

Lingering in the system: Hundreds of Minnesota children wait for families to love them

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There are at least 642 children living in group homes, foster homes, residential treatment facilities and shelters in Minnesota, waiting to be adopted, Ramsey County officials estimate.

"Sometimes when our children come to this building, it is not such a happy occasion," Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter said last Saturday at the county's Juvenile and Family Justice Center in downtown St. Paul. Carter, other dignitaries, families and friends celebrated the formal adoption of 10 children by four families.

"I'm very happy that's over," said Bernita Givens-Osborn. She and fiancé Malachi Samples are now the proud parents of three daughters: 22-month-old Brandi Jones, six-year-old Tiffany Jones, and eight-year-old Talisha Jones.

"I have been waiting for this since I was very little," added Ashley Saxe, the oldest of the waiting children who formally got adopted on National Adoption Day November 20.

In his proclamation, President Barack Obama strongly urged Americans to support children "whether opening our hearts and homes through adoption, becoming foster parents to provide quality temporary care to children in crisis...[and] supporting foster and adoptive families in our communities."

Approximately 80 "waiting children" are seeking adoption in Ramsey County every day: 58 percent are Black, 58 percent are boys, and 40 percent are ages 16 and older. Some are without a family because of abuse, neglect or abandonment.

Some require special accommodations. Many are siblings who need to stay together.

Regardless of the circumstances these waiting children find themselves in through no fault of their own, all of them deserve and need a family that loves them and makes a life-long commitment to them.

Adoptive parents may be single, married, currently parenting or not.

They may own their own home or be currently renting. Furthermore, families are not responsible for paying the fees associated with adopting a child. Subsidies are available to help offset the costs of adoption and for some of the child's ongoing needs as well.

You don't need to live in Ramsey County to adopt a county waiting child, said Carolyn Smith, who heads the county's Permanent Families Recruitment Project, now in its third year of a five-year operation.

"Some people think that if they have something on their criminal background check, that might be a barrier" to adopting a waiting child, Smith noted. "Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. But I would encourage anybody who has a question about that to contact us."

Over...

The adoption process “does take time, patience and care to work,” admitted Carter, adding that all waiting children “deserve to be adopted by people who love them. [They] all deserve to have permanent families.”

Former U of M and NFL player Michael Lehan was an “interracial adoption” when he was three years old and was raised in Hopkins. “It wasn’t that big of an issue until I got to seventh or eighth grade,” he recalled. “We go school shopping and people would take a double take because it wasn’t as much interracial adoptions going on at that time [in the late 1980s].”

Lehan, now dean of students at North View Junior High School in Osseo, was among the speakers at last weekend’s event. He told the audience that both parents and child will go through adjustment periods simultaneously, even after the adoption process is finalized.

“It takes special people...to open your home” to a waiting child or children, he told parents. Then he reassured the soon-to-be-no-longer waiting children, “There is nothing wrong with you.”

“I was going to get adopted [in the past], but it didn’t work out,” said Ashley. “I just gave up.” Even after a social worker finally convinced her to try again, she still hesitated to go through the maybe-maybe not ordeal. “I really didn’t want to, and then something told me why not,” continued Ashley.

“Then a miracle happened, and I got adopted by Jennifer and Scott Saxe.”

Twenty-year-old James Terrell said he was in long-term foster care since age five. “To me that was an adoption, because it provided me with a safe home, a learning environment, structure, and gave me a network and the support that I needed at that time. That’s what a family is,” he said.

There are children “who are in the system for five, 10, 15, or in some cases 18 years,” noted Ramsey County Family Support Services Manager Clyde Turner, adding that the older the child, too often it’s harder for them to get adopted.

“It was long for us, and longer for Ashley,” admitted Jennifer Saxe. Her husband Scott Saxe added, “We were able to get her in our home before she turns 18.” She is now “the big sister” to their two biological children ages eight and 10. “She has a little sister and little brother,” said Scott, who’s now Ashley’s father.

Ashley said, “It is special for me to have my own family, to have someone to love me and take care of me.”

At last officially her mother, Jennifer proudly proclaimed, “She has our last name now.”

Yet as Ashley, the three Jones sisters and six other formerly waiting children have become permanent members of their respective families, there are still countless others, especially children of color, who are still waiting.

“There is a disparity issue that we are looking at very closely,” Turner pointed out, adding that too many kids are “lingering” in the system, not only in Ramsey County, but also in Hennepin County and nationwide.

“We are doing a diligent recruitment effort to find African American families to adopt our kids,” said Smith. “We have been having some success.”

“I would encourage more African Americans to adopt,” concluded Givens-Osborn, who is now Talisha, Tiffany and Brandi’s mother.

For more information on adopting a child, call 651-266-KIDS or visit Ramsey County’s website at www.co.ramsey.mn.us.

Charles Hallman welcomes reader responses to challman@spokesman-recorder.com.

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