road for dead.

By Ron Karten

Not every question has an answer, at least not right away. Twenty-two-year-old Oregon State University student Erik Michael Counts is a case in point.

The call about him, that a young man with a significant head wound was lying part on Highway 18 - about six miles west of Grand Ronde near mile post 14 - and part on the shoulder, came in to the state police office at 4:06 a.m. on Thursday, April 17.

The victim's car, a Toyota, was stopped at the scene on the shoulder heading east. Police never did determine where he had been or where he was going. Where he ended up, however, was Emanuel Hospital in Portland.

"A note left at the scene that kind of fits with the way he had been acting" lead police to believe that this was a suicide attempt, said Lt. Dale Rutledge, Regional Administrative Lieutenant with Public Information Officer duties for the state police.

"There are any number of scenarios

where people get out of their vehicles," said Rutledge. What the police do know, however, is that "he wasn't hit square on. What we suspect is that it may have been a glancing blow of something protruding from the vehicle, like a mirror or something."

The geography student from Broadbent, Oregon may have tried to step in front of an oncoming vehicle. "It appears that's what his attempt was," said Sergeant Jim Ragon, whose office investigated the case, "but it's not like you have pieces of the glass mirror or paint transfer on him."

The only information the police received from the public came from the motorist who found Counts at four in the morning, and waited for the police to arrive.

"The DA has pretty much declined to take the case as a criminal case," said Rutledge. And the State Police are "wrapping up the investigation," according to Ragon.

"You scratch your head," said Ragon, "and ask, why would you do that? But



in their mind at the time, it was perfectly natural."

Although police believe Counts remains at Emanuel, and is improving, the family has requested that no information be given out, and the hospital is honoring the request.

It was very close to this spot that a passing motorist found injured Oregon State University student Erik Michael Counts.

Photo by Peta Tinda