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Louisiana Children and Family Services agency completes roll-out of new initiative aimed to improve foster care system

BY GRACE TOOHEY | GTOOHEY@THEADVOCATE.COM JUL 16, 2017 - 7:11 PM



Stephanie Cannon, standing, center, a home development worker, conducts a retraining session Tuesday for foster parents to align with the Quality Parent Initiative. Advocate Staff Photo by PATRICK DENNIS

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Grace Toohey

About seven years ago, Tiffany Carroll's four children were removed from her care by the state's child protective services system.

She had struggled on and off with substance abuse, but when she was arrested for drugs in 2009, her 7-year-old, 3-year-old and 19-month-old twins were taken to live with a family member. The stay-at-home mom was in shock; her days once filled with bus stop drop-offs and nap times abruptly transformed.

Carroll was only allotted certain visits with her children. Many days she wondered how they were doing. Twice she found out after the fact that one of her children had gone to the emergency room — once a child got stitches after an accident. One of her toddlers' hair was cut for the first time, and she wasn't told until later.

Story Continued Below

She dedicated herself to improving her life for the sake of her family. But, looking back, Carroll said she often felt judged and out of the loop as the biological parent pushed to the side by the foster care system.

"We weren't notified of anything. I felt like I didn't have rights as a parent," Carroll said. "We were left in the dark with some things, and they would do stuff without asking if it was okay."

Now, Carroll — back with full custody of her children after completing a case plan that included parenting classes, mental health services and substance abuse treatment — serves as a parent mentor for other biological parents navigating the foster care system in the Lafayette area. And she is excited to see how the system is changing with the Department of Children and Family Services' recent implementation of a new approach called the Quality Parenting Initiative.

"It's been amazing," said Carroll, 34. "Any and everything I ever wanted as a biological parent and now as a parent mentor, everything I ever wanted in a system change, was wrapped up in QPI."

The initiative is expected to raise expectations for foster parents and caregivers, better include biological parents in their children's lives while they are in care and improve communication among the children, their caregivers and the agency. In summer 2016, the department began training and implementation of QPI in each of its regions, completing the process with Baton Rouge in late May. Department of Children and Family Services officials say the approach is utilized only in ways that are determined safe for each family.

"It's not a tangible thing; it really is a philosophy, an approach, a model, a framework, for how we work with caregivers, whether it's foster parents, relatives or even biological families," said Rhenda Hodnett, the agency's assistant director for child welfare. "Every child deserves this type of parenting."

'For the good of the child'

Lafayette was one of the pilot regions that launched QPI in August 2016, and in less than a year, Carroll and her colleagues at The Extra Mile — a nonprofit that helps support clients of state agencies — have begun to see changes in the foster care system.

"It's just been amazing to see biological parents and foster parents working more closely with each other," Carroll said. In the past, she said, almost all communication would have gone through a child's caseworker, but now parents have more opportunities to work together. A foster parent could now ask the biological parent about the child's usual bedtime routine or, conversely, when a child returns to the biological parents, the foster parents can fill the family in on any new developments or changes.

"It's allowing the birth parent and foster parent to work together for the good of the child," said Jennifer Zanazzi, also a biological parent who's children previously went through foster care and is now a parent partner at The Extra Mile. She said the partnership eliminates the idea of "enemies," so birth parents don't feel like foster parents are trying to take their children, and the child never has to feel like they have to choose between caregivers.

The partnership and team mentality between all caregivers is powerful because the majority of the time, children will go back to their birth parents once it is safe, Hodnett said. The new approach also asks foster parents to be models for biological parents, so they can be better prepared when they regain care of their children.

"Giving that message right up front to foster parents: We're not an adoption agency. Our goal is reunification when that's possible, when that can occur safely; it is a huge shift," Hodnett said.

The new approach also asks more of foster parents — that they treat any child in their care as their own, meaning taking them to doctor's appointments and showing up to school meetings, said Department of Children and Family Services Secretary Marketa Walters. Foster parents are now taking on assignments often previously handled by agency caseworkers.

"Quality parenting means every child has a 24-hour parent," Walters said. "We haven't asked our foster parents to do that; foster parents have just been seen as placements (in the past)."

'Something radically different'

About 10 years ago in Florida, child welfare leaders had hit a crossroads, as there was a decreasing number of available foster parents and a growing number of children in the system. QPI co-founder Carole Shauffer saw two options: The state could lower standards for foster parents to try to increase numbers, or it could raise expectations and try to recruit better, more reliable foster parents.

Florida chose the latter and became the first to implement Shauffer's program. It worked to raise standards and eventually resulted in more foster parents in the system, she said.

"With higher expectations, we have had more of the right people doing the right job," said Shauffer, the senior director of strategic initiatives at the Youth Law Center in California. The initiative has since also been implemented in six other states, including Louisiana, as well as Philadelphia and an a county in Ohio.

Shauffer said she is currently working on an evaluation system to quantify the program's outcomes, but she believes, when implemented fully, it has proven successful.

When Hodnett entered her position after Gov. John Bel Edwards was elected, she said she tried to understand how the foster care system was operating on the ground.

Two issues she heard jumped out at her: Children were too frequently spending the night in their offices because a caseworker could not find an appropriate home placement, and agency employees were spending a huge portion of their time picking up children from their foster placements and transporting them for routine trips, like to doctor's appointments or to get a new school uniform.

Meanwhile, foster parent complaints were rising.

"We knew it was time to do something radically different," Hodnett said. QPI became their answer.

As she introduced it to her staff and foster parents, she said it felt like people had been waiting for this philosophy.

"To return to the mission of the agency, the mission of what brought people to foster parenting (and social work), that really was uplifting and really got people passionate again," Hodnett said.

Covington region's QPI lead TerriLynn Bowe said she found herself rejuvenated by QPI, as it was a return to the values that led her to the field more than 20 years ago.

Bowe, who is also a child welfare manager for the Department of Children and Family Servies, said she has seen the "magical" improvements when comparing a child's removal from their biological family to go to a foster family before QPI and after.

Before, a caseworker would show up, quickly pack up the children, often crying or stunned, and transport them to their foster home – and while the state's employees followed protocol, it was often traumatizing for everyone involved.

Now with QPI, communication on all ends is more open, Bowe said. This has led to key changes at the beginning of the process. The caseworker arrives and is equipped to speak with the biological parent to explain the situation and answer any questions before addressing the children, Bowe said. Then the parent can help prepare the child for the change, perhaps help them pack a bag, allowing the child to feel more at ease.

Once the child is in the car, the caseworker calls the foster parent and puts them on speaker phone so the child can get acquainted through an "icebreaker," perhaps learning what they will eat for dinner or that the family has a dog, Bowe said. Once at the foster house, Bowe said, the caseworker calls the biological parent and gives an update about how the child is doing and asks if there's anything the foster family should know, like food dislikes or stuffed animal preferences.

'Reducing the trauma'

A stuffy July evening in Baton Rouge, almost 20 potential foster parents spent three hours for part of the Department of Children and Family Services' training, a series of interactive meetings that have been revamped to follow the QPI philosophy.

They read aloud examples of potential children who could enter foster care, and together the adults imagined how they would respond and support the child if they came to their homes.

In one of the cases, two older siblings had taken on all the responsibilities for their infant sister, changing diapers, feeding, dressing. In another, a child endured the outcomes of her father's drug abuse: homelessness, hunger, poverty. And a third, a teenager had been beaten and blamed for the family's ostracism when he came out as gay.

The potential foster parents then learned about how that trauma can influence a child's brain development, and therefore their actions and behavior.

"Understanding how trauma at an early age affects the brain (was helpful)," said Rick Kravat, of Zachary. He and his wife went through the training to become foster parents 12 years ago but decided it wasn't the right time. Now, as empty-nesters, they came back to the agency and appreciated the new research, which, the couple said, gave them more insight.

With better training, higher expectations and a culture shift from both the top of the agency and from the bottom in all the state's regions, Bowe said it's easy to see how parents' and caseworkers' experiences will improve, but she believes the children in the system will most benefit.

"What we're seeing is that the children who are coming into care, they see the adults from the beginning engaged and in conversation. ... There are not two sides," Bowe said. "We're reducing the trauma for children."

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