

Jefferson County in great need of foster families

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, April 28, 2016 10:43 am

JEFFERSON — There is a great need for foster families in the Jefferson County area, especially those to take in children in their preteens and teens.

Last year, Jefferson County’s foster care program served approximately 80 children, who came through Child Protective Services (CPS) or the juvenile justice system.

“It varies year to year,” Katie Schickowski, Jefferson County foster care coordinator, said. “A couple of years ago, it was up in the hundreds. Kids don’t enter foster care from a good place. In a lot of cases, they are happy to be in a situation where they’re no longer being abused.”

Schickowski oversees the program for the entire county, under the oversight of the Jefferson County Human Services Department. She took over her current position two years ago, but has been working with the county in different positions for the past decade.

“The need is steady for children under the age of 11, but higher for those who are older,” Schickowski said. “And with the turbulent lives they’ve experienced, a lot of those kids have some significant mental health issues.”

Schickowski said that foster children get placed in private licensed homes within the county, with treatment foster care providers or in group homes. If there are not enough qualified volunteers to host children locally, Jefferson County has to contact area counties to see if they have openings.



LOVE TO SHARE

LOVE TO SHARE — Jenn and Jeremy Burtsch of Fort Atkinson have been serving as foster parents for the past eight years. Licensed through Jefferson County, they foster children from newborns through 8-year-olds who, for whatever reason, have been removed from their parents. Including those for whom they provide respite care, they have fostered about 30 children. — Union photo by Pam Wilson.

“We have to find a place for these kids,” Schickowski said. “If there are not enough families in the county, we have to look outside the county, but when children are farther away from their homes, it creates more of a hardship upon reunification.”

A single person or a married couple can sign up to become foster parents. Anyone who provides foster care has to be licensed.

However, the designated foster parents don’t have to be with their foster children every minute. Trusted friends can provide “respite” care as long as they meet minimum requirements, such as a background check and a home visit by case managers to make sure conditions there are safe and appropriate for children.

If a group of friends — members of the same church, for example — wanted to help provide a supportive community for a foster child, they could do so using this method, with one official foster family and several people authorized to provide respite care, either by meeting the minimum respite requirements or by going through the full foster care licensing process.

“For some people, especially teenagers with mental health issues, that change in perspective is valuable,” Schickowski said.

She said the county has one teen in a foster home who has been particularly difficult, exhibiting explosive behaviors. However, a relative of the foster parents has been willing to step in at a moment’s notice as a respite provider.

“If something happens, the foster parents can call,” Schickowski said. “That has really helped maintain that placement.”

Jefferson County’s foster care program offers a parent support group once a month so families can get together and share their experiences.

“We have about five core families who come every month and others who come at times,” Schickowski said. “The reason it started was because they wanted to get to know other foster parents. You don’t really know what it’s like until you do it.”

She said that when foster parents complain to their friends or siblings about some problem they’re experiencing with a foster child, the normal reaction is not support, but, rather, being asked, “Why are you doing it, then?”

The fact is, Schickowski said, foster parents are committed to giving children from troubled family situations a second chance. They know the children will be coming in with high needs and inappropriate behaviors. If everything was fine in the situation they were taken out of, they never would have been removed from their birth families’ care in the first place.

“There’s still a stereotype out there that people choose to become foster parents for the money,” Schickowski said. “Yes, they do receive money to cover costs, but that compensation is just enough to cover basic expenses for the child being fostered,” the county foster care representative said. “It doesn’t necessarily cover everything they need, let alone all the extras they’d like to have.”

She noted that foster parents do a very important job of providing hope, stability and love for children from troubled backgrounds, and that is worth much more than can be represented with a compensation check.

“Foster parents are everyday heroes,” Schickowski said.

A group of supporters in the community recently put together a “wish list” from families hosting foster children, listing items that they don’t get reimbursed for and with which they could use some help.

This includes: a storage facility to hold childcare-related items; luggage; duffel bags; diapers in a range of sizes; baby wipes and bottles; clothes in a range of sizes; Milwaukee County Zoo passes; gift cards for haircuts, eating out, grocery stores, gas stations, etc.; swimming pool passes; gift cards for car rentals so they don’t have to take two cars if they’re going away for the weekend with a bunch of kids; coupons for formula; sandboxes and sand; cribs, toddler beds and twin beds; bedding for the above; laundry detergent and softener; funds to assist with ongoing training; school supplies; the donation of lawn-mowing and snow-removal services; credits to laundries for big items that can’t be washed at home; and gift cards to museums.

One foster family has turned the basement into a storehouse of clothing in various sizes, but not everyone will be able to do that, Schickowski said.

Community supporter Michelle Fox said that she has contacted the St. Vincent de Paul Society stores in Jefferson, Fort Atkinson and Lake Mills for assistance in obtaining some of these materials for foster families.

Supporters also have been invited to talk at the next St. Vincent de Paul Regional Council gathering.

“The Jefferson St. Vincent’s is already looking over the list, so progress is being made,” Fox said.

Although the responsibilities of Schickowski’s job leave little time to work on recruiting new volunteers to become foster parents, the county recently has formulated a foster care committee to get out the word about the issue.

Schickowski said that churches are some of the best places to recruit foster parents, and her agency is open to providing information or speaking with groups at any area church.

For the first time, the county also had representatives at this year's Watertown Children's Fair, where they gave out magnets and balloons in order to spread the word about the program.

For more information, contact Schickowski at Jefferson County Human Services. The telephone number is (920) 674-8119 and email address is katies@jeffersoncountywi.gov.