

Fresh Hope For Foster Kids

After failing a federal review (as did all 50 states) Hawaii is making strides to improve life for thousands of foster kids

By MELLISSA MONIZ

Take yourself back to when you were just 5 years old and imagine one day being taken away from your parents, separated from your siblings and sent to live with strangers.

That is reality for many children who enter the foster-care system, and it's a reality Foster Family Programs of Hawaii works to improve upon and support every day.

At the helm of the operation is president and CEO Linda Santos. With more than 20 years of experience as director of Casey Family Programs (one of two foster support groups that merged in 2004 to form Foster Family Programs), Santos and her team continue to better the lives of children in the system.

"We work with families and children to prevent placement in foster care, to support and assist families and children who are in the foster-care system and to help those children who grow up in the system to transition nicely into adulthood," says Santos. "So our whole scope is not just foster children, it's children who have been involved in the child welfare system — children who have been abused or neglected and are in danger being in out-of-home care or are already in out-of-home care."

Perfecting the system is far from done, however, as Santos explains, but thanks to the support of the state there have been huge improvements. About two years

ago the number of children in foster care on any given day was about 2,700. That number has decreased to 2,100.

"A few years ago the federal government did a review of every state in the nation to see how they measured up in the child welfare system and our state, like the rest of them, did not measure up. As they predicted, nobody passed. So the second part of the process is each state had to come up with a plan on how they were going to raise the standards. Our state has done a really, really great job in changing the child welfare system. There has been more improvement in the last couple of years than ever."

For starters, the Department of Human Services has been very successful in getting more money to develop more services. There have been tremendous efforts in prevention and in the overall well-being of the children.

"We have a contract with the state to work with families who have been reported for abuse and neglect if there is not a safety issue for the child," says Santos. "So the parents come to us and other agencies to work on a being better parent, and that has done a lot. Most parents love their children; oftentimes the stresses of life have caused them not to be good parents. So doing good assessments of what happens in a home and what the needs of a child are is important. Removing a child needs to be the last thing that happens because it's so traumatic to

a child."

The Voluntary Care Management program handles much of the preventative efforts within Foster Family Programs and assists families reported for abuse or neglect in getting help to create a safe home through support and counseling. Other programs under the Foster Family Programs umbrella are: Long-Term Foster Care, which provides support and services to foster parents to offer the children long-term foster care; Hawaii Attach Resource Connection seeks to increase community awareness about attachment relationships and improve the care of children with attachment problems; the Adoption Respite Program connects adoptive families to qualify respite care to help strengthen the families; Project Visitation helps to maintain relationships between siblings who live in separate foster homes; Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition assists youths in the foster system by advising; and Voluntary Case Management.

"Probably about a third of our work is prevention, another third is training and supporting foster parents so children aren't moved from place to place," says Santos. "Then we do some long-term foster care where we work with adoptive families. And then we have a couple of programs that work with the young adults when they leave foster care because the statistics of those kids haven't been good, but they're getting better. There's still a whole lot to do, but there's a lot of effort being made."

Collectively these programs work in a team approach with families, caregivers and the community to understand and better serve the needs of the children.

Brian Ramos, an 18-year-old Mililani resident who entered the foster care system when he was 9 years old, explains, "The most challenging thing about being in foster care was trying not to get my hopes up when I met a new family and then being rejected when they wouldn't want to adopt me. I had depression about why no one wanted me, and the Casey Family Program really helped me with that."

The Mililani High School senior has since been adopted and has plans to take the firefighter course at Honolulu Community College upon graduating.

"Being adopted has been really great," he adds. "I love my parents and they love me. They also



Santos says the state now offers support for foster kids past age 18

adopted my half brother, so now there's the two of us."

An unfortunate statistic, however, is that each year at least 100 children age out of the foster care system when they reach 18, meaning permanency was not achieved. Fortunately, the state has upgraded support by offering health care, education and job training until age 23.

With the support of the state and the community, Foster Family Programs has been able to really make a difference from within.

"There are multiple things that volunteers can do," says Santos. "You don't just have to be a foster parent. Youths need mentoring, job preparedness, job opportunities. And, of course, the community can be responsive by donating things."

Thanks to a large donation from one of the Foster Family Programs board members, the program is in the process of building a receiving home and assessment center in Ma'i'i. Scheduled to open next year, the facility will serve as a temporary emergency home for families disbanded through the child welfare system until the situation can be adequately assessed.

"The idea is when children are removed, it could be in the middle of the night and multiple children. The difficulty now is find-



Brian Ramos, former foster child, with Santos and Janelle Kana

ing a place to immediately place them until assessments are done," explains Santos. "So that's very disruptive to children. So this receiving home, you can bring a whole family there in the middle of the night and get all the physicals and things taken care of. It will speed up the process where the state can either get the children back home or in a permanent place. It's not a happy time when someone comes to your door and says they're taking your kids away. That's necessary sometimes, but sometimes it isn't. So we've worked to improve that and we have been successful."

In honor of National Foster Care Month (May), Foster Family Programs is having a Foster Parent Appreciation/Recruitment Fair May 24 at Bishop Museum. Foster families and those interested in becoming a foster parent are invited to join in the activities, demonstrations and entertainment. Volunteer camp counselors and donations also are needed for the upcoming Camp Connection 2008 (July 11-13), which brings siblings separated in the foster care system together for a weekend camp as a means to help reconnect them in a fun environment.

For more information on these events or to help with any of the programs, call 521-9531.