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Andy Shookhoff: Let's see that every foster care story has a successful, happy ending

By ANDY SHOOKHOFF

The Tennessean recently focused our attention on the affirming stories of those who open their hearts and their homes to neglected and abused children as foster and adoptive families. While we cannot ignore the failings of our child welfare systems — recently underscored by two federal reports outlining the failure of the child protection agencies in all 50 states — the month of May, National Foster Care Month, provides us a welcome opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate what is working.

Through the partnerships of agencies and foster and adoptive families, thousands of children who come into state care are safely reunited with their birth families or adopted into loving homes every year. Since 1997, the majority of states have doubled the number of children adopted from foster care. Several states, when given greater flexibility to innovate and use federal care dollars on preventive services or support for relative caregivers assuming guardianship of children, have shown measurable success in reducing the number of children in foster care.

But for every child who finds a permanent family, there's another who waits too long, often bouncing through a series of foster homes and schools. Without the anchor of a permanent home, too many "age out" of foster care to uncertain futures. Forty percent rely on public assistance. Twenty-five percent become homeless. An astounding one in five end up in prison. The costs to society and the wasted potential of so many young lives are staggering.

Later this month, after more than a year of deliberations and investigation, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care will call for reform aimed at removing three significant obstacles:

- Federal financing rules that pay states to maintain children in foster care but "strait-jacket" state and local efforts to provide more effective and more appropriate services and supports to children in their own communities, with their own families or relatives.
- Failure of the juvenile court system, which makes the decision whether to place children in state custody, to provide the oversight needed (including ensuring quality representation for children and parents in court proceedings) to make sure that children and families receive the services they need and do not "fall through the cracks."

- High caseloads and inadequate training and support for caseworkers who every day must make life-altering decisions in complex situations involving substance abuse, mental health issues and domestic violence.

I hope that next year during National Foster Care Month, we can point to the progress that we have made in responding to these three critical areas. If we can, then more of our nation's most vulnerable children will have the safe, stable and permanent families that every child deserves.

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