

Needs of foster children soar

Number of Missouri foster children at historic high

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Children, foster parents and other attendees release 130 balloons into the sky Wednesday, each representing 100 children in Missouri's foster care system during the Central Missouri Foster Care and Adoption Association's "Light the Way" event at Thorpe Gordon Elementary School. The event was hosted by CMFCAA to raise awareness for the more than 13,000 children currently in Missouri's foster care service.

Photo by Kris Wilson /News Tribune.

Karen Ryals adopted the first child she received through the foster care system.

The Hartsburg woman's 15-year-old daughter, Malysa Ryals, entered their household when she was a one-year-old baby, and more than a year later, the adoption was finalized. Since then, Karen Ryals and her husband have continued to open their home to foster children — specifically those who are harder to place. They often come with behavior issues stemming from difficult backgrounds or they have developmental disabilities.

Preparing to become empty nesters when Malysa came to them, the Ryals decided they weren't done parenting. Karen said God put it in their hearts to foster children.

"It's the hardest job you'll ever love," she said.

Mother and daughter stood with dozens of others on the Thorpe Gordon Elementary School playground in Jefferson City on Wednesday night for the first Central Missouri Foster Care and Adoption Association (CMFCAA) "Light the Way" event, aimed to raise awareness about foster care children. May is foster care month.

In Missouri, more than 13,500 children are currently in the foster care system. That's the highest number the state has ever seen. Many are teenagers placed in residential care facilities because there aren't enough foster homes.

As the sun started to set Wednesday, foster care and adoptive parents, children and supporters of the organization released 130 glow-in-the-dark balloons, each representing 100 children in the system.

DeAnna Alonso, executive director of CMFCAA, said a way to decrease that number is increasing the amount of foster families. The group is partnering with the Missouri Children's Division, Alonso said, to strengthen relative kinship placement and recruitment for more foster care homes.

"It's important to bring attention to amount of children in foster care at this point — there's just far too many," she said. "Most of those children are (in the system) because of the lack of the amount of homes available."

Respite care can be an introduction to becoming foster parents without a long-term commitment, Alonso said. She described it as "dipping your toe" into the system. In respite care, certified adults take in children for a short period of time to watch over them for foster parents.

"It's short-term care, and it provides you a glimpse of foster children and the trauma they've experienced," Alonso said. "One way you can help the most is giving them an opportunity to play and to have fun, and give an opportunity for the foster parents to take a break, rejuvenate with their spouse, go to a funeral, do some laundry, whatever it is. Respite is a good way to start the process as whole."

She said substance abuse, poverty, abuse and neglect all contribute to the historic number of children in foster care.

Tim Decker, director of the Children's Division, said the state faces "daunting odds" as it tries to place children. A main factor driving the numbers, he said, is time of permanency — the length of time it takes to safely reunite a children with their families, arrange guardianship with a relative or friend, or finalize adoption.

"The time that it takes to do that has become longer and longer," Decker said.

The most important role foster parents can fill, he said, is giving children hope.

"The way that hope is provided — because it's not something that we can bottle up and give to a child or we can teach them in school — is to show them through love and relationships," Decker said. "It's something we can only show them by taking a personal interest in that child and what they're interested in. It's something we can only do by making personal sacrifices, by deciding there are certain things in our lives that aren't going to be as important as being a parent."