




Inspired

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.”

PROVERBS 3:27, NRSV

A New Approach to Foster Care

Decreasing the time children spend in foster care while strengthening opportunities for children and families to thrive is the goal of Families Together, an evidence-based program that Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) is piloting in its Chicago office with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

On average in Illinois, children spend 35 months in foster care. Families Together aims to shorten this time and return children to their family within 12 months. When they cannot safely return to their parents, the goal is adoption or guardianship within 24 months.

Extenuating issues contribute to this timeframe, including lack of referral services and resources for children and families, the local juvenile court, staff turnover, and a shortage of foster families and the supports they need. When a family becomes involved in the child welfare system, a child can experience multiple moves, disrupting attachments, and increasing trauma.

Families Together differs from the current process in which one caseworker oversees the combined needs of the

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Responding to the Gospel, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois brings healing, justice, and wholeness to people and communities.

 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

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Evidence-Based Training Distinguishes Families Together Pilot

An evidence-based approach distinguishes LSSI's Families Together foster care pilot (see cover story), nurturing all parts of the family unit—children, birth parents, and foster parents—with individualized training and support.

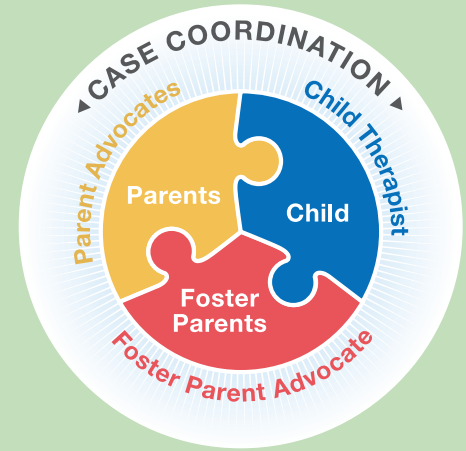
Specifically for foster parents, including kinship foster parents who are relatives of children in foster care, the training Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP™) provides support and skill enhancement. KEEP™ training teaches a preventative approach, providing parenting practices and behavior management skills. Its group approach also provides peer support among foster parents.

More than 20 years of research has shown KEEP™ training provides positive outcomes for all involved. For children in care, this includes more frequent reunifications with family and lower rates of emotional and behavioral challenges. For foster parents, KEEP™ has

shown reduced stress and higher rates of positive parenting. Additionally, youth average fewer days in foster care, and the training has resulted in a longer tenure for foster parents, who are a critical resource.

“KEEP is invaluable,” said Donna McKenzie, a Child Welfare Resource Specialist in LSSI's Chicago office, who completed the training. “It gives foster parents and relative foster parents valuable tools to address specific needs of children in foster care. When foster parents finish the KEEP training, they've made connections they can use for another time.”

For more information, visit LSSI.org/families.



Foster Parents Needed to Make a Difference

LSSI's goal for children in foster care is to help them find their forever home through reunification with birth families or through adoption or guardianship. In Illinois, there is an urgent need for foster parents, with 20,000 children currently in foster care and not enough foster parents to meet the need.

LSSI is the largest private provider of foster care in Illinois, licensing foster parents and placing children in foster care through 12 offices that include Aurora, Canton, Champaign, Chicago, Danville, Galesburg, Marion, Moline, Nachusa, Rockford, West Peoria, and Vienna. Foster parents for teens and siblings especially are needed. LSSI welcomes and affirms members of the LGBTQ+ community, including children in care and foster parents.

“LSSI actively seeks individuals and families interested in becoming licensed foster parents,” said Christine Hawes, Statewide Foster Parent, Licensing, and Recruitment Manager. “There is always a need for foster parents, but post-pandemic, the need is even more critical.”

Foster parents provide safe, loving, stable homes, help shape future generations, teach kids to connect with others, and provide positive support for biological families, Hawes said. By becoming a foster parent through LSSI, people join a community dedicated to providing support, resources, and guidance every step of the way.

Whether someone is considering fostering for the first time or has previous experience, LSSI embraces individuals from all walks of life. LSSI also welcomes individuals and organizations that can help spread the word about the need for foster parents.

For more information, visit LSSI.org/fostercare.





Living Out its Mission

Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Northfield, is a longtime supporter of LSSI. Their approach to helping serve the organization's clients and programs was illustrated when LSSI was part of Ascension's 2023 Lenten Challenge.

"We decided to ask our ministry partners how we might be helpful, rather than assuming that they would gladly receive whatever we offered," Pastor JoAnn Post said. "We were delighted to learn that, in the same way our congregation's ministry is always being reviewed and revised, our partners' needs were changing, as well. Partnering with LSSI's Foster Care Program to provide both tangible gifts and a significant financial gift was a welcome challenge, and a gift to Ascension, as well."

During the Lenten Challenge, congregation members participated in multilayered engagement opportunities to learn about LSSI and its foster care program. This included temple talks and vitality lectures on a variety of topics. Videos were shown. Sunday school students enjoyed a hands-on activity making fleece-tied blankets for youth in foster care. In-kind donations were collected, including diapers, toiletries, and books. And members gave offerings totaling over \$17,000.

The money raised supported older youth in foster care transitioning to independence. The other items were delivered to LSSI's Chicago foster care office and distributed to children in care.

Pictured above: LSSI's Chicago Foster Care Office received handmade fleece blankets from Lutheran Church of the Ascension as part of their 2023 Lenten Challenge. From left are: Kate Berlin, Ascension volunteer; Lesly Rocha, LSSI; Gail Price, Ascension volunteer; and Angela Weeden, LSSI.

• A Special History

Dear Friends,

LSSI's 156-year history is rooted in child welfare starting when a caring community in Berlin, now Swedona, Illinois built an orphanage for children left parentless by a cholera epidemic.

Although our programming has expanded well beyond that first orphanage, child welfare remains a critical part of our mission.

As the largest, private provider of foster care in Illinois, LSSI is a leader in child welfare services. We served 2,607 children in foster care last year. We know the work we do affects the trajectory of a child's life.

In our leadership role, LSSI hopes to influence the state of Illinois and its Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) by partnering to improve child welfare services. We've already done this with our Therapeutic Foster Care Program.

Learning from that evidence-based approach, LSSI has embarked on another pilot with DCFS called Families Together (see story on page 1), which applies a similar approach as our Therapeutic Foster Care Program but to traditional foster care. Aiming to decrease the length of time children spend in foster care, Families Together combines empathic, immediate engagement, and a strengthening of the caretaking system. The goal is to reduce the length of stay in foster care, increase the use of positive, supportive parenting skills, improve the level of children's functioning, and find children a loving, stable place to call home.

I hope you're inspired learning about our child welfare programs. Much has changed since our founding in 1867, but our commitment to children and families entrusted in our care remains strong. Thank you for all you do that helps us continue our mission.

Peace and Prayers,

David P. Novak, JD
Vice President, Advancement
Executive Director, Cornerstone Foundation



LSSI Recognized for LGBTQ+ Inclusive Adoption and Foster Care

LSSI was one of 172 child welfare organizations that joined the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation's All Children-All Families (ACAF) program. In December 2023, LSSI received a "Solid Foundation Tier of Recognition" from the organization. This recognition enhances an organization's efforts to establish a record of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) inclusion and build meaningful relationships with LGBTQ+ communities.

All Children-All Families partner organizations, including LSSI, work to improve the services provided to the LGBTQ+ community. This includes youth in foster care and prospective foster and adoptive parents who are LGBTQ+.

"LGBTQ+ youth are over-represented among foster and adopted youth," said Heather Williams, LCSW, LSSI Clinical Supervisor-Adoption Support & Preservation, who chaired LSSI's All Children-All Families Work Group. "The ACAF process helped LSSI become better equipped to provide the best care possible to these vulnerable

young people so that they can have the safety and support they need."

Approximately 1 in 3 youth in foster care nationally are LGBTQ+, according to the HRC. When they aren't allowed in homes that support them, LGBTQ+ youth face higher rates of abuse and mistreatment than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

The Human Rights Campaign also reports that there are an overwhelming number of LGBTQ+ families who have considered adopting or fostering a child in the future, but 55% of them feared being turned away because of their identity. Only 14% knew of an LGBTQ+-inclusive organization near them.

"The All Children-All Families process also focused on recruiting, welcoming, and supporting LGBTQ+ foster parents," said Williams. "This ultimately benefits our youth in care."



Events

Sunday, April 21, 2024

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

Congregations are invited to celebrate their shared ministry with LSSI on Good Shepherd Sunday, April 21, 2024, or any Sunday during the Easter season.

Visit LSSI.org/GSS for more information.

SAVE THE DATE

Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024

43RD ANNUAL TRUE FRIEND CELEBRATION

Save the date for the 43rd Annual True Friend Celebration held at a new location—Epiphany Center for the Arts, 201 S. Ashland, Chicago. More information at LSSI.org/Friend.

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foster parent, the child, and the biological parent.

"This can stress not only those involved parties—children and families—but also the caseworkers," said LSSI Executive Director of Children's Community Services Jere Murry. "This can lead to foster parents who don't feel supported, children whose behaviors worsen, and biological parents feeling unheard and defensive."

The Families Together program seeks to avoid this issue by blending expert case coordination, behavioral health interventions, and evidence-based interventions. The program guides the parents, both biological and foster, to gain the skills, resources, and support needed to provide positive, effective parenting that allows the child to heal and grow with their permanent families.

The ultimate goals of Families Together include fewer families and youth advancing in the child welfare system or needing a higher level of care than traditional foster care; a quicker response to concerns to avoid cases escalating in the system; and reinforcing success among staff serving the children and families.

Families Together will move into full implementation in 2024.

For more information, visit LSSI.org/families.



Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



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