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News

10-3: County responds to judge's call for more foster families

By MELISSA TRESNER

A year after Family Court Judge Robin Sage launched an initiative to increase the number of foster homes in Gregg County, she reports the numbers have gone from five to 45.

"All in all, the program has been extremely successful, but we still need more foster parents. We will always need more foster parents," Sage said.

In August 2003, when the program began, Gregg County had a dire shortage of families willing and able to foster. While there were more than 200 children in the foster system, only an average of five homes were available in the county to send them to, Sage said.

She said the lack of homes forced the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services to send foster children as far away as Houston and Paris. The trauma of being separated from their families was only worsened when the children had to move away from their schools and friends, the judge said.

Sage enlisted community support through churches and civic organizations to increase the number of licensed foster homes. Another goal of the program was to provide more support for foster parents, often stretched beyond their means.

She made presentations at about 30 organizations to get help. The response was tremendous, she said.

Churches have held baby showers to stock the Rainbow Room, a free store for foster parents to pick up staple items — diapers and clothing — for the children in their care.

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church offers a Parents Night Out once a month for foster parents. And an Appreciation Banquet was sponsored by the Child Welfare Board in July. Foster children enjoyed a free night at Kids Station, owned by Greggton United Methodist Church, while the parents attended the banquet.

Fostering Partners, which was funded with a \$30,000 grant from the Supreme Court Task Force on Foster Care, also has sponsored a teamwork seminar and is planning a discussion panel about fostering at 6 p.m. Oct. 7 at the ROC, a recreational facility at First Baptist Church on South Street in Longview. The event is free and open to the public.

Diane Timmons, who has coordinated the project, said it's been a busy year for Fostering Partners.



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She has been working with Buckner Children & Family Services to offer foster parent training classes. Three nine-week classes have been held so far — one through CPS and two through Buckner.

About 15 families are enrolled in the third class, which ended Thursday.

Sheryl McQuitty was one of the participants.

She saw a newspaper advertisement in July about Fostering Partners and decided to approach her family about opening their home to a foster child.

"I felt like our family could contribute to a child a safe environment," McQuitty said.

Once she and her husband, Don, decided to foster, they talked to their 18-year-old daughter, Rachel Hulsey, about the plan. Rachel is a student at Kilgore College and still lives at home with her parents.

Hulsey asked if she could attend the training classes as well, a request that astounded her parents and the Buckner instructors.

"We've always done family things," Hulsey explained.

McQuitty said her daughter is a stand-out at the Thursday night classes.

"She overly participates. (The instructors) were in awe that she even wanted to come to the class. They utilize her a lot in skits and other activities," McQuitty said.

Hulsey said the instructors make the classes interesting by loading them with activities and lessons that bring home how vital loving, stable foster homes are.

"I think the classes would definitely help anyone grow as a person. It helps your perspective on those less fortunate," she said.

Sheryl McQuitty said the classes have opened her eyes to the poverty, abuse and neglect that many foster children face.

"We were all naive as to what takes place," she said. "Every week, I see more and more how I have been blessed, and it reassures me how I would like to bless others."

After finishing the program, the family will be ready for a home study by Child Protective Services and soon will be a licensed foster family.

Thomas Welch IV and his wife, Amy, were in the class with the McQuittys.

He said the three-hour classes also enlightened him.

Welch began the classes with the attitude, "We already have a 5-year-old son, what's another small child?" He also is a children's pastor at The Church at Grace Creek, so he thought a foster child would be no problem.

He said he quickly realized foster children have emotional and physical needs that go beyond his experience.

"I can't relate to a child that has been sexually abused. I can't relate to a child who's been beat," he said.

The classes have helped him be more confident that he can foster a child who has had a tough life.

"My wife and I just have a heart for children. We see fostering as a ministry in a sense," he said.

Timmons, who also took the training to become a licensed foster parent, said the Fostering Partners program is not finished even though the grant money has been used up.

She said she'll continue to volunteer her time, and the judge will continue to make presentations at churches or organizations that request them.

Now that the Fostering Partners project is winding down, Sage and Timmons will write a report detailing their efforts and send it to counties across the state.

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Fostering Partners



Judge Robin Sage

The Honorable Robin Sage currently serves as the 307th Family District Court Judge in Longview, Gregg County, Texas. She has served there for 13 years handling all family matters, and child abuse and neglect cases. Judge Sage started the CASA program in Gregg County in 1991; the program has since expanded to five other counties. After graduating from Baylor University and Baylor Law School, she practiced with the firm of Sharp, Ward, Ross, McDaniel and Starr until 1983, then went into sole practice as a family law specialist. Judge Sage has served on the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission Advisory Council, Governor's Committee on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and currently sits on the Supreme Court Task Force on Foster Care and the Texas CASA Board of Directors. She was named Woman of the Year in Longview in 2002. She recently discussed her latest innovative project with Texas CASA CEO Megan Ferland.

The Fostering Partners project is an initiative to recruit and support foster and adoptive parents through faith-based and other community groups. The Supreme Court Task Force on Foster Care funded this project to encourage innovative ways to locate and maintain quality homes for children.

When the project began, Gregg County had only five CPS foster homes located in the county, with an average of 200 children in care. Children were being placed in foster homes across the state, which made supervision and parental visits -- not to mention CASA involvement -- extremely difficult. Children were frequently moved from home to home as placements broke down. Both the children and caseworkers were suffering the effects of a lack of homes in this area.

I formed a blue-ribbon committee of community and religious leaders to forge a plan to remedy the foster care situation. Collaborating in this project are CASA of East Texas, County Protective Services, the Foster Families Association and area churches. The local newspaper and television stations have devoted many stories to the project to raise public awareness of the needs of foster children. A project director, who reports to me and offices at the local CPS building, supervises the project.

In November and December of 2003, my team and I made presentations at 18 local churches, describing the plight of foster children and seeking commitments from the congregations to help as foster parents, CASA volunteers, and "fostering partners." The churches will form "circles of support" around each foster family to provide encouragement, counsel, and practical help with things like dinners, babysitting, and transportation.

In just a few short months, the number of foster homes in Gregg County has tripled and even more new families recruited by the project are being trained. Equally as important, foster parents are being supported in many new ways to retain them as foster homes. For example, foster parents reported that obtaining Medicaid cards and getting the child in to see the pediatrician immediately was a problem. As a result of this project, the local pediatricians have agreed to see a child within 24 hours of a request by a foster parent regardless of Medicaid delays.

Several local churches are holding special projects throughout the year, such as Foster Parents Nights Out, contributions to the Rainbow Room as church missions projects, and fund raisers to benefit the foster children.

Fostering Partners is planning on expanding their efforts to include many other area churches and civic organizations. Our goal is to ensure that foster children in Gregg County will lack nothing any other child has, including a loving home.

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