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DeAnna Alonso, middle, confers with Central Missouri Foster Care and Adoption Association staff Amanda Towns, seated at left, and Sue Engelage.

Agency strives to connect foster kids, families

By Brittany Hilderbrand

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At any given time, there are 14,000 children in the Missouri foster care system in the Central Missouri area, said DeAnna Alonso, president of the Central Missouri Foster Care and Adoption Association. This is one population of children that is often forgotten.

"These aren't bad kids; some just may have bad behaviors," Alonso said. "Those behaviors can be altered through good mentorship and good programming."

Through their mission to educate, support, and advocate for foster and adoptive children, youth and families in Central Missouri, they offer services and partner with community and governmental agencies to develop healthy and self-sufficient individuals and families. In a reunification state like Missouri, Alonso said, their goal is to place children in homes with a relative or next-of-kin if at all possible.

"With the median age for foster care being 9 years old, we're trying to spread the word about to get people to consider if they had the help and support they needed

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would they take a child over 9," Alonso said. "They need families, just like the infants and the toddlers do."

The resources available to children and families through the organization equip them with the tools they need to be prepared for life circumstances whenever they arise. For example, they offer Begin Again backpacks to every child and infant referred to them, serving 150 children a year. They also provide in-service training free of charge to foster and adopting parents, which helps parents to navigate topics like how adoption occurs and older youth issues. For youth who are aging out, they offer a transitions program that provides mentorship and guidance through milestones like prom, class pictures, filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and graduation.

One way anyone can help the organization continue to serve Missouri's foster youth is to become a 12-for-12 donor, where you donate \$12 a month for a year. You can donate online at ccfosteradopt.com.

Q. What are the unique mission and programs of the Central Missouri Foster Care & Adoption Association?

A. "We have a multitude of programs that get to the heart of our mission. We serve the entire continuum of foster care from kinship relatives to stranger foster care to adoption. Through our mission, we are able to provide three of our most popular programs such as the Begin Again Backpack, Foster Parent training, and the Transitions program.

"The Begin Again Backpack program provides a backpack to every kid who is referred to us from a licensing agency. These backpacks are instrumental to the child's life because most of the time they have not had anything to call their own. It has everything that a child would need. The backpack supplies include a mix of hygiene products, beauty products and toys. Children under the age of 3 are given diaper bags filled with age-appropriate necessities.

"Foster parents and parents seeking to adopt are mandated to take training classes that prepare them for

their journey. Through fundraising efforts, we are able to provide these classes free of charge to the families. The classes focus on topics like brain mapping, attachment issues, the adoption process, the legalities involved in the adoption process and African-American hair care. Classes like this are designed to fill your tool belt with things you may need along the way.

"One of our signature programs is the transitions program which caters to seniors in high school who are aging out of the system. For youth who are aging out, the statistics are pretty grim; it's homelessness, incarceration, unplanned pregnancy, substance/alcohol abuse and even death. This program is about changing the trajectory of those kids' lives by offering mentors to them for two years. For the past eight years, we have had a 100 percent graduation rate with all the youth in our program."

Q. How does the Central Missouri Foster Care & Adoption Association use a donation?

A. "Donations are the life blood of the programming we do. We raise money for the respite programming and in-service programming, which provides enrichment, a healthy meal and training classes. All of the programs cost a minimal fee that we do not charge our families. We fund-raise around that in order to provide free training to parents who in turn will provide the best care to the kids in their home."

Q. What percentage of the organization's donations are used locally?

A. "One hundred percent of donations are used locally serving the 13 counties we provide services to."

Q. What is the greatest challenge facing the agency?

A. "The greatest challenge is not having enough homes. At any point in time, we have 14,000 kids in the Missouri foster care system in the Central Missouri Area. Our kids are being sent to group homes and residential treatment facilities while we work to find people who want these kids in their home."

Q. What is the agency's biggest fundraiser?

A. "Our biggest fundraiser is the Forget Me Not Gala held at Capitol Plaza. In November, we will celebrate our ninth annual gala. This year's theme is Bring The Joy Back. We're going to highlight, pop bubble gum and have fun. Often times, these kids have little joy, and we want to go back to childhood days bringing love, laughter and joy in the kids' lives."

Q. How much of a donation goes for general administration and fundraising expenses?

A. "Seventeen percent of a donation is used for administration costs, while 80 percent of that same donation goes to programs. Fundraising costs only take up 3 percent of a donation."

Q. Is a contribution tax deductible?

A. "Yes, donations are 100 percent tax deductible."



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DeAnna Alonso is the president of the Central Missouri Foster Care and Adoption Association.

Q. Can a donor see the agency's financial report?

A. "Yes, all information can be found at ccfosteradopt.com."

Q. Besides donations, how can someone get involved in the agency?

A. "You can be a mentor, an advocate, watch legislation, be a sponsor of the gala or our backpack program and start a collection drive. Another avenue if you have been considering caring or supporting for a child, reach out to us about our respite care program. You can provide care for a child for six to 12 hours or weekend and give a family a chance to go to a funeral or go on a weekend vacation. This can be hard work, so we want to make sure these families remain healthy."



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