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More foster children find adoptive homes

BUT MANY STILL FACING SYSTEM'S TRAUMAS

By Julie Patel
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Before San Jose residents David and Sally Oliver adopted their 4-year-old, they heard the many warnings about adopting foster-care children: There is a lot of paperwork. The kids may be troubled. The process could take years.

The Olivers found the warnings are worse than reality.

“It took six months,” Sally Oliver, 42, said. “I’m looking to do it one, maybe two more times.”

Over the past five years, the number of foster-care children adopted in California has doubled, to more than 7,900 last year, according to a report published earlier this month. Child welfare experts attribute the increase to legislation passed in the mid-1990s that focused on finding permanent homes for foster-care children.

“In the past, states would get money for the number of children in foster care as opposed to getting it for helping kids get out of the system,” said Michael Kharfen, of Fostering Results, a project by the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, which published the report.

As a result, social workers in the past spent more time and resources assessing whether children could safely go back home to their biological parents than looking for new homes.

In 2001, the state broke a national record with more than 9,800 adoptions. Kharfen attributed the sharp increase to a backlog of children who finally became available for adoption at the time.

For the Olivers, it took no time at all to find a child. They visited their daughter when she was 13 days old, at the home of her foster mother.

“I knew my life had changed,” Sally Oliver said. “I had this child in my arms who was completely dependent on me. I was immediately protective and wanted the best for her.” She and her husband began the adoption process a few months later.

The Olivers were fortunate the process was so quick.

“A lot of American children get stuck in the foster-care system,” said Donald Duquette, director of the Child Advocacy Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School. “The chances are that they’ve suffered significant trauma in that foster-care experience.”

By the time records are compiled, court dates are scheduled and paperwork is completed, many foster-care children have drifted in and out of homes and may be considered "damaged goods" by prospective parents, Duquette said. That's why so many foster-care children don't make it into a permanent home before they're released from the system at age 18.

To address that problem, then-Gov. Pete Wilson in 1996 created an Adoption Initiative Bureau and increased state money to counties in an attempt to get more foster-care children adopted. In 1997, Congress passed legislation giving "adoption bonuses," to states that succeeded.

Since then, California has received more than \$24 million in bonuses. But there are still nearly 100,000 foster-care children in the state.

South San Jose resident Denise Marchu has sheltered dozens of those children. Over a period of 14 years, she was a foster parent to more than 120 children, and she now has eight children of her own, including three who are adopted. "You might think you're too busy, but you just do it," she said. "You find a way."

Marchu and her husband adopted 5-year-old Izaiah about a year ago. A teenage mom had relinquished guardianship of Izaiah -- born a premie with a lung disorder -- soon after he was born.

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