



Families First Ensures Safety of Foster Children; Saves Georgia Nearly \$2 Million in 2008

I. Child maltreatment and the foster care system

All children deserve to have a safe and stable family in which to grow and flourish. Unfortunately, not all families are capable of providing such an environment, which is why the child welfare system is necessary. The Georgia Association of Homes and Services for Children reports there are presently 13,100 children in Georgia's foster care system. In a 2006 report by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), there were 510,000 children living in the foster care system nationwide. Of those children 303,000 entered the system that year, and 289,000 exited the system. The average age for children in the foster care system is 9.8 years. 52% of the children were males and 48% were females. The average length of stay in foster care is 28.3 months.

The primary reason children enter into the foster care system is due to child maltreatment. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Families and Children "Child Welfare 2006" report, in Georgia there were 96,094 cases of child maltreatment. Of these cases, 41% or 39,802 cases were substantiated. This rate is substantially higher than the national rate of 29% for substantiated cases.

The "Child Welfare 2006" report delineates maltreatment into several categories: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, medically neglected, and other. In 2006, 64.1% of children in foster care entered the system due to neglect, 16% for physical abuse, 8.8% for sexual abuse, 6.6% for psychological maltreatment, 2.2% were medically neglected, and 15.1% incurred other types of maltreatment including: abandonment, threats to harm, and fetal drug addiction. *(Please note that the total percentage equals more than 100% because some children enter with more than one type of maltreatment designation.)*

Since most children in foster care have suffered some form of maltreatment, the goal of foster care is to prevent further maltreatment, and find a safe and permanent placement for the child. The "Child Welfare 2006" report also claims that children who were previously maltreated are 96% more likely to experience repeat maltreatment. Therefore, safe and permanent placement is a necessity for these children. Permanent placement may include: returning to birth family once the home is safe, living with a relative, and adoption. According to the AFCARS 2006 report, 53% of children who exited foster care were reunified with their family, 17% were adopted, and 11% went to live with other relatives. The other children were emancipated (9%), guardianship placement occurred (5%), they ran away (2%), or were transferred to another agency (2%).

II. Families First's foster care services deliver impressive results

Families First has long recognized the importance of the safety and stability of families and children. It is a core concept in our mission to “ensure the success of children in jeopardy by empowering families”. Foster care plays an integral role in achieving permanency for children. Whether placed with a relative or foster parent, the focus is always on the child – ensuring that the proper care and services to address maltreatment are provided until a safe and permanent placement can be achieved.

Until permanency becomes a reality for these children, Families First provides foster care services in both foster homes and group homes for youth who have been placed into the state's custody. In 2008, Families First supported 51 foster homes and 6 group homes throughout metro Atlanta. The agency provided a range of services to these foster children including: home visits, individual counseling sessions, family counseling sessions, facilitated birth parent contacts, group counseling sessions and other case management services. The demographics and outcomes for Families First's foster care services for 2007-2008 are as follows:

Demographics:

- Served 268 children and youth in foster care
- 51% female; 49% male
- 41% ages 0-5; 24% ages 6-11; 26% ages 12-17; 9% ages 18-25
- 54% of the children entered our program due to neglect; 22% due to physical abuse; 4% due to abandonment; 20% due to other/multiple reasons

Outcomes:

- 99% of children were protected from repeat neglect while in our care
- 99.7% of children were protected from repeat abuse while in our care
- 97% of children met or made significant progress on their service plan goals while in care
- The average length of stay in our foster care program was 176 days vs. the national average of approximately 840 days
- 85 children left the program in FY07-08. Of those, 81% (69 children) achieved permanency:
 - 21.1% children moved to adoptive status or were adopted
 - 56.4% children were reunified with their birth family
 - 3.5% were unified with another relative

III. Families First reduces foster care costs

Families First strives to provide cost effective, quality care and services to the children in our care. Families First's average length of stay for a foster child is 176 days compared to the national average of 840 days – a difference of over 1-1/2 years. With this reduction in length of stay for the children served by Families First, there is also a direct cost savings due to this reduced time in care.

Consider this – the average per diem rate paid in Georgia is \$40 a day, therefore, for the 69 children Families First moved to permanent placement in 2008, based on the average length of stay (176 days) with Families First compared to 840 days, our agency saved the state an average of \$26,560 per child.

This is a cost savings of \$1,832,460 for the 69 children Families First served in FY07-08. These savings were achieved without compromising outcomes (compared to state and national outcomes).

IV. Conclusion

There are currently over 13,000 foster children in Georgia. The majority of these children are in the foster care system due to child maltreatment. The affects of maltreatment are devastating; not only to the children who endure such abuse, but also the families and communities in which they live. Foster care plays a vital role in preventing further maltreatment until the child is placed in a safe and permanent home.

Families First knows the importance of permanency as it relates to the development and well-being of children. Our foster care program provides children within metro-Atlanta with placements that are safe and stable until permanency is achieved. Last year's results show that over 99% of the children supported by Families First were protected from repeat abuse and neglect. And for those children who left our program, over 80% achieved permanency.

Of course, there is a high cost to protect these vulnerable children on a local, state and federal level. However, Families First's experience and commitment to improving the lives of children in jeopardy enables our agency to deliver both quality and cost-effective services to foster children. The length of stay for a foster child served by Families First is dramatically less than the national average; a difference of 664 days! And by reducing the length of stay for children in foster care, costs are also significantly reduced. Given the number of children who moved to permanent placement last year, Families First saved Georgia almost \$2 million – proving that communities can protect their children from harm in a cost-effective manner, and at the same time, achieve positive outcomes with organizations like Families First.