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Spring 2020

### An Overview of Foster Care

Rachel M. Smith

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“An Overview of Foster Care”**

written by

**Rachel Smith**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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William Viser, third reader

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 23rd, 2020

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## **Introduction**

### **Personal Impact**

If my life were to represent a novel, the beginning chapters would be filled with countless stories of people pouring into and investing in me to ensure that I have a successful future. As I have aged and started to appreciate all that has been done for me, I want to make sure the chapters that finish my novel are filled with stories of me giving back to others and my community.

During my time at Ouachita Baptist University, I have been given incredible opportunities to serve those around me. One example would be through my internship at the Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center. I had the privilege to learn more about child abuse and what it looked like outside of a “textbook story.” I was able to pour into children coming from broken homes and invest in helping them find peace with their personal stories. I not only saw the damage abuse could have on a family, but I also saw the good that could come from centers directed towards helping a child heal and how the legal system helped provide justice in those specific cases.

Because of my learning experiences in the last few years inside and outside the classroom, I have discovered within myself a strong desire to pursue law. While there is a substantial need for counselors and teachers to be integral parts of these families and children’s lives, there is a large need for compassionate lawyers as well. Even though law was something I considered when I was younger, the real-life stories and cases I have witnessed in the last three years have only strengthened my desire to give back and help others like I have seen people do with me.

As I am at the point where I have begun narrowing down what I want my focus to be within the field of law, I have felt a burning passion for helping children in the foster care system. After looking into more of the foster care information for the state of Arkansas, I realized there was so much information that people needed to hear. I think the widely held belief that helping with foster care can only be done by being a foster parent is something that needs to be reformed, as there are many ways to become involved and to help children. That is what ultimately led me to doing more research and becoming interested in foster care in its entirety.

### **Relevance of Understanding Foster Care**

Not only is there a large demand for foster homes on a national level, but there is a strong need for foster families in Arkansas as well. With laws being different in each state, some specific procedures and laws take place in Arkansas on a local level. As more churches in Arkansas are working together to provide available foster homes, the topic of foster care has become much more prevalent in conversations today. When children are placed into foster care, they are stripped away from what is familiar to them and sometimes completely removed from the care of people in their immediate family. A foster child has to experience many adverse circumstances that a child coming from a traditional home might never have to face.

The foster care system in Arkansas seeks to provide children with homes that are fit to meet the needs of a child for his or her wellbeing. When a child is removed from a home, there are many factors that go into impacting the development of the child- both positive and negative. As children are in their crucial developmental years, being put in a new environment and having the absence of a secure home leaves room for a large impact on his or her development. It is important to not only look at the basis of the foster care system in the state, but also the impact

being in foster care has on a child. Currently, there are programs in the state working towards not only raising the number of available foster homes, but also seeking to intentionally place children in an area where negative developmental issues will be minimized. Many programs are working toward making the foster care experience for the child one that does not have to be viewed as a traumatic or negative experience.

Arkansas DHS reports, “most children in foster care have experienced trauma not only related to abuse and neglect, but also the trauma of removal from their family and everything that represents family to them. They need foster families that will care about them, will commit to providing temporary care and will help them stay connected to family while those family members try to remedy safety issues so the children can safely return home. Foster parents play critical roles in the lives of these children.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Definition and Laws of the Foster Care System in Arkansas**

The Call defines foster care as “providing a temporary home for a child who is not able to live in his or her home of origin for whatever reason. It may be for a short time or maybe a long-term affair.”<sup>2</sup> This means that a child could be placed in the system for a couple of months while their permanent guardian is being investigated, or they could be in the system for a couple of years because their biological parents’ rights were terminated.

Many of the general requirements to become foster parents are the same as they are to become adoptive parents. Done through the Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services

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<sup>1</sup> ARCCC - Creating Connections for Children. (n.d.). Retrieved February 2, 2020, from <http://www.fosterarkansas.org/dcfs/fosterarkansas/Foster.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> About Us. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2019, from <https://thecallinarkansas.org/about-us/>

(DCFS), DHS acts through DCS and serves as the “court-appointed legal custodian of the child and has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the child has the best possible foster care experience and the appropriate long-term plans are made.”<sup>3</sup> While traditional family settings are needed in order to establish the stability a child needs, in some cases that can be provided through a single parent household as well.

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<sup>3</sup> DCFS Foster Family Home Inquiry. (2020). Retrieved March 4, 2019, from [https://dhs.arkansas.gov/dafs/fcadoptinq/FCA\\_Inquiry.aspx](https://dhs.arkansas.gov/dafs/fcadoptinq/FCA_Inquiry.aspx)

**DCFS sets out many basic requirements and rules for families wishing to open up their homes to children in foster care:**

- ❖ Parents are required to be 21 years of age and are recommended to be within 45 years of age of the child.
- ❖ Traditional families and single parents can apply.
- ❖ There cannot be a health condition or disability that causes the parent to not be fully capable of taking care of the child.
- ❖ There must be 50 square feet in each bedroom.
- ❖ Firearms have to be secured and locked away.
- ❖ Children of opposite sexes cannot live together if within four years of age of one another.
- ❖ Smoking is not permitted around the child.
- ❖ The family must have resources available to meet all needs of the child.
- ❖ Everyone older than 14 must agree to do a background check.
- ❖ Anyone in the home over 18 must agree to a crime check.
- ❖ Parents must be CPR and Standard First Aid certified and also have 30 additional hours of service.
- ❖ Corporal Punishment is not allowed.
- ❖ Foster parents must respect the religious beliefs of the child.
- ❖ There cannot be more than 5 unrelated children in a home.
- ❖ There can only be 8 total children in the home, regardless of relation to the foster parent.
- ❖ There are weekly contacts made within the family after a child is placed.
- ❖ Babysitters cannot be used for more than 6 hours.
- ❖ The family must have a reliable means of personal transportation.

Through all of the regulations listed above,<sup>4</sup> DCFS makes sure children entering into a foster home are experiencing a better home life than what they are used to. While moving into a new home can cause a child to feel a lot of anxiety, these rules aim to make the process for the child a little easier.

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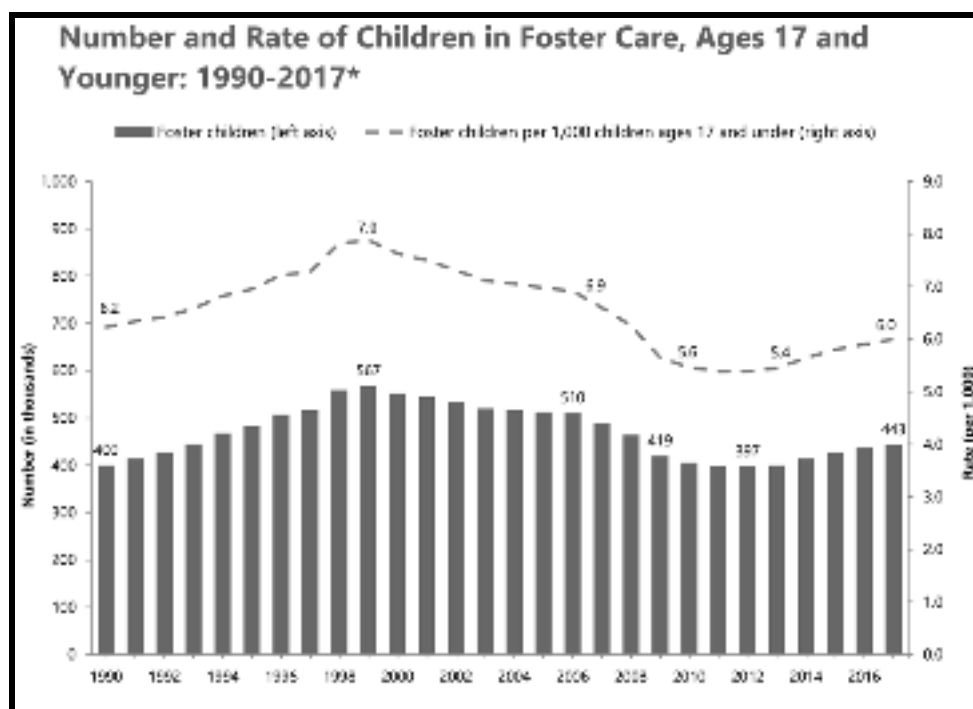
<sup>4</sup> DCFS Foster Family Home Inquiry. (2020). Retrieved March 4, 2019, from [https://dhs.arkansas.gov/dcf/fcadoptinq/FCA\\_Inquiry.aspx](https://dhs.arkansas.gov/dcf/fcadoptinq/FCA_Inquiry.aspx)



## Data and Statistics

In the state of Arkansas, there are currently 8,200 children in foster care yearly. Sadly, there are not nearly enough families to cover the need to house them. With “only 1,600 families available to care for these children,” it makes it hard to keep children in areas close to home and with their siblings.<sup>5</sup> This can cause a child to have to move into a new school district as well.

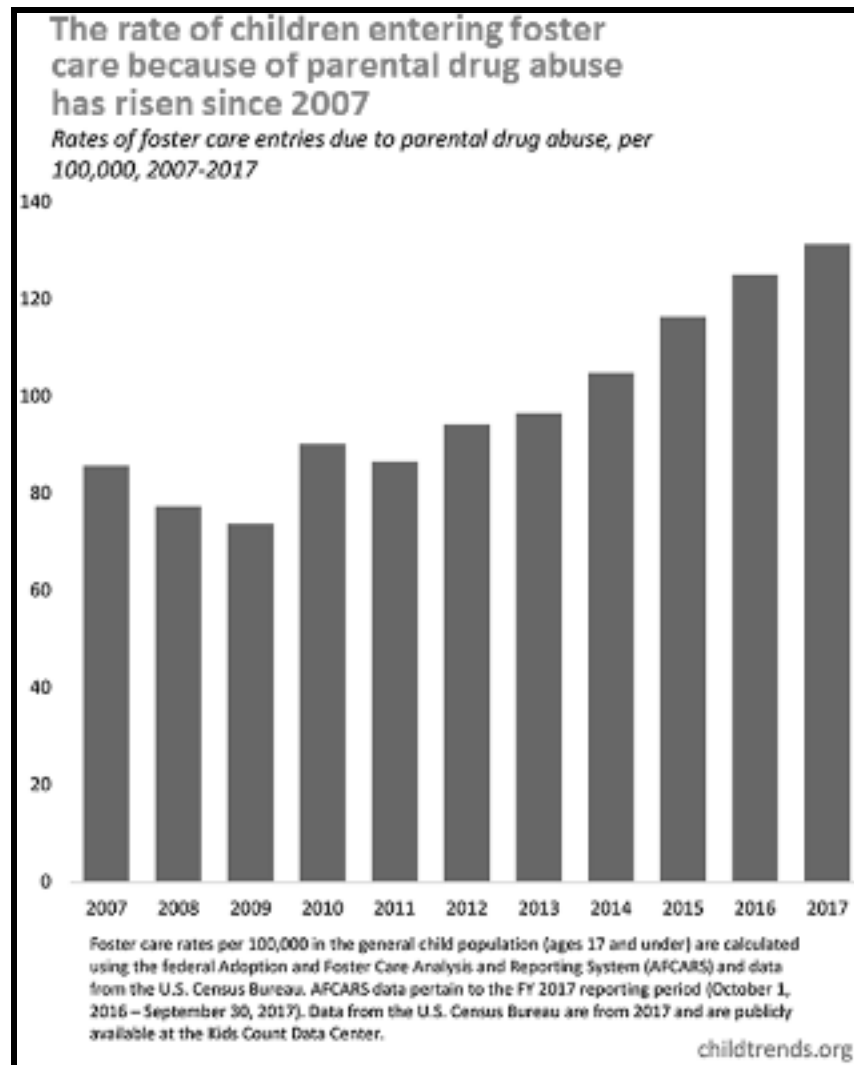
According to Child Trends, “the number of children in foster care has increased in recent years, climbing to 443,000 in 2017 from a recent historic low of 397,000 in 2012.”<sup>6</sup> Even though there was a decrease of foster children seen in 2012, it is clear that the numbers seen in the system are still high. The graph pictured below shows the number of children in foster care from 1990 to 2017.



<sup>5</sup> About Us. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2019, from <https://thecallinarkansas.org/about-us/>

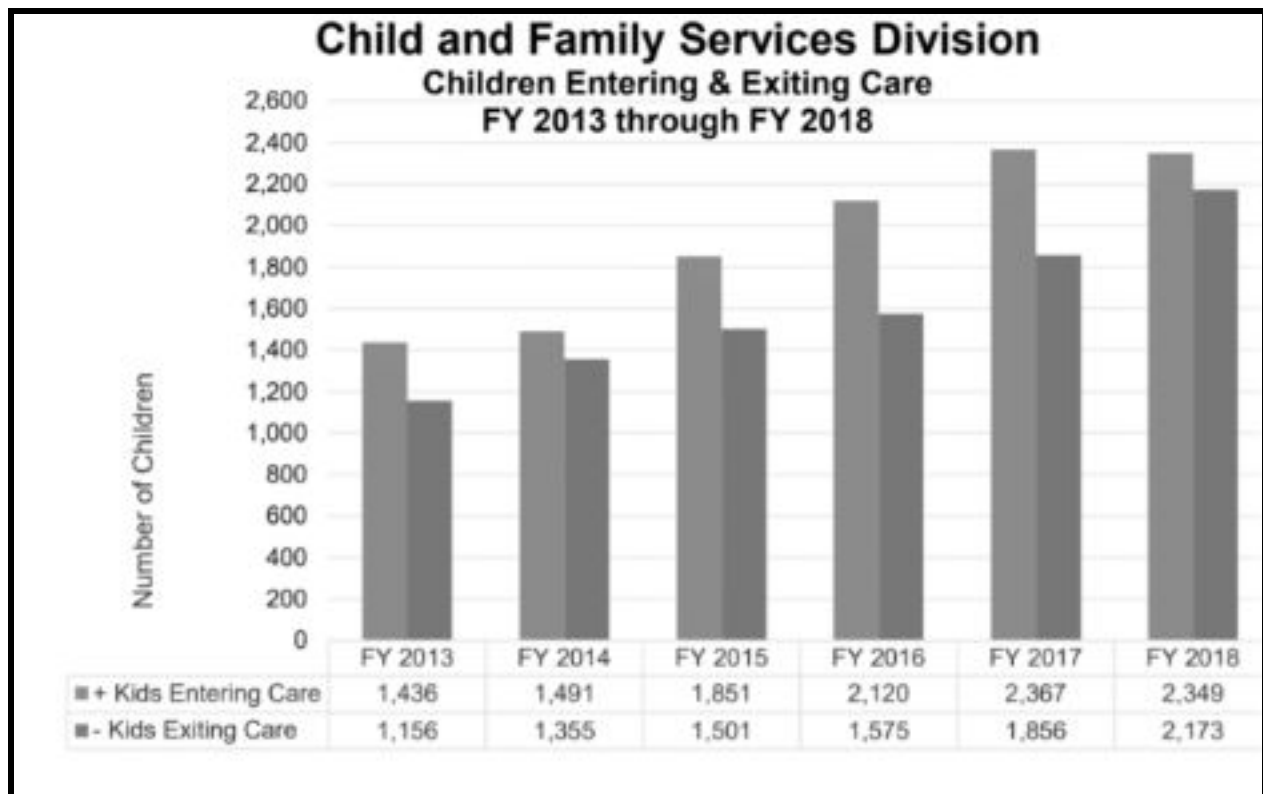
<sup>6</sup> Foster Care & Child Trends Databank. (2019). Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/foster-care>

Child Trend also reports that on a national level, “neglect is the most common reason for removal (62 percent), but these cases often involve other underlying factors such as drug or alcohol abuse or parental mental health problems, which may not be reported or even known by child welfare agencies at the time of removal.”<sup>7</sup> As the drug problem in the United States continues to rise, so does the strong impact it has on the foster care system.



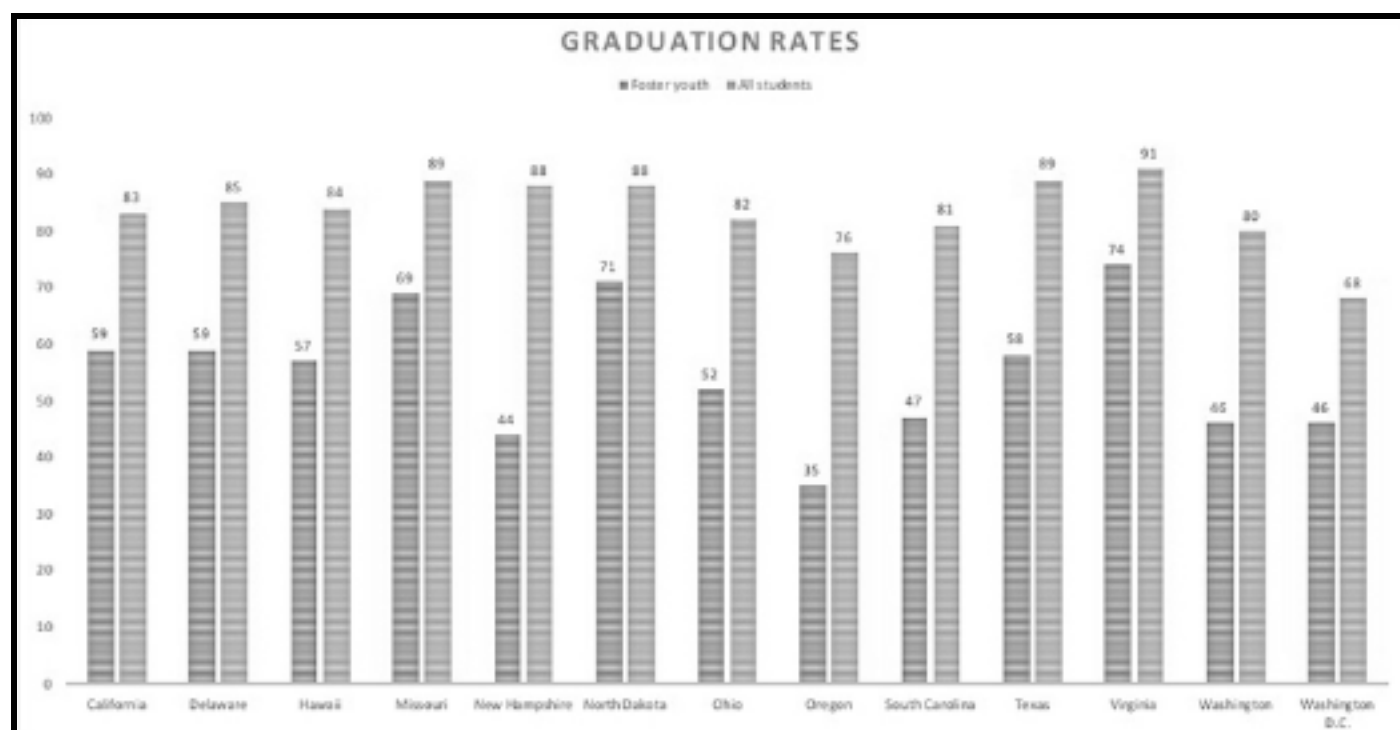
<sup>7</sup>One in Three Children Entered Foster Care in 2017 Because of Parental Drug Abuse. (2019, February 26). Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.childtrends.org/one-in-three-children-entered-foster-care-in-fy-2017-because-of-parental-drug-abuse>

For the state of Montana, even though foster care numbers have begun to level out, the number of children entering is still higher than the number exiting. This means that more and more children are being put into homes, yet less than what is entering is actually exiting the system.<sup>8</sup> This ultimately creates the need for more homes to become available as well.



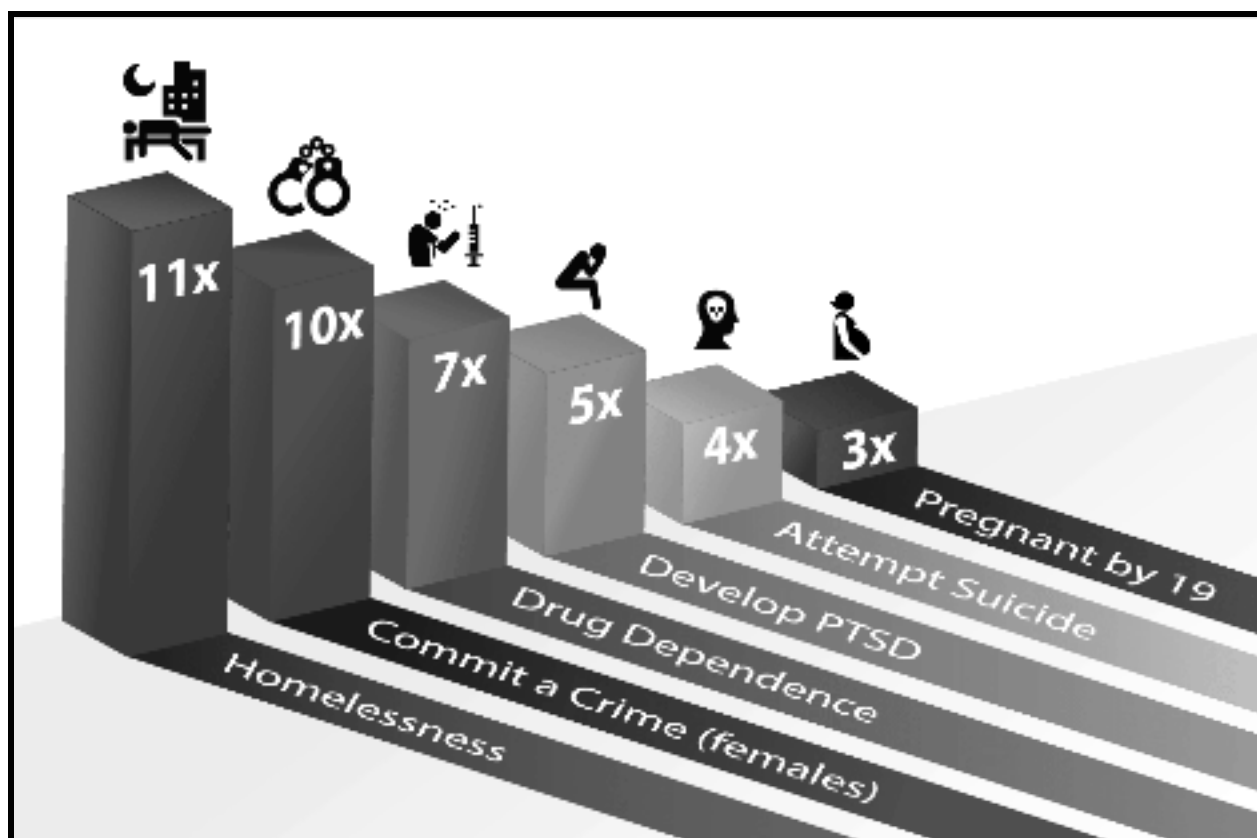
<sup>8</sup> Missoula Current, Dragu, P., & Herald, H. (2019, September 16). Montana Foster Care Numbers Steady; Drug, Alcohol and Neglect Make up Most Cases. Retrieved from <https://missoulacurrent.com/general/2019/09/montana-foster-care/>

In comparison to students who are not in the foster care system, foster care students have a harder time succeeding in an academic setting. Kate Stringer, with The Chronicle of Social Change, writes that a specific “ student, who usually got straight As, had been placed in the foster care system and was balancing class at her Bronx public high school with court appointments, meetings with lawyers and social workers, and the emotional shock of uprooting her life.”<sup>9</sup> Even though this particular student was able to eventually be successful in school and graduate, this is sadly not the case for all students. Many are overwhelmed with the added stress of dealing with being in foster care. The graph below shows graduation rates of foster students and non-foster students for specific states.



<sup>9</sup> Stringer, K. (2019, March 1). State Report Cards Must Track Graduation Rates for Foster Youth. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/federal-legislation-says-state-report-cards-must-track-reading-and-math-scores-high-school-graduation-rates-for-youth-in-foster-care-only-16-do/33911>

The rate of foster children who age out of the system is also really high as well. Because of this, there are problems for “experiencing devastating outcomes” from it.<sup>10</sup> As seen in the chart below, aged-out foster children are eleven times more likely to experience homelessness, ten times more likely to commit a crime, seven times more likely to be drug dependent, five times more likely to develop PTSD, four times more likely to attempt suicide, and three times more likely to become pregnant by the age of nineteen. The impact of being in the foster care system extends into later years, causing there to be a multitude of long-lasting problems.



<sup>10</sup> The Village. (2019). The Caring Village: Foster Youth Need Our Help. Retrieved March 4, 2020, from <https://thecaringvillage.org/>

## **Foster Care Programs**

Within the state of Arkansas, there are multiple programs working to provide children and families with resources to succeed. This is done through pairing children with homes, assisting with repairing broken relationships, and also through providing education programs. Below are a few of the programs available to foster children and foster families in the state.

### **The CALL**

The CALL originated in 2007 when a group came together to pray over how to serve the foster kids and families in Pulaski County located in Little Rock, Arkansas. It became a state-wide organization in 2010. Through recruiting over half of the foster care parents in the state, the CALL reaches 51 counties in Arkansas. There have been over 900 adoptions and 11,000 children placed in homes. The four main aspects of the organization are to serve, care, answer and become.

The basis for The CALL comes from a biblical background. James 1:27 reads “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”<sup>11</sup> This has been the backbone for the organization. The current mission statement of The Call is “mobilizing the church in Arkansas to love foster children with the extravagant love of Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> BibleGateway. (n.d.). Retrieved April 24, 2020, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+1:27&version=NIV>

<sup>12</sup> About Us. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2019, from <https://thecallinarkansas.org/about-us/>

## **Project Zero**

This organization began as the Pulaski County Adoption Coalition over 15 years ago. It states that “the coalition was made up of adoption professionals, ministry and organizational leaders, DCFS staff, attorneys, adoptive parents, foster parents, and others who were passionate about adoption.”<sup>13</sup> In 2009, Project Zero became an official 501c3 non-profit organization, and in 2011 Project Zero shifted to linking children with waiting families.

One of the main parts of the organization is the Arkansas Heart Gallery. This is a collection of waiting children and teens that prospective families can look through to get a better idea of the reality of the need for parents in Arkansas. It can be seen on the website or through free-standing travel exhibits in the state. The overall mission statement is “imagine a world where  $1+1=0$ .”<sup>14</sup>

## **Immerse Arkansas**

Immerse Arkansas formed when Eric and Kara Gilmore saw a young girl go through 50 different foster homes before she aged out of care, and at that moment they knew they needed to do something. This organization seeks to provide support for youth in crisis ages 16-22, and also to provide support for foster and adoptive families. Immerse Arkansas believes in the idea of “with,” and has a strong desire to help with the broken relationships in many youth’s lives. There is a strong emphasis in teaming up with youth to help rather than approaching the issue from a

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<sup>13</sup> Who We Are. (2017). Retrieved February 20, 2020, from <https://www.theprojectzero.org/who-we-are.php>

<sup>14</sup> Home: Project Zero. (2017). Retrieved February 23, 2020, from <https://www.theprojectzero.org/>

much more distant place. The Immerse Arkansas team is made up of various volunteers from people, businesses, and churches.<sup>15</sup>

### **Bethany Christian Services**

Bethany Christian Services is a group that offers a wide range of different services for individuals, ranging from adoption to pregnancy. One part of their informational services is giving more resources and information about what families need to do in order to become eligible to be a foster home. Bethany provides monthly reimbursement for families based on the support level being provided to foster children. The three main focuses they offer are domestic foster care, refugee foster care, and foster care adoption. Because Bethany's main resource is having information available, they offer a 24/7 hotline for foster care families.<sup>16</sup>

### **Foster Arkansas**

Foster Arkansas was created by the Department of Human Services-Department of Child and Family Services in response to the need for foster families in the state of Arkansas. At one given time, there are over 5,000 children in the foster care system for the state. Foster Arkansas offers five basic resource areas: volunteer, connect, foster, adopt, and those who are already a foster parent.

Their website states the following: "Foster families provide the typical things any child needs: safety, stability and love while the conditions that caused the placement away from the

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<sup>15</sup>About- Immerse Arkansas. (2020). Retrieved January 14, 2020, from <https://immersearkansas.org/about#about-home>

<sup>16</sup> About Bethany. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2019, from <https://bethany.org/about-us>



biological family are being resolved. Foster care is intended to be temporary so in all cases we hope children and youth can be reunited with the biological family.”<sup>17</sup>

Foster Arkansas seeks to keep children safe, but also looks for any opportunity to reunite a child with his or her biological family.

### **Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranch**

Formed in 1976, the mission of the Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranch is to “address, remedy, and prevent child abuse and neglect by creating safe, healthy, and permanent homes for children.” The group was started by policemen who were concerned about boys that were in homes not providing satisfactory care. Since then, there are now three active campuses offering two different programs. The campuses are the Batesville Campus, Degray Lake Campus, and Donald W. Reynolds Campus.<sup>18</sup> The first program offered is an education program that seeks to educate people on child abuse and neglect in communities throughout Arkansas. The second program is a residential program where boys live in a cottage with a set of house parents and up to nine other children of the same gender.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> ARCCC - Creating Connections for Children. (n.d.). Welcome to Foster Arkansas. Retrieved January 12, 2020, from <http://www.fosterarkansas.org/dcfs/fosterarkansas/>

<sup>18</sup> Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranches Campuses. (n.d.). Retrieved February 13, 2019, from <https://www.youthranches.com/about/ourcampus/>

<sup>19</sup> Arkansas Sheriffs' Youth Ranches Programs. (n.d.). Retrieved February 13, 2019, from <https://www.youthranches.com/about/programs/>

## Events

### **Clark County Foster Family Valentine's Day Party**

One event that I attended was the Clark County Foster Family Valentine's Day Party in 2019. This was at First Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, on the 8th of February for an evening party. All current foster families for the residents of Clark County were invited. Around fifty guests attended and there were about ten volunteers, including myself.

The families that attended were a mix of demographic make-ups. Some families were white, while some were African American. Some were older, while others were younger. Some families had one or two children, while some had multiple plus biological children. Some parents were related to the children while others were distant relatives. Overall, the families in attendance were very diverse and I did not notice that it made any difference with how the families interacted. However, I did pick up on the fact that some of the children were hesitant to interact with each other.

Along with a meal, we served the children through playing games, making crafts, and even providing a bouncy house. The blow-up seemed to be the best activity, as kids were playing in it the whole night. Another one of the activities the kids enjoyed was the keychain craft station. I think it was so special because it was something the kids could always carry with them, regardless of where they went.

The night in itself was really fun, even as a volunteer. It was one of my first events to do that was specifically created for foster families and children. I think the night was such a hit because it allowed time for families to come have a free evening where their children could play

games and be served a free meal. I also enjoyed how they were able to see they were not alone on the foster care journey.

### **The Hope Conference**

I attended the Hope Conference on March 1st and 2nd of 2019 at Geyer Springs First Baptist Church. The event was put on to mainly offer support for foster families, adoptive families and professionals. The keynote speaker for the weekend was Tina Bryson, who is a psychotherapist and Founder/Executive Director of The Center For Connection and Play Strong Institute in Pasadena, California. The two main sessions with her were based on “Parenting With the Brain in Mind” and “No-Drama Discipline.”<sup>20</sup> Through a psychological approach, Dr. Bryson offered practical tips and information on the processing patterns of children in difficult situations. With a large part of foster care causing a child to face instability, Dr. Bryson showed how much change can be seen based on specific parenting styles being practices. She stressed the point that safety is the main care and concern of the brain, which is why a child will act out in different ways when they feel unsafe. She also stated that behavior is communication, and it is important to see the behavior of a foster child as information telling us what is impacting that specific child the most. Yelling and having a strong attitude towards a child makes their brain respond by seeing the situation as a threat, which in return makes the child feel unstable.

She stated “we build skills through reflective dialogue and practice, which is followed by redirecting. With children between the ages of seven to eleven being highly vulnerable to anxiety, it is important for parents to connect with children in the way they respond best. This

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<sup>20</sup> Bryson, T. (2019, March). *The Hope Conference. The Hope Conference.* Little Rock.

can be done by knowing which brain hemisphere is most active for the specific child. By doing so, secure attachment with the child can be obtained. This ultimately means that they feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure.”<sup>21</sup>

Outside of the discussions held with Dr. Bryson, there were many options for attending breakout sessions. The two I got to attend were “Parenting the Sprinning, Running, Jumping, Bumping Child” by Aleisha Mortensen and “Trauma Informed Parenting for Young Children” by Leighsan L. Harrod and Emily Robbins. Both sessions were an hour, which gave them a chance to be really in-depth with the topic.

In the first breakout session Aleisha Mortensen, an occupational therapist, discussed ways to help foster children who tend to have disruptive and invasive social habits. While the discussion was directed toward helping a child in distress, the main goal was to speak on behaviors that are rooted behind a wide variety of causes as well as different levels of severity. One specific demonstration she showed us was the power of having tools that keep children active. She suggested having objects around the house that can keep a child occupied but allows them to still interact with others. This could be done through large, inflatable balls to sit on, sand and pasta boxes to play with, and even small workout areas. When a child can be engaged on more than an emotional and mental level, it allows there to be transformational habits of beneficial behavior.<sup>22</sup>

In the second breakout session with Leighsan L. Harrod and Emily Robbins, we looked at different counseling options and evidence based treatments that helped families with children

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<sup>21</sup> Bryson, T. (2019, March). *The Hope Conference. The Hope Conference.* Little Rock.

<sup>22</sup> Mortensen, A. (2019, March). *The Hope Conference. The Hope Conference.* Little Rock

who experienced trauma. According to their data, trauma in a foster child's life is a large problem. 68% of children in the system experienced neglect, 59% had an impaired caregiver, and even 54% saw some form of violence in the home. This is proven to be a problem because consistent, long periods of trauma are associated with bigger gaps in development. Some common misconceptions about trauma in children are that children are not affected, children are resilient, the child will forget about it, and that young children cannot do therapy. Harrod and Robbins spent a long time pointing out that ADHD and Trauma symptoms in children mirror each other almost exactly. This is important to recognize because it can sometimes cause confusion when trying to work with a child, especially in an emotional and behavioral setting.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Harrod, L. L., & Robbins, E. (2019, March). *The Hope Conference. The Hope Conference.* Little Rock.

## Interviews

### **Chris Goins Interview**

Chris Goins is an attorney for central Arkansas. He graduated from William H. Bowen School of Law in 2005. Chris represents DHS and has two primary types of cases that he works. He typically does cases involving adult protective services, and dependency/neglect. His average caseload is 60-70 but there have been times where he has covered up to 140.

When thinking about what field he wanted to go into after graduation, Chris had no specific area. However, after working in this field there is nothing else that he stated that he would rather be doing. While there are many disturbing and upsetting things he has to see, at the end of the day he finds his job to be very rewarding. One thing he says is very stressful is knowing how much power he holds in representing the child well. Because of the hard things he sees, he has had to learn how to shut it off. Most of the time it is pretty easy to leave work at the office, but there are a few nights that are harder. When he had his own children, he was really freaked out and struggled for a while. He had to relearn how to cope with things. He is also way more protective of his children and wife now, especially because of all he is seen in the field.

While his job title does not require him to work cases for foster families, he primarily only sees children that are in foster care. Most of the cases he has are dealing with foster children, which shows a strong correlation between abuse and being in the system. Because his primary focus is the legal side, he does not deal with the foster family very much. The only time he might see them is if they need to testify in court, or many times if the parental rights are terminated.

Chris said he has seen a bigger change and larger effort in providing more services prior to removing children from the home. Society and those working in the field are evolving to realize that foster care and home-removal for a child can be largely traumatic. There is a large push for keeping children with their biological parents and typically only removing them if there is an immediate threat or true danger.

He also believes that a strong effort is being seen in the field. His case numbers have definitely been decreasing, which is a positive step forward. The affidavits he receives have been showing more emphasis on keeping families together, but the case workers typically note that the efforts have failed. However, he still views that as a positive change since reunification is widely discussed.

### **Stephanie Smith Interview**

Another one of my interviews was my mother, who works for CASA as a volunteer advocate. Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) reports they “are appointed by Judges to watch over and advocate for abused and neglected children, to make sure they don’t get lost in the overburdened legal and social services or languish in inappropriate groups or foster homes. Advocates stay with each case until it is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. For many children their CASA Advocate will be the one constant adult presence in their lives during this time.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Who We Are. (2015, February 3). Retrieved April 24, 2020, from <https://casaspeaks4kids.com/about/>

After she saw someone post on social media that a CASA director was having an interest meeting, she decided to attend the meeting since she was available. After going to the meeting along with a couple of friends, she decided she wanted to serve. In order to be certified, Stephanie had to become trained. This consisted of videos, lectures, and even walking through scenarios with the training group. After becoming involved with a case, she feels her training was in-depth but not enough to allow her to serve as strong as she could. One aspect Stephanie feels her training fell short was knowing how to fill out a court report. These are very crucial for the judge's decision in a case, and she felt that having more knowledge on it would have been very beneficial.

After being sworn in at court in 2019, she has only had one active case. One of the directors covering her area- Grant county, Hot Spring county, and Garland county- left and was replaced by a new employee, so it was hard to really get involved at the beginning. The first case she was assigned ended up being resolved, so she had to wait a while to finally get children. Finally, in February she went to a hearing with the judge and was assigned to a sibling set of three. At the hearing, she was very surprised because the biological parents of the children were very put together and did not seem like they would have children taken away from them. Because there were three kids, they had to go to two separate homes. One of the foster parents was there in court in February, but she did not want to be seen by the biological parents. However, the judge made a statement revealing her presence, and she ended up meeting the parents afterwards. To her it was encouraging because the biological parents were thanking the foster parent for taking care of two of her children. The next step for my mom was to make a home visit to meet with the foster parent of the other siblings living in a separate home. She was



surprised to learn that the foster parents of the two children had never been trained in foster care. The foster parent had taught one of the siblings in school and when the biological parents did not show up to pick the children up at school one day, she took the children in as an emergency placement. The foster mom said she would have taken the younger sibling in as well but she did not have the abilities to take in three kids at once.

One aspect of being a CASA volunteer my mom was surprised by was that the first thing one of the children said to her was “why can I not go see my mom and when can I go home?” It was a shock to get thrown into it right away. However, she feels that being a public school teacher prepared her for the job because she had heard similar home stories from students in her classroom. She believes that she was mature enough and experienced enough to answer those questions, but some people in CASA might not know the appropriate things to say.

Another part that shocked her was that “being poor is not a reason to have your kids taken away.” Stephanie had a hard time believing that a child could live without water or electricity and not get taken from the home. She found out that most kids would rather stay in poor home situations, than be removed from their parents to have a better living condition.

She has to serve an average of 10 hours a month, but it isn't a large time commitment so it should fit most people's lifestyles. The reason there is such a strong need is because once a volunteer is assigned a case, they never get reassigned. Even after placement back in the biological home, it is the advocate's job to continue communicating with the family to make sure things are going well. Overall, she believes the foster care system is very overwhelmed and in need of volunteers. There are not enough hours in the day for social workers to get everything done, so it is important for people to help in any way possible.

## **Matt and Misha Parker Interview**

I interviewed the Parker family in the spring of 2019. Matt and Misha Parker are Arkadelphia citizens after moving from Texas. After their youngest child was born, they took their first year in Arkadelphia to adjust. The next year they started to think about what God wanted to do with their family. As a teacher in the public school system for Clark County, Mrs. Parker watched two students who were siblings be removed from the school because of being moved from their home by DHS. At the time, there were not any foster families in Arkadelphia. After teaming up with other community members, the Parkers were able to be the first family for The Call in Clark County. Their home opened up on September 13th of 2016, and they got a call for taking in foster children on the same day.

The Parker family had their first foster child for 18 months, and they got him the day he was born. Even though they were asked if they were seeking to adopt, Matt and Misha knew that it was not their child. They were preparing and molding the child for his forever home. After receiving the infant, they also received two little girls, both of whom had been relocated and brought back into the county. Because of the set of siblings, the Parker's biological siblings had to make a hard transition at home. The guest bedroom had to be changed and their youngest child now had to share a bedroom. Even though they already had the infant, having the two siblings really impacted their family.

The girls were with them for four months. They had visitations with their mother, which made things hard on the Parker family, especially for Misha. Aside from the younger child and the two female siblings, the Parker family took care of eight more children before May of 2019. One thing the Parkers have learned is that they need to take kids younger than their youngest

child. They can take a risk of imbalance of power with the younger children, but they do not want to have problems with the older children. Misha claimed they have to “set the parameters strongly” in order to ensure their biological family is ultimately safe.

Misha said that becoming a foster parent has completely changed her viewpoint. Her mindset has changed not only about the ones she serves, but also the ones from school that she does not even realize are in the system. She knows without a doubt that she will be fostering kids in the school within the future. She already works with the younger age group at school, so getting them in her home is like second-nature. At first it seems like a big deal to the child, but she is eventually able to talk to them because of teaching experience with kids on that level.

Misha stated that “a teacher is constantly making new places in her heart for a kid they know is not going to stay.” This has helped her be able to wave and say goodbye to little foster children leaving her family’s home because she has many of the children at school, so she gets to watch them grow up, even if it isn’t within the walls of their home. She also believes that being a teacher gives her a “leg up” because she already has the natural skill set to work with children coming from various backgrounds.

One thing Misha strongly believes in is helping a child that has been relocated to a different county. If a child goes to Clark County from a different one, Misha thinks that being able to see the child at home and at school will allow the transition for the child to be much easier. There will be a constant face the child sees throughout the whole day, rather than having to readjust to multiple different adult figures.

Some of the problems the Parkers have seen through becoming foster parents is the unavailability of help. Because of standards within the foster care system, only specific people

are allowed to keep the children. This makes it even harder for when the Parkers need to use a daycare. There is only one daycare center in Arkadelphia that takes any child, which makes it hard when looking for somewhere to keep a foster child. A neighboring county also shifts employees around frequently, which makes it difficult to know who to reach out to for help with the children.

The Parkers said that the first two days of a new placement are the hardest. It is a big adjustment to get the children to fit in and work together. You also do not know the background of every child so there can sometimes be trust issues when a child walks into a home. You never know if the child is going to come home and “strangle the hamster” or say something inappropriate in front of a younger sibling.

One part of the foster care system that has been a huge blessing for the Parkers is the amount of support they have received through the years. Within a two week period, the family had to prepare only two dinners. The church the Parkers attend has done multiple meal trains for them. They have found frozen lasagna and diapers on the porch when getting home from an event. People have supplied bikes and reached out on social media to see if there are any immediate needs. While The Call is the main organization for the Parkers, they have reached out to them very little. People “joyfully contribute to the work they do.” Matt’s mother has taken care of the whole family when they were sick with the stomach virus. People are willing to help, they just have to be told how. A thriving faith community is crucial for getting work done.

## **Joe and Lindsey Snyder Family Interview**

Lindsey's mom grew up in foster care and aged out at 18. As a result, Joe and Lindsey had a desire to foster and adopt. Because of having a "strong heart" for it, the Snyders started the process in 2015. They said it was ultimately part of what God was calling them to do. Initially they were interested in adoption, yet they quickly realized there was a strong need for solely foster parents as well. After attending an informal information meeting, they decided there was nothing else to do but quickly get involved.

The most difficult part of the process was understanding children entering into Joe and Lindsey's home were coming from broken backgrounds and had traumatic experiences that their own children never had to endure. They realized that the foster child's trauma was no longer individual to them, but it was Joe and Lindsey's to battle from now on as well. Another hard aspect of foster care is the idea that the main goal is reunification. After getting used to having a child in one's home and taking on the parental role, one essentially hopes and believes that they will "never have to say goodbye." However, this was not a guarantee for the child. It was hard for Joe and Lindsey to initially grasp the idea of being fully committed and taking on the parental role from day one, even if the child would have to leave the next day.

One part that was a challenge for the Snyder's biological children was understanding what foster care truly meant. While they made house plans and removed furniture in the beginning, which got the Snyder's children excited at first, they slowly began to realize they were there to serve. The mindset had to become "I am serving others and not expecting anything from it," rather than "I am gaining another sibling." After the first foster child, the Snyder's children eventually got adjusted to being a foster home.

Developmentally, the Snyder's worked really hard to make sure the foster children did not fall behind from where they were meant to be. One of their foster children was a teenager, so knowledge and healing for the first time was crucial. She had a hard time understanding the severity of her birth mother's drug use, which caused issues with thinking cigarettes were considered drugs. Healing from past trauma was essential in moving forward as well. Because of it, school work proved to be hard at times. Part of that process for the Snyder's looked like simply naming what had happened in the past as the first step. Once things were noticed as a problem within the home and at school, it became a lot easier to get the adequate help needed to make sure a foster child was not struggling more than one normally should.

One piece of advice the Snyder's said for future foster families was to commit fully and do it wholeheartedly. While it might prove to be hard at times, the Snyder's stated that in the end it would be worth it. It is necessary to put aside personal issues and look at the harsh reality of what children are facing in foster care today. Not that some people's excuses aren't valid, but when looking at the amount of kids that do not have homes, the Snyder's believe that children need to be put in homes where people lay their own worries down so they can be fully present. Overall their final piece of advice was to look for outlets and opportunities to educate the community. In order for more families to get involved and help out with the state foster care system, Joe believes awareness is crucial.

## **Videos of Foster Children in the System**

Seen through the Arkansas Heart Gallery by Project Zero, there are a multitude of videos showing current foster children that are available for adoption. Each one is specific to a single child or sibling set, and they go into detail about the circumstances and personality of the child. Some examples from videos are listed below<sup>25</sup>:

**Joey (17):** After losing his father and grandmother, both of whom were influential people for Joey's upbringing, he entered into the foster care system. While he likes to be surrounded by others, he also has a strong desire to grow when alone. His dream is to one day become an RN to be a traveling nurse.

**Kaylon (14):** Because of a strong love for sports, Kaylon enjoys spending much of his time being active. He also enjoys being energetically connected to others, but he does not come across as too strong. Kaylon desires to remain close with his sister, who is currently with an adoptive family.

**Leviathan (14):** Leviathan is diagnosed with autism and mild mental retardation, which requires he has a family who understands his specific needs. While he is non-verbal, he has many ways

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<sup>25</sup> Arkansas Heart Gallery. (n.d.). Retrieved February 4, 2020, from <https://www.theprojectzero.org/arkansas-heart-gallery.php>

that he has learned to communicate. Leviathan needs a family who will also return to him his radiating joy.

**Addilee (9):** Addilee desires to be adopted and to have stability. She loves to cuddle and spend time with dogs. One of her favorite things to do is go shopping, and she loves to make crafts as well. Because of her love for animals, she wants to one day be a vet. Addilee is looking for a family where she can be an only child to “receive a lot of attention.”

**Faith (8):** Because of her diagnosis of autism, Faith has a hard time with change and loud noises. She needs a family that can help her deal with PTSD and also her mental setbacks. Faith loves to spend time outside and enjoys listening to music as well.

**Denice and Lenice (15, 18):** Both sisters have a few behavior issues, but they love to learn new skills to get better daily. One of the main things Denice and Lenice need is a family that will be consistent. The pain they have endured is not going to define the potential strong, young women they want to one day become.



## **Conclusion**

As I reflect on the different programs available, different events I attended, and different people I talked to, I have sensed a common theme: service. Whether it is through becoming a foster parent or volunteering by spreading knowledge and awareness, there is a place where all of us can fit in to serve.

Seeing the amount of progress within the foster care system the last few years is a great step forward, but there is still much work to be done. When looking at the number of children who cannot be placed in an adequate home, it is the Christian duty to intercede and serve. Psalm 82:3 calls us to “defend the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.”<sup>26</sup> We are challenged to serve those around us, including ones who might not have anyone looking after them. Ephesians 1:5 states that “God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.”<sup>27</sup> In the same way, we are called to reflect this image through our actions to others. We are called to choose those who are not chosen, and pray that it will reflect the hope seen through Jesus. When children have gone through something so emotionally taxing, there is nothing better than showing them the love of Jesus by personally choosing them without the expectation of anything in return. As I have learned more about the current kids in the system, and as I have heard personal stories from families serving locally, it is evident that there is a need

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<sup>26</sup> BibleGateway. (n.d.). Retrieved April 24, 2020, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+82:3&version=NIV>

<sup>27</sup> BibleGateway. (n.d.). Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1:5&version=NIV>

for us to become involved with foster care. While the end goal is reunification, that should not stop us from allowing children in the system to have a place in our heart.

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