

## Number of local foster kids up 57% in last five years

**By Lisa McCormack**

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They're infants and teenagers and every age in between. Some are alone; others have several brothers and sisters. They're all looking for the same thing: a stable home.

That's where foster parents come in.

Statewide, more than 1,000 children are in foster care. Many have been neglected or abused. Some were turned over to the system because their birth parents couldn't deal with their behavioral problems.

The Morrisville office of the Vermont Department for Children and Families covers 16 towns in Lamoille, Caledonia and Orleans counties. In the last five years, the number of children in its custody has risen 57 percent, while the number of licensed foster homes has remained virtually the same.

Amy Anderson and Michelle Turbide are working to provide more safe, long-term homes for children in need.

Anderson works at the Morrisville office; Turbide works at Casey Family Services, a private agency that tries to place children in foster homes that will offer both long-term and therapeutic placements.

Both women help to recruit and train foster parents.

Anderson isn't sure why the number of kids in custody has spiked in the last five years. An increase in substance abuse, a rise in the number of brothers and sisters entering the foster care system together, and parental stress caused by the economic downturn could all be factors.

The foster care system's primary goal is to return children to their birth parents — but that's not always possible. Even if it is possible, it can take months for parents and children to be ready to be reunited.

In the meantime, Anderson and Turbide try to keep kids from being bounced from place to place.

"Our major goal is to provide permanence for kids," Turbide said. "We want to make sure their next home is their last."

Some kids are never reunited with their parents. Some remain in long-term foster homes; others are eventually adopted by their foster parents.

### **Not enough homes**

In the past 12 months, the Morrisville district had about 85 to 90 licensed foster homes, and 105-115 children who needed foster care at any given time, Anderson said.

"Of the licensed foster homes, we may have only about seven to 10 homes available at any given time for various reasons," Anderson said. "The homes may already have the number of children allowed, they may just be licensed to care for their relatives, they may be licensed and work exclusively with a particular agency such as Laraway (in Johnson), or they may be taking a break for some reason, such as a death in the family, and not be available."

Other restrictions add to the placement problem.

"Of those seven to 10 available homes, most homes can take children of only a certain age or sex,

based on the other children already in the home and their family's needs," Anderson said. "In one quarter in the last two to three years, I had to place 18 children from four families, as well as several other children from separate families."

Most homes can take only one or two more children, making it difficult to keep brothers and sisters together.

"We try very hard to keep children together, but we do sometimes end up splitting children up because of the lack of homes able to accommodate enough children at one time," Anderson said.

School continuity is another problem.

"We sometimes end up having to place children out of their school district because the only home available that can take the children is in a different school district," Anderson said.

"What would be ideal for this district would be to have more licensed foster parents from each town who have don't have any young children living with them, because it gives them and us more flexibility in who we could consider placing in their home."

The district is also looking for families that want to help, but don't want to commit to being full-time foster parents.

"We continue to have a need for respite providers," Anderson said, people who can give foster children and foster parents a break from each other.

"For example, one weekend a month, they could have a child or sibling group for their home," she said.

### **It's a tough job**

Anderson spends much of her time dispelling myths about foster care.

One myth: Foster parenting is a way to make money.

"While foster parents do receive a small, tax-free reimbursement, it is about 45 days after incurring expenses for a foster child," Anderson said.

Families are reimbursed for a foster child's room and board, food and clothing.

Foster parents also spend an enormous amount of unpaid time attending school meetings, team meetings, court hearings, and taking children to visits with their parents, to doctors, and to therapists.

"The biggest pay the foster parent receives is when they see the progress a child or family has made because of the help and support they've given," Anderson said.

It's also untrue that caring for a foster child is the same as raising your own children, Anderson said.

"Children with traumatic backgrounds usually struggle in many areas of their life — emotionally, behaviorally, cognitively, and/or medically," Anderson said. "As a result, the foster parents often work very hard to help the children make progress at following a structured environment, and often compromise with birth families to have their environments more consistent so the children will transition home easier."

Foster parents don't get to make most decisions about the children in their home; that's handled by a social worker.

Still, "all these troubled children grow up to be adults in your community," Anderson said. "Foster parents do an amazing job trying to help them grow up to be contributing members."

## **Parents needed**

People interested in being foster parents can apply through the Department for Children and Families or a private agency such as Casey Family Services.

Applicants take a 16- to 20-hour orientation class. They must complete a comprehensive application and go through a criminal background check.

After all that, the agency will begin a home study.

"You meet with a social worker three to five times and talk about your family and your lifestyle," Turbide said. "It helps us get to know a family and helps us to match them with kids."

Once a foster parent or foster family is approved, the agency will look at the pool of kids to find a match.

"It's a slow process," Turbide said. "You get a lot of information about the kid. You meet with social workers and therapists to get to know who they are. Then you meet the kid for day visits and overnights."

The process can take up to six months.

"Some kids are coming out of residential care, so they need a slow transition to build trust and get to know the family," Turbide said.

Foster parents are expected to work well with the children's parents; the goal is to get the children and parents the help they need, so their family can eventually get back together.

*Next week: Local foster parents and foster children talk about their experiences.*

*To learn more about being a foster parent, can call Amy Anderson at the Vermont Department for Children and Families, 888-1375, or Michelle Turbide at Casey Family Services, 655-6688, extension 4715. Or, visit <http://dcf.vermont.gov/projectfamily>.*