

Support Services Lacking After Families Adopt Kids

By Kate Shatzkin (*Baltimore Sun*, 12/15/00)
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When 8-year-old Erica first came to live with Sherry Hulett, she refused to consider her room her own. She wanted Hulett to sleep on the floor to keep danger away. When Hulett adopted Erica, she wanted to change the girl's name to Elizabeth, but Erica wanted to keep her name.

Social workers and counselors were available to help with these issues when Erica was a foster child. But after she was adopted, mother and daughter felt largely on their own.

Thanks to a 1997 law pushed through by President Clinton, which gives states incentives through resources to facilitate the adoption of children from foster care, more kids in Maryland and around the country are being adopted.

But, advocates say, those numbers mask the question of what happens to families after they adopt—and find themselves struggling to find normal routines with children whose lives have been anything but.

"You can love a child, but there's a lot more to it," said Hulett, an Essex teacher who was a foster child herself. "You can't expect them to walk in your door and feel like they were yours forever."

At a recent conference in Washington hosted by Casey Family Services, a foster care and adoption arm of the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, advocates said they would press Congress for money to help families after they adopt.

Lack of Funding

Part of the problem, according to a report released at that conference, is that there's no federal funding specifically designed for that purpose.

An Iowa study recently found that parents get more financial support and resources in the foster care system than if they adopt, which advocates say discourages adoptions.

"There is this tremendous inconsistency from state to state in what resources are available after parents adopt," said Joy Duva, associate director for planning and policy for Casey Family Services in Shelton, Conn.

And, in Maryland, inconsistencies run from county to county, says Janice Goldwater, executive director for Adoptions Together, a private adoption agency that works in Prince George's, Montgomery and Baltimore counties and Baltimore City.

Next month [January 2001], Adoptions Together will start a project with Casey Family Services to examine the needs of families caring for relatives' children on a permanent basis.

"I think people have thought for years that putting a child in an adoptive home was the answer, and the end," Goldwater said.

"So often it's presented in the pathological model that if you need help, there's something wrong. It's the rare family that doesn't need help."

More Adoptions

Adoptions from foster care have been on the rise in Maryland, with 715 finalized in 1999—the most recent figure available—compared with 450 in 1996.

But at the same time, Maryland children are staying in foster care longer, according to state statistics: a median of 32 months from July 1999 to July 2000, compared with 28 months during the same period in 1999 and 26 in 1998.

Officials say that's because the longer children have been in care—and the older and more institutionalized they get—the harder they are to place.

They also point to the popularity in Baltimore of family members becoming foster parents to a relative's children—a placement considered permanent even if the child is never legally adopted.

Stephanie Johnson Pettaway, adoption manager for the state Department of Human Resources, agrees that more consistency is needed among Maryland's 24 local social services departments.

DHR is conducting a survey of families that receive adoption subsidies to determine areas of greatest need, she said. But she says some responsibility lies with adoptive parents, many of whom don't ask for help that's available until it's too late. Families could get counseling and other services that many don't know about, she said.

Striking a Balance

Because adoptive families assume all legal responsibility for their new children, the social service departments strike a delicate balance between giving families independence to make their own decisions while offering continued help, she said.

"Families hear, all we need to do is love this child," said Pettaway. "They don't feel comfortable coming back to the departments or the private agencies. Sometimes it

goes so far down the road that when they come back, the whole situation is very volatile. If they had come in the beginning ... there would have been less damage to the whole family unit.”

DHR does not keep statistics on how many adoptions from foster care fail in Maryland, Pettaway said, partly because there’s no guarantee they would be accurate. But she acknowledged such dissolved adoptions do happen—though she estimated less than 1 percent of cases fall through.

Inadequate Funding

Debbie Oor, an Edgewood foster parent for children with special needs for the past six years, said she’s seen a number of adoptions fall through shortly before the papers are signed because parents aren’t adequately trained in the behavior of foster children who may never have known a loving home.

“It only makes sense to ensure that the adoptive parents have the same training that the treatment foster parents received before the child is placed in the new home,” she wrote recently to a newsletter for foster and adoptive parents.

Hulett does receive a monthly stipend of about \$550 to care for Erica, as well as medical insurance coverage for the girl, who is now 13. But she said that the subsidy should be higher to encourage more families to adopt.

“You want them to feel important,” Hulett said of the children. “You don’t want them to feel like they don’t have anything.”