

Bridging foster care and adoption

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Each year, nearly 250,000 children nationwide enter the foster care system.

Of that, about half remain in the system for a significant duration of time. And the older the child, the less likely are the chances for adoption. In many ways, these kids are part of a forgotten population, but one area organization is seeking to bring greater awareness to these sometimes forgotten children; and most importantly, find permanent adoptive homes for the kids.

"We believe every kid needs to be parented by parents, not by foster care families or by institutions," said Michelle Chalmers, co-founder of Ampersand families, an area non-for-profit seeking to find permanent adoptive homes for foster kids ages 10 years and older. "Even the most loving temporary care is not a family; it's not designed to be."

Chalmers, who founded Ampersand with Jen Braun, said too often children enter foster care and the population at large tends to not notice these children as in need of a permanent home.

"We sever these kids from their homes, oftentimes because of abuse or neglect, and we place them in the foster system, pat ourselves on the back and say we're done and we wipe our hands of them," said Chalmers. "Ampersand fundamentally disagrees with that premise."

According to Chalmers, a great number of older children waiting for adoptive homes are African American. She said while there are several African Americans willing to serve as foster parents, that same enthusiasm does not exist when it comes to adoption.

"There's a desperate need for families of color to step up and adopt," said Chalmers. "A lot of families of color are doing foster care, but they're not getting the message to become permanent families."

Chalmers theorized that one reason more families opt to participate as foster parents as opposed to adoption is resources.

"Families are worried about support – rightfully so," said Chalmers. "Foster families have 24-hour access to services. Once you make a commitment to adopt, they're your kid and those services just aren't there for adoptive families. The child welfare system doesn't work. Just

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trying to get kids in permanent homes is an up hill battle."

Ampersand Families seeks to be a bridge between foster and adoptive care, connecting families to resources and services and even matching adoptive families with "buddy" or respite families to offer additional support. Respite families oftentimes take the adopted child or children on outings to give adoptive parents a short break away from their child or children.

"We're there for the long haul," said Chalmers. "It's only ethical to make an unconditional commitment to that family. No way we're going to place a kid with a family and not answer their call five years after."

For more information on Ampersand Families or to discuss becoming an adoptive family to an older foster child, visit www.ampersandfamilies.org or call (612) 605-1904.

May is National Foster Care Awareness Month and throughout the month Insight News will spotlight stories and organizations dealing with area foster care.