

Manatee coalition tackles foster care epidemic

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Manatee and Sarasota counties are the top counties in the state for the rate at which children are removed from their homes, largely due to the rise of opioid addiction

Summer 2016 was a hectic time for Danielle Wright.

Danielle, 34, and her husband, Chris, welcomed three foster children to their Parrish home. Between their four children and the three foster children, there were seven kids under the age of 11 at home.

“I had two babies, a 4-year-old, and then my own four kids,” Wright said. “They were all safe and loved, and it was good, but it definitely was crazy.”

During the four years they have been foster parents, the Wrights have installed a second washer and dryer, learned how to care for a drug-affected babies and exposed their children to people living in far different circumstances.

Child welfare leaders in Manatee say they need more people like the Wrights.

The Manatee Community Foundation, with support from the Barancik Foundation, is leading an effort to recruit 100 new foster families in Manatee County in the next year.

The opioid epidemic has tripled the number of children requiring foster care in Manatee County on an average monthly basis, and there are not enough beds to care for all the children in need, said Brena Slater, vice president for community-based care at the Sarasota YMCA’s Safe Children Coalition.

“We’ve been having this insanity the last three years now,” Slater said.

Leaders of the \$25,000 campaign hope to stem the tide of Manatee foster children who are being sent to neighboring counties.

“Kids are being sent out of the county. They are going to Venice, they are going to Pinellas,” said Susie Bowie, executive director of the Manatee Community Foundation. “What happens as they get farther and farther away from their families is that shrinks our chances of getting them back and reunified with their families.”

While Manatee is the focus of the Community Foundation’s campaign, child welfare leaders say the 12th judicial circuit, which encompasses Manatee, Sarasota and DeSoto counties, is dealing with a foster care crisis unrivaled across the state.

Sarasota and Manatee lead the state in the rate at which children are removed from their homes once an investigation has been initiated, nearly doubling the state average, according to the state Department of Children and Families' most recent quarterly report.

For 17 years no more than one or two parents would die of an overdose while their children were in the foster system. In the 2016-17 fiscal year, 23 parents died of overdoses, Slater said.

The state annually distributes \$5 million in risk-pool funding to circuits dealing with untenable numbers. The 12th Circuit received \$2.8 million last fiscal year — more than half of the entire pot.

Lion's share of funding

The 12th Circuit was considered an "adequately funded" area until the opioid epidemic arrived, Slater said.

"You have an explosion, and there are not enough homes, so you have to recruit homes, get them licensed, go through training, get them background checked ... it can take months to come back," Slater said. "You have to do all this stuff and it takes time. It wasn't like it was a buildup where you had a year or two warning."

Slater said the biggest need in Manatee is for families willing to take teenagers and siblings. Those children often end up at the Florida Sheriff Youth Ranch in Safety Harbor or at the Children's Village in Pinellas, meaning they switch schools and see their family and friends much less frequently.

"People are scared of teens," Slater said. "We have amazing teens and they do amazing things, but it's so hard to recruit for teen foster homes."

Leaders from 27 agencies involved with foster care in Manatee County have been meeting to plan a coordinated campaign to get more foster families.

Keith Gold, CEO of Gold & Associates, is lending pro-bono marketing expertise to the efforts of recruiting more foster families in Manatee. One of the first questions Gold wanted to answer was this: What type of people become foster parents?

His firm conducted a survey of 197 foster parents in Manatee, Sarasota and DeSoto. Gold said nearly all of those surveyed described themselves as "spiritual" and 61 percent attend church. He said most had experienced a trauma of their own at a young age, and nearly all viewed foster parenting as a personal calling based on their experiences and faith.

Wright and her husband fit Gold's profile. She said they got involved because of their desire to live out their faith, and bringing foster children in her home has taught her other children how to be unselfish and care for others.

"They just kind of take it on like they are little missionaries," Wright said.

Exposure to drugs

Leaders want recruits to be fully aware of the challenges they face, especially when caring for children who have been exposed to drugs. Children of addicted parents tend to stay in care longer, and they bring with them a host of issues.

“It’s taking a lot longer for parents to get better, or they are not getting better, so then they have been placed in a foster homes for a year or two,” Slater said.

Even when children are reunited with their parents, it is with the understanding that most addicts end up relapsing.

“The relapse with the opioids is just so bad,” said Kathryn Shea, CEO of the Florida Center, a nonprofit children’s therapy organization. “It’s worse than any other drug that I’ve seen.”

Wright said several of the children her family has cared for, including a baby boy she and her husband ended up adopting, have been exposed to opioids.

“They don’t like the same things babies that aren’t exposed (to drugs) do. Sometimes they can’t be touched a lot or held a lot because it hurts them,” Wright said. “A lot of lights, a lot of sounds, they are very sensitive to. Their sensory systems are really overwhelmed so you have to parent them differently.”

Families interested in fostering should expect a two- to three-month process before they become licensed, and they will receive a stipend, varying based on the child’s needs.

It’s a tough sell — finding families who will love a traumatized child as their own while and also working to reunite that child with his or her family is not easy.

“We need the right people. We want good people,” said Nathan Scott, Child Welfare Systems Advocate with the Family Safety Alliance. “We want professional parents.”



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