



Getting to Know Our Foster Parents: Eileen



Eileen had dreamed of having a family of her own. Growing up in a large family, close to her siblings and nieces and nephews, she felt a natural pull toward nurturing children. That calling led her to become a foster parent through Lutheran Social Services of Illinois' (LSSI) Families Together Pilot Program.

Families Together is an evidence-based approach to foster care. Its goal is to decrease the amount of time children spend in care while strengthening opportunities for children and families to thrive.

"I knew LSSI would be responsive," Eileen said. "I knew there would be strong training, and I kept an open mind." Initially hoping to foster girls, Eileen's experience took a different direction when a 4-year-old boy with medical needs was placed with her. She had previous experience assisting a family member with similar medical needs and stepped up without hesitation.

Her experience has been transformative. "His heart is so open; he enjoys being in a family and making friends," she said of her foster son. "Watching many of his 'firsts' through his eyes is a joy."

Contributing to Eileen's success has been the KEEP™ training, an essential component of the Families Together pilot. KEEP™—Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained—is an evidence-based, 16-session program that equips foster parents with behavior management tools and peer support.

"It was especially helpful after my foster son arrived," Eileen said. "It gave me a community who knew what I was going through in a non-judgmental, helpful way."

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The KEEP training has been a great asset to all foster parents, including kinship parents—family members who become official caregivers—participate in the 16-week session, said Foster Parent Specialist Sheree Carter, who delivers the training. Carter shared that the weekly meetings can seem daunting to some at first, but by completion, the foster parents see the benefits of the engagement they have with each other.

"They have enjoyed the material and the support they have received from one another," said Carter. "Some of the parents are glad to have the tools from KEEP because it has helped them not to be reactive, but proactive."

"I learned the challenge is not about the issue at hand—it's about something that's come before in the child's life," said Eileen of her KEEP training. "It really addresses the day-to-day realities. The instructors were great at drawing us out and keeping us engaged."

Eileen encourages others to consider fostering. "If not now, when? If I just make an impact on one child, that could change the complete trajectory of that child's life," she said. "The gain is so much worth the investment. If you just help one child, think of the impact you've made."