



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

# NEWS RELEASE

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**CONTACT:** Jo Ann Dollard  
847/390-1446

## **Innovative ‘Lifebook’ Training DVD Launched To Help Foster Children Overcome Trauma and Build Family Connections**

LSSI Hosts Chicago Premiere and Panel Discussion of  
*“Putting the Pieces Together: Lifebook Work with Children”*

CHICAGO, IL — Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) has launched a new therapeutic tool to help children in foster care overcome trauma by documenting their life stories. Entitled “Putting the Pieces Together: Lifebook Work with Children,” the new DVD will train child welfare professionals, as well as foster and adoptive parents, in using a Lifebook, a personalized timeline and memory book that serves as an evolving record of a child’s life.

“Every child deserves a sense of his or her own history,” says Ruth Jajko, associate executive director of LSSI’s Children’s Community Services. “Many foster children lose that after being separated from their original families and the emotional damage can deepen if children have to move to more than one foster home. Lifebooks are a source of healing — helping children reconnect with people and fill in the gaps in their personal histories.”

A Lifebook is like a scrapbook with a more intensive emotional element, containing items such as family photos, letters, goals, report cards, artwork, poems, diplomas, religious certificates, and written explanations of why the child is not living with his or her original family. For a child in foster care wrestling with difficult questions, such a collection can become a crucial accounting of key people and events, providing stepping stones to sorting out the past and the future.

The new DVD — which is aimed at caseworkers, therapists, and foster and adoptive parents — was produced in collaboration with the Center for Adoption Studies at Illinois State University (ISU) and is the first systematic effort to explain how to use a Lifebook effectively with foster children. The new training DVD was made possible by a leadership gift from Doris and Jay Christopher for LSSI’s Post-Adoption Services, of which the Lifebook project is a part. Filming was done by Rhondal McKinney, a professor of Fine Arts at ISU and director of ISU’s Rural Documentary Collection.

“Lifebooks have long served as a way of helping adopted children make sense of their lives,” said Monica Johnson, who led development of the project and is statewide coordinator of LSSI’s Post-

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Adoption Training and Services in Rock Island. “What’s new is that we’ve laid out a training method for using these books as a therapeutic tool. We are taking Lifebooks to a new level, aiming to impact child welfare training nationwide.”

The new DVD is unique in its focus on foster children, 14,328 of whom are now living in Illinois. “Though Lifebooks are relatively common among adoptees, children in foster care are rarely exposed to them,” said Jeanne Howard, Ph.D., who worked with Johnson in developing the DVD and serves both as co-director of the Center for Adoption Studies and as policy & research director of the Evan B. Donaldson Institute. “That means photos are lost, accomplishments are forgotten, and children can be confused by moves from one place to another. A Lifebook helps these children regain a sense of their own history and self-worth.”

For example, Crystal Dixon, now a 19-year-old student at Joliet Junior College, came into the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) at age 11 and started a Lifebook as a teenager, using it to maintain memories of family members and track personal goals.

“A Lifebook is an important tool,” she says. “You can write down your goals and then look back to see what you’ve accomplished and have yet to accomplish. It’s a chance to say what you really want out of life.”

Crystal is now studying child development because she wants to be able to give kids the kind of attention and affection that her own childhood sometimes lacked.

LSSI’s event premiering the new DVD was held at Northern Trust Bank in Chicago on July 9 and included a screening and panel discussion. The event, co-chaired by Doris and Jay Christopher, featured a panel discussion moderated by Merri Dee, director of community relations at WGN-TV. Speakers featured include:

- Jeanne Howard, Co-Director of the Center for Adoption Studies at Illinois State University (ISU) and Policy & Research Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Institute
- Doris Houston, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Center for Adoption Studies, and an adopted person
- Jackie Bright, Administrator for Cook North Region, DCFS
- Lynn Goffinet, former Statewide Director of Adoption Services, LSSI
- Markea Burrell, a foster and adoptive parent from Moline featured in the DVD
- Crystal Dixon, a foster youth whose Lifebook work improved her foster care experience and helps her chart her life course

*Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) is a not-for-profit social services agency of the three Illinois synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Founded in 1867, LSSI is based in Des Plaines, Ill., and provides a wide variety of services for children, adults, and families, including adoption, foster care, pregnancy counseling, Intact Family Services, residential services, and Head Start. For information, visit [www.LSSI.org](http://www.LSSI.org) and [www.AdoptionIllinois.org](http://www.AdoptionIllinois.org).*