

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

**HENDERSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

MEETING DATE: June 24, 2013

SUBJECT: Social Services' Informational Update

PRESENTER: Sharon Tirrell, DSS Board

ATTACHMENTS: Yes

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

The DSS Board is providing monthly three-minute informational updates to the Board of Commissioners regarding various Social Services issues. The June 2013 update, provided by DSS Board member Sharon Tirrell, focuses on the importance of foster parents.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

No Board action requested. This item is for information only.

Suggested Motion:

No motion suggested.

Foster parents are my heroes. They open up their homes and hearts to children who have had rotten lives, children who have been neglected and abused by their parents or caretakers and who have been removed from their homes by the court for their protection. Foster parents come from all kinds of backgrounds. Most foster parents are motivated by a sincere desire to help children.

National Foster Care Month is celebrated every year in May; foster parents are given recognition for their largely unsung efforts to better the lives of kids. Let me introduce you to some of my heroes. They represent the 90 foster families in Henderson County who care for 101 children in custody of the Department of Social Services (DSS.) Their identities are altered to protect privacy.

Charlotte, an unmarried professional nearing retirement, saw foster parenting as an opportunity to enrich her life. She went into it with her eyes wide open. She knew that a child who was traumatized by physical or sexual abuse or severe neglect would not be easy. She knew that a child who hadn't had enough to eat might hoard or steal food. She knew that a child bitterly disappointed by parents and afraid to trust would be hurt and angry and might test her with defiance. She knew that a child who was traumatized by physical or sexual abuse might have nightmares, might have flashbacks that could cause odd behavior and might have problems with concentration and learning. But she wanted to make a difference in a child's life. And she has. Charlotte is foster mother to Bea, an eleven year old who was severely abused and whose parents were incarcerated. Bea had been in another foster home for two years. With the help of a good therapist she was making progress. But the foster parents, who had other children as well as full-time jobs, felt they couldn't give Bea what she needed. Not surprising, Bea was very tentative at first with Charlotte. Charlotte's warm, nurturing laid-back nature and patient but firm and consistent style have paid dividends. Being an only child and not having to compete for attention was a bonus for Bea. She has bonded with Charlotte. The behaviors that were symptoms of post traumatic stress are no longer evident. She is making friends and her school work has improved. When Bea snuggles up close on the couch and wants to be hugged, that's Charlotte's reward. Charlotte would like to adopt Bea, but "I have to make sure that's what she wants," she says.

Jerry and Diane have middle school children of their own and a comfortable lifestyle. They are active in their church. They see being foster parents as part of their Christian commitment. Billy became their foster child when he was four. He came from a chaotic household. There was little supervision, no regular mealtimes or bedtimes. He was allowed to play outside at any hour. It was a challenge to socialize him to organized family and community life. Two years later he is struggling to focus in first grade. He needs tutoring, speech therapy, counseling and medication. He continues to be socially inappropriate at times but, as he matures, he is improving. His foster mother has become skilled in guiding his behavior and she has decided to home school him. Fortunately for Billy, he is attractive and charming. Diane says, "We love him unconditionally and he wants us to be his forever family." Jerry and Diane have recently adopted Billy. When Billy's needs lessen, they will probably foster another child, they say.

Most foster parents are temporary parents. Unlike Bea and Billy, most children return to their biological families or live with relatives. When children are placed in DSS custody by the court, the agency by law must create a plan for family reunification. Parents generally have a year to accomplish specific objectives with the help of an assigned social worker in order to have their children returned.

Connie and Frank have been fostering babies and toddlers for seven years. They have taken in babies for as little as one day or as long as two years. They've received "preemies" right from the hospital. They have three teenagers of their own. Connie, a stay-at-home mom, says it has been a very positive experience for her family. "The love it brings in and the love it brings out of us makes this a happier house. We smile more. And it's been good for our kids. I'd never taken care of a baby before I got married but our kids know

what it is all about. We've all grown and learned so much." The hardest part Connie says is when you have to let a child go. "We become attached. It's not natural to give up a child you've learned to love. But we fill a gap that needs to be filled. It's an opportunity to give that doesn't really feel like giving. God gave us the grace to do it."

Connie and Frank maintain connections with some of the children they've fostered. They are godparents to a child who is adopted by an aunt and uncle and they visit once a month. "We've become extended family," Connie says. Another family who adopted a child sends pictures regularly. A benefit of being a foster parent is the friendships they've made with other foster parents, Connie says. "Foster parents are a very caring group of people."

Foster parents receive a stipend from DSS to cover a child's food, clothing and shelter. Health care and therapeutic services are provided by Medicaid for most children. But the hours of teaching and guidance come out of love. Foster parents must be willing to "hang in" when the going gets tough.

A number of local agencies including Henderson County DSS screen, train and support foster parents. To learn more about becoming a foster parent, e-mail familiesforkids@hendersoncountydss.org or call Darlene Stone at 694-6252.