

Children Can't Wait

Adoption is a greater challenge after long stays in foster care



In a constantly shifting world where foster parents, case workers and schools may change from one day to the next, case reviews can take children one step closer to stability. But for some, it's another way to mark the years they've spent in foster care.



February 2007 issue of *Pediatrics* shows that instability and frequent moves can also worsen a child's behavior problems by 63%. This is one of many arguments for early intervention and stable home placements.

Volunteers of Foster Care Review have seen a growing number of older kids who have logged years in the system. Many of these kids (ages 12 to 17) simply don't want to be adopted. But 61% of those who do seek adoption, and who were reviewed by FCR in 2006, have been in care for more than three years—a long time for a child to wait.

"Things have gotten better, but we still see kids with five, six or seven years in the system," said Wendy Sejour, an FCR volunteer and a panel chair.

While it's impossible to point to one reason, this problem usually stems from gaps in resources, a child's special needs issues or poor case management. A child with special needs or behavior problems, for example, will have a harder time finding adoptive parents. And new research in the

"I feel that foster children, by definition, are special needs," said Dr. Warner Lambert, Medical Director of the Child Protection Team for Miami-Dade County. "The system doesn't put



Dr. Warner Lambert

the emphasis on developmental and psychological needs of these children and from an intervention standpoint, we rely too much on medication because it's cheap, relatively, compared to counseling."

Delays and high turnover also weaken care

Nearly all volunteers have sat on panels, ready to hear updates on a child's progress, only to have the case

rescheduled. If the parties aren't notified, the report isn't filed on time or the case manager doesn't appear, the one who loses most is the foster child. Resetting three out of ten cases isn't unusual. In fact, FCR's findings show a 33% increase in re-set cases in 2006.

"It bothers me very much when case managers don't appear and cases aren't heard," said Peter Forrest, a volunteer since 1991. "Unfortunately, [resets] waste everyone's time."

Resets have also been used by agency providers to avoid penalties. "I've noticed that caseworkers are more reluctant to go forward with hearings if they don't have everything ready," noted Sejour. "They'd rather reset the case, than have a finding of noncompliance."

High turnover is another issue. Changing caseworkers, supervisors and even therapists can cause delays for foster children. Without regular continuity, kids must adapt to each new person, while panels wait for new staff members to catch up on active cases.

Will privatization help?

There are high expectations now that the state's child welfare programs are managed under a private system. "Privatization has helped with



Judge Cindy Lederman



In this Issue:

Cover Story: Children Can't Wait.....	1
Volunteer News.....	2
FCR Updates.....	3
Director's Letter.....	4

accountability," said Judge Cindy Lederman, who leads the juvenile court system in Miami. "There's someone to call if something is wrong and there's someone to fix it. That was not the case under DCF."

The new system is being watched closely by the state and other agencies. "We have to support the needs of foster children no matter whether this is a privatized system or a public system," said Lambert, who has fostered and adopted children. "This is what we have now, so let's see what we can do."

What can we do?

By collecting statistical data, FCR has an important tool to mark progress or decline. But it's the feedback from more than 100 volunteers that shows us what's happening day-to-day. These stories point to children who are waiting months and even years for a permanent home, despite certain steps that can be taken now.



"Things have gotten better, but we still see kids with five, six or seven years in the system."

To serve the biggest need, the community should call for increased funding of child welfare programs. "My biggest hope is that the legislature will put the money into supporting direct services to foster children, including the salaries and training of people who work in the system, whether it be the protective investigators or the community-based care provider staff," said Lambert. ■

Volunteer News:



Volunteers: Reviews can be difficult, but adoptions are 'fabulous'

As someone who had what she called a "Beaver Cleaver-type childhood," Nadine Johnson always understood the importance of stability for foster children. "My parents kept us safe," she said. "I know what a gift that is."

Johnson and more than 100 volunteers like her try to find safety and stability for abused and neglected children every day. As volunteers of Foster Care Review, they get a front-line look at foster kids' lives and can make recommendations for better care.

When Johnson first volunteered seven years ago, she thought she had an idea of what she would face, having served as the executive director of Switchboard of Miami. "I knew there was sexual abuse, but I didn't know how often. I don't think society has any idea how often this happens. It was the biggest surprise I had starting out," she said.

Peter Forrest, a retired administrative officer from the Miami-Dade Police Department, also volunteered with what he thought were eyes wide open. Said Forrest, "I was amazed at the tragedies the children go through in terms of being rejected and abused.

I think we all know that these things happen, intellectually, but when you actually learn the details, it's horrifying. The children are the innocent victims."

Johnson, now CEO of the Hope Center, works to support adults who have developmental disabilities. But for a full day each month, she turns her attention to children. And like all

other FCR volunteers, she was trained to know what to look for, which questions to ask and how to review cases.

By monitoring progress on each child's health, education, special needs and case goals, she not

only helps provide for foster children, she also supports the case judge with her recommendations. "It's the most difficult day I spend in my month, but also the most rewarding," she said.

Wendy Sejour finds her volunteer work a rewarding experience as well. As chairperson

of an Independent Living panel, she supports children who will soon turn 18 and leave the foster system. "We try to make sure they have a safe, stable place to stay with a responsible adult," she said. "So if something happens to them at three in the morning, who can



FCR Volunteers Michael Milton, Barbara Sangetti and Caridad Castro.

"It's the most difficult day I spend in my month, but also the most rewarding."

Volunteer News:



they pick up the phone and call?"

In an initiative that is still fairly young, FCR has been holding specialized reviews of foster youth ages 14 and older. The goal of these reviews is to ensure that youth transitioning out of the foster care system are being prepared to live on their own. "There are some agencies and Independent Living coordinators who are doing an excellent job. They've really stepped up to the plate and I've seen a major improvement," she said.

Sejour, who works for the Health Council of South Florida, has also seen success stories outside of the Independent Living reviews. "One mother had several chances [to improve] over two years. We were ready to write [the parents] off, but they walked into the room with the children and it was amazing. They made a complete turnaround," she said. "The case worker was recommending termination of parental rights last time, but this time the lawyer was calling for reunification."

Others also shared stories of success. "When there are adoptions, it's fabulous," said Johnson. "I saw a case where a 17-year-old girl was adopted three weeks before her 18th birthday."

"Occasionally, we'll have a final hearing prior to an adoption and we all celebrate," said Forrest. "It's really quite festive." ■