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Number of foster parents in region hits all-time low
By Kym Soper

North-central Connecticut has hit an all-time low in available foster families, forcing the state's child welfare agency to start actively recruiting volunteers to help care for abused and neglected children removed from their homes.

According to Department of Children and Families officials, there are only 75 licensed foster families in the north-central region.

"That's the lowest it's ever been," Karen Dupuis, a social worker in the Manchester DCF office, said Tuesday.

A few times each week there are children playing all day around the desks of social workers who frantically work the phones looking for a foster home that can take them, Dupuis said. Sometimes, it takes until 7 or 8 p.m. to find a home – and even then, it's typically a temporary emergency bed and the process must begin again the next morning.

"It's rough on the kids," who already are dealing with traumatic experiences, she said. "They get so antsy – especially when the weather's nice and they're cooped up in an office."

What's needed is three times the number of families DCF has now to care for the roughly 600 children who have been removed from abusive homes in the north-central region, Dupuis said.

And the biggest needs are for Hispanic and minority foster families, she added.

The office behind the Parkade shopping plaza on East Middle Turnpike in Manchester is responsible for children in that community and in 19 other area towns, including East Hartford, Enfield, Vernon, Tolland, East Windsor, Windsor Locks, Somers, and Stafford.

And it's not just this region that's feeling the pinch, officials say. The drastically low number of foster families can be seen throughout the state and even nationwide.

A report released Tuesday in Washington, by the Pew Commission, which spent the last year studying the issues surrounding children in foster care throughout the country, concluded that drastic changes are needed to address the dwindling numbers of foster families in the United States.

Its recommendations include expanding the entitlement to federal reimbursement for foster care and adoption assistance to all children in foster care, regardless of family income.

Currently only about four out of 10 foster families have family income so low that the state can claim 50 percent federal reimbursement for their care. For the rest, the state bears the sole responsibility.

And many times foster families find the state stipend they receive is insufficient to meet the costs of caring for foster children, and families are forced to cover the difference.

A nonpartisan board of the nation's leading child welfare experts, the Pew Commission's work was funded through a grant to the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute.

Its study also showed that Connecticut is about midstream in terms of the number of children living in foster care, ranking 22nd among states.

According to state officials, roughly 7,440 Connecticut children are in state-sponsored foster homes.

By comparison, California has the most children in foster care, with 107,168 and Idaho the fewest, with 1,114.

Of the children in this state living in foster care, about 24 percent, or 1,817, are under the age of 6.

Other recommendations from the commission include:

- Creating a federal grant that would allow more funding flexibility for states that want to use federal dollars for family preservation services and adoption assistance rather than for foster care subsidies. Almost \$700 million in federal funds is now spent nationwide on family preservation and support services, compared with \$4.8 billion annually on children in foster care.
- Allocating an additional \$10 million in federal funds for training of court personnel and child welfare advocates.
- Allocating an additional \$5 million in federal funds to expand the court-appointed special advocates program.

As child advocates begin pushing federal officials to heed those recommendations, locally the fight goes on.

To address the severe shortage now, the Manchester office has beefed up its recruitment efforts and begun staging at least six open houses each month throughout the territory. The open houses will offer prospective foster parents a chance to find out what a family can expect if they decide to take on the challenge of caring for a foster child.

Social workers hope to dispel myths, such as foster families getting called at all hours of the night and being forced to take children they cannot handle, Karen Caputo, a supervisor in the Manchester DCF office, said.

Foster families set the guidelines on the number and the types of children they can take, she said. “Families need to be insightful of their own limitations and needs,” she said. Caputo added that the parameters make for a better match.

To make it easier for those interested in learning more, meetings are being planned in the communities rather than in a state office.

Next month Dupuis has scheduled foster family open houses at Temple Beth Shalom and South United Methodist Church in Manchester and the Raymond Library in East Hartford.