

Children desperately need foster families now

By Commissioner Emily Piper, Minnesota Department of Human Services

Children in need of foster care come from all families, all areas of the state, all socio-economic backgrounds. What they share in common are their struggles. Most have been abused or neglected; some are dependent on alcohol or drugs; some have mental health concerns; some have had encounters with the juvenile justice system; some have parents who are chemically dependent, cannot cope due to illness or have been incarcerated. All need our help.

The need for foster parents is greater than ever. In the past three years, the number of children in Minnesota's foster care system on an average day has increased by 51 percent, from about 6,200 in 2013 to about 9,400 in 2016. The growing numbers of children in the child protection system due, in part, to increased awareness about child protection issues, changes in how reports are reviewed, a growing opioid crisis, and children staying in care longer, have led to an increased number of foster children.

Some of these children are in group residential settings but most are in family foster care. They need foster parents to welcome them into their homes, recognize their struggles, accept them for who they are and help them move forward.

We need more foster parents who care for children in crisis. We cannot underestimate the power of our foster families who care for children who may be frightened or who have experienced trauma, and give children the structure, nurturing and stability of everyday life. I know foster parents face challenges caring for children who are hurt and angry. I greatly appreciate all they do to help children get the critical care they need until they can safely reunite with their families – which most do – or, when necessary, find permanent families – often through adoption.

For current foster parents and those considering becoming foster parents, help is available. The Minnesota Department of Human Services works with counties and tribes to offer supports to foster families, including:

- **Training, both online and in person:** Those considering becoming foster parents can access training through their counties and tribes to learn about becoming foster parents, providing culturally responsive services, and building on families' strengths to support children's safety and well-being
- **Financial support:** Financial support to meet foster children's needs is available to eligible families through Northstar Care for Children; beginning July 1, 2017, the basic rate for Northstar Care for Children will increase by 15 percent, which will help foster children; during the final weeks of the 2017 legislative session, we are pushing to ensure children under age 6 will receive the same benefits at the time of permanency as older children in Northstar Care for Children
- **Forgotten Children's Fund:** Counties and tribes can access this fund on behalf of foster children to cover the costs of bikes, class rings, art supplies, sports equipment, driver's education classes and other one-time special expenses.

The time is now. The need is critical. Children are waiting. I urge Minnesotans to consider becoming foster parents. To learn more, contact county or tribal social service agencies or licensed child placement agencies, and check out the department's website, www.mn.gov/dhs.

For more information on foster care in Scott County, go to www.scottcountymn.gov/213/Foster-Care-Licensing, or contact us at 952-445-7751 or via e-mail at fostercare@co.scott.mn.us.