

Therapeutic foster care can work with loving families

By TONY BAUGHMAN Staff writer; Aiken Standard
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At Family Preservation Services in Columbia, they call him Jason. The name isn't real, but his story – so often repeated as an example of successful therapeutic foster care – is:

A boy, abused and neglected most of his life, is placed in an Aiken-area foster home. He destroys furniture, threatens to torch the house, rebels at school. However, after just three years of love and patience from one extraordinary foster mother, Jason becomes a treasured member of the family, a productive student, a happy 15-year-old.

Sound too good to be true? It's not, according to Stephanie Hall, state director of Family Preservation Services Inc.

"He was a horror. He was going to burn the house down. He said, 'I don't want anything to do with you,'" said Hall. "Now he is just thriving. You can probably pass him every day on the street and wouldn't know him. He works at a local business and does very, very well. This was a kid that nobody could get to."

A division of Providence Service Corporation, based in Tucson, Ariz., Family Preservation Services contracts with the state Department of Social Services to place some of the most profoundly disturbed children in South Carolina – usually older children that the system has all but forgotten – into therapeutic foster care.

At any given time in South Carolina, about 4,000 children are in foster care. About 1,500 of these are considered "the most emotionally disturbed," Hall said, and are potential clients for Family Preservation Services.

The company has two different contracts with the State. One serves "medically fragile" children, those with such conditions as cystic fibrosis and even some infants who require feeding tubes. The other focuses on the emotionally disturbed and abused.

"I have seen kids that have been beaten to within an inch of their lives, and they turn out just fine," Hall said. "The bruises heal and the broken bones heal, and everything's OK. And I've seen kids that have been sexually abused, and they just kind of lose it and they are never the same after that. I've seen kids who have been severely neglected, locked in closets for weeks at a time, not fed. I had one who was deaf because roaches had crawled in his ears and laid eggs."

These abuses, and the psychological damage they inflict, make these children doubly difficult to place in traditional foster homes. There simply aren't enough families prepared to take on such a daunting challenge, Hall said.

"The last 17 referrals, I've had to turn away," she said. "That kills me. That's not what we're in the business of doing. I could fill as many homes as I could get. The referrals come like water. But it's very hard to find people who are willing to open their hearts and their homes to those types of kids, because they will test you."

For those who might be willing to take on such a test, the qualifications process alone can be discouraging, Hall acknowledged.

Potential foster parents must be at least 21 years old and have a clean criminal record and no record of domestic violence. Deeper into the process, a case worker will inspect the potential foster home to make sure it is clean, comfortable and safe enough for the child.

The fire marshal and inspectors from the Department of Health and Environmental Control also examine potential foster homes for health and safety.

“It is a very intrusive process. I want people to understand it's a long process; it's about a 90-day process, start to finish,” Hall said. “We come into your home on two different occasions. We do a home assessment. We talk to everybody in the house. We're going to get background checks on everybody. We're going to do a budget with them to protect the interest of the child, because we need to know that people aren't doing this just for money.”

The final step is a four-day mandatory training session for potential foster parents.

“It's a pretty intensive training. It's two full weekends, two days,” Hall said. “We want people to know all about kids and how they react.”

For those who survive the vetting, after the child is placed in the home, Family Preservation Services caseworkers visit every other week and call the family during the other two weeks. A clinician also is on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week to assist with problems that might arise with the foster child.

“It's a neat process, a very interlocked process. There's always somebody there if you need them,” Hall said.

The rewards are both tangible and less so, she said. Family Preservation Services pays foster parents \$30 per day to care for the children. Hall says many of her foster parents reap so much more.

“We always talk about what we can give to the kids. I really think the kids give back, because once you have their love and respect, nothing can change that,” she said.

For more information on becoming therapeutic foster parents, interested persons may call Family Preservation Services at 1-888-782-3424, ext. 7. It's a call, according to Hall, that has the potential to change a foster parent's and a child's lives forever.

“This is a special experience,” Hall said. “Not only are you giving them shelter and food and support; you're really changing what they've seen, what they know, what they feel. You're giving them a totally different lifestyle.”