

Foster care program provides training, support for families

By LIZ MUGAVERO
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NORWICH -- Tammy Bissonnette of Sterling believes every child should have a home for Christmas. As a longtime foster parent through the Waterford Country School Foster Care program, she and her husband, Scott, and their two children are doing their part to ensure at least some of the area's displaced children have a loving place to be. "Our family is very family-oriented," said Bissonnette, 31. "We have a large family, and to see a child not have that structure is very sad. If every home could be a foster home, it would be a great service."

While there are still many children in need, the school's foster program is growing every day, according to Kathryn Sullivan, foster family recruiter. Waterford Country School is in Quaker Hill, but its foster care program operates out of offices in Norwich. There are more than 90 licensed foster families for the therapeutic program, which services children who have suffered abuse or trauma. Right now, there are 70 children in the program. The organization completed a move in mid-March from a rented facility on Salem Turnpike to its own building on Clinic Drive, which it purchased last August and renovated.

The families stay, Sullivan said, because, unlike other foster programs, Waterford's offers extensive training and support to its families, with a caseworker visiting each child at least once a week. "We're only as good as our foster families," said Sullivan. "These children are emotionally and behaviorally challenged, so we offer ongoing training, support, crisis intervention and respite services. Most importantly, we try to find the best match for the child."

In Bissonnette's case, her family cares for the two most complex residents of the program, a brother and sister who are medically complex in addition to their therapeutic issues. The 5-year-old boy came to live with them first, Bissonnette said, and she's had his 4-year-old sister for about a year.

"I took him because he had no place to go," she said. "They usually won't put two children younger than 5 in the same house because of the needs, but I wanted to get them together."

The program services children age 3 to 18, but most children fall within the 8 to 18 age range, said Sullivan. And the staff has a lot of experience outside the office -- many are foster parents themselves. Sullivan, Director Chris Lacey and Assistant Director Dorothy Sieburg all have foster children, and they know the challenges.

"It takes a long time to make a good foster home," said Lacey.

Sieburg agreed. "These children have suffered multiple losses of caretakers, and often were abused by more than one person along the way," she said. "We offer thorough training to make sure the families see this type of foster care is different from regular parenting, to help them recognize the effects of being pulled out of their own family. It affects their moods and behavior."

As a former special education teacher, Bissonnette said she knew what she was in for, but her husband did not. "We started out four years ago by taking children for overnights so my family could get used to it," she said. "Once he knew what to expect from the children, we took them on full time." Her 12- and 5-year-old biological children enjoy the other children as well, she said.

"Waterford stands behind me every step of the way, from transports to the hospital to being in the house every week talking to the kids," she said. "Good or bad, the worker knows what we're going through."

Most of the children never go back to their biological families, remaining in some kind of foster care until they turn 18, Lacey said. Some are lucky enough to get adopted by a foster family. "That's a very happy outcome, and we've seen a few already this year," he said.

Bissonnette said she continues to foster because these children won't have anywhere to go otherwise. "Just because they don't come from me doesn't mean they don't come from my heart," she said. "I hope they'll be with my family for a long time."

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