

Going the Distance for Kids and Families

Some days, staff from LSSI's Children's Community Services in southern Illinois might drive four hours round trip to serve foster children—taking siblings to a supervised visit with parents or picking up children being removed from their home. LSSI's Marion and Vienna offices serve surrounding communities with foster care services, Intact Family services, and the extended family support program.

"Our staff put their heart into their responsibilities," said Program Director Eve Rossin.

For parents reported to the Illinois Department of Children and Family services for suspected abuse or neglect, Intact Family Services staff provides guidance, case management, and community resources referrals, to help keep families together and minimize trauma for children.

The foster care program places children who are removed

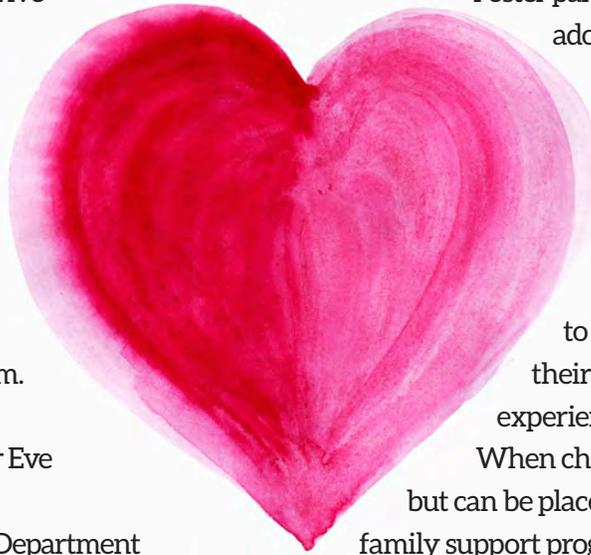
from their homes, and recruits and licenses foster parents.

Foster parents Jim and Tonya Hammer have adopted two children through LSSI's foster care program. Staff supported them as foster parents and through the adoption.

"Being a foster parent is hard work," said Tonya. "We've had positive experiences with LSSI staff just listening to us." Added Jim, "Kids are trying to form their life view and personalities. Positive life experiences produce positive lives."

When children are removed from their home but can be placed in a relative's house, the extended family support program assists that family member with acquiring DCFS licensure, which is required for relative and non-relative foster parents.

"Children now in their 20s call me to check in," Rossin said of LSSI's impact on families. "Moms stop by to say they still have their kids."



Osayande and Nanyamko Watson had a unique perspective on foster care when they decided to become foster parents in the early 90s. As employees of the Cook County Correctional Facility, the Watsons saw first-hand the struggles of adolescent African-American males.

Osayande, who worked at the correctional facility for 30 years before his retirement, saw a void in the mentorship of young people.

"The young people I saw come in didn't seem to have a lot of guidance," he says. "I tried to be that somebody to help them with their problems. It came very easy."

Growing up in foster care, Nanyamko lived in 4 homes before she was 18. Her final home was "fantastic," enabling her to transition successfully into adulthood. So when health issues meant she could no longer work full-time, Nanyamko turned her attention to helping children like herself.

Many children have come through the welcoming doors of the Watsons' home over the past 24 years. 3 have stayed permanently. Jawanza was their first adopted son, now grown and living in Colorado. Then came Jahlani and 5 years later Jahari. They are currently in the process of permanently adopting 2 more boys.

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 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois
TRANSFORMING LIVES FOR 150 YEARS

150
YEARS
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Congregation's Generosity Supports LSSI Program for At-Risk Foster Children

Social ministry thrives at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Glen Ellyn congregation works with a local food pantry, participates in community organizing, and supports a group of Myanmar refugees who call the suburb home. Now they've added Steps To Life, an LSSI program to help at-risk children in foster care, to their roster of good works.

"The people here really capture the vision that God has intentions for the world. It is our calling to enact those intentions," said Faith pastor Rev. Jim Honig. "God's work gets done in the world through God's people."

Fueled by an anonymous donor this past Advent season, Faith rallied support for LSSI's Steps to Life program. The anonymous donor offered to match the congregation's gift, up to \$2,500, to help underwrite the program's cost for the year.

Foster Parent Ron Guhl and LSSI Associate Director Ruth Jajko gave testimony about LSSI to congregants. By the end of Advent, Faith had raised \$5,600 – \$8,100 total with the challenge match – far surpassing any gift made in their history.

"We know that African-American boys with special needs are the hardest to place, and their adoption rate is almost zero," Osayande says.

The Watsons thrive working with African-American boys with special needs, believing they have the tools to set them up for success.

"I think in that respect they can relate to me and know they're not alone in what they can experience," she says. "They'll talk with me about it because they know that I know."

It takes a unique couple to face the challenges of fostering and parenting children with special needs. "I haven't had anyone like them," says Gail Jackson, the licensing representative responsible for the Watsons at LSSI's Augustana office. "They are such good foster parents because they mirror each other. I think that is why it is so easy for them to work with children who have special needs. They just see that the child needs a home."

A home is what they have provided. Along with their soon-to-be 5 adopted boys, they have 4 birth children as well. Add in the many, many children who have spent an extended period of time within their walls, and they have parented, mentored, and loved almost 30 children.

"For all of those people who say 'How do you do it? I could never do it. I just say, 'How do you not?!'" Nanyamko says. "I forget I didn't give birth to these kids because I love them exactly the same. I can't really tell the difference."

Every child in LSSI's foster care program receives a lifebook called "My Awesome Life" created by LSSI. A lifebook is a fun and healing tool to help foster children celebrate special milestones and understand difficult aspects of their lives. Since 2008, more than 3,200 lifebooks have been distributed to foster children in LSSI's care.

