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Fairfield County has few foster families

BY MICHELLE GEORGE
The Eagle-Gazette Staff

FAIRFIELD COUNTY - It was nearly five years ago when Kelly and Mark Brick first opened their home to a 9-year-old child in need of a place to stay.

Fourteen children and three adoptions later, the Bricks still are welcoming foster children into their home - and encouraging other families to provide a temporary refuge for children who need one.

"I know it can be a scary decision, I have been there," Kelly Brick said. "But think about the child; their circumstance is probably scarier."

The Bricks are one of only 19 foster families in Fairfield County - a small number compared to the 170 children in the custody of Child Protective Services at Fairfield County Job & Family Services.

Child Protective Services Director Rich Bowlen said the agency is desperate for more families to become foster parents. Right now, approximately 60 of the 170 children in protective custody are living in foster homes outside the county.

"What moving the child outside the county creates is that child loses the school and community they were familiar with," Bowlen said. "By the time they adjust to a new school system and get established, they have to come back and pick up where they left off."

Bowlen attributes population growth and an increased demand for child protective services as the reasons behind the increase in foster children.

He said the main goal of child protective services is reunification - or eventually placing the child back in the custody of his or her parents. About 75 percent of children in foster care eventually are reunified with their families, he said.

Brick said she and her husband, who have two biological children, weren't planning on someday becoming foster or adoptive parents.

But since 2003, they have adopted three of the children they took into their home. Brick said all three are special-needs children.

Bowlen said foster parents are required to go through 36 to 40 hours of training and a homestudy to become licensed by the Ohio Department of Human Services. The family needs to be financially stable and willing to undergo regular house inspections throughout the year.

Brick said licensed foster parents also need to be ready to take a child into their home at any time. She said, of the 15 foster children she has cared for, all of them came into her home 24 to 48 hours after she was notified by Child Protective Services.

"They like them to be in foster home as early as possible, so some have shown up on our doorstep with literally a bag of clothes and that's it," she said.

The time a foster child stays in a home can range from just a couple of days to as long as 15 months, Bowlen said. The agency works to help parents if there is a problem in the home during that time.

But Brick said she never had a problem with any of the children. The hardest part, she said, was when they had to leave.

"The No. 1 reason I have heard from people on why they could never be foster parents is, 'we could never give them back,' " she said. "And while you do feel the pain of losing that child you have now bonded with, as a foster family, you need to step back and let them leave."

Brick said bringing foster children into her home has taught her a lot about herself and the struggles many local children are going through.

"My own birth children learned how blessed they are to have a stable family and how the circumstances these children are facing could happen to anybody," she said.