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Campaign addresses need for foster families in upstate

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ALBANY — Northern Rivers Family of Services, a local foster care agency associated with Parsons Child & Family Center and Northeast Parent & Child Society, has launched a new campaign to educate adults and potential families who would like to care for children.

The campaign, titled “Give Hope a Home,” aims to address a need for foster families in 19 upstate counties, including Montgomery and Fulton.

Bill Marszalek, executive program director for Foster Care at Northern Rivers, said foster homes for children ages 1–21 are always needed.

“We do a lot of adoptions. When adoptions happen, those foster homes no longer take children anymore,” Marszalek said. “The more foster homes we have, the better we can match children. If I have 50 homes and I’m trying to place one child, the chance of me placing that child in a nicely matched home that’s perfect for them is much greater than if I only have two homes.”

Since becoming a full-time foster parent might initially seem daunting, Marszalek said other options are available.

“We’ve had parents who were full time for 20 years and then we’ve had other parents who don’t want to be full time like that because it is a lot of work,” Marszalek said. “But they can provide just weekend respite homes for children who could be in foster care or are requiring preventive services in the local counties.”

To become a foster parent in any capacity, someone must first complete 30 hours of training in order to be considered for certification. The training follows the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting method (MAPP).

“What MAPP does is give you a good understanding and overview of what it’s going to be like as a foster family,” Marszalek said. “It’s usually three hour classes once a week for 10 weeks. It’s a big commitment.”

Completing the training course is the first step, but it does not guarantee an individual will be certified. An in-depth home study and a comprehensive background check are also required to meet New York state guidelines.

Marszalek said it generally takes between two and three months for a family to become fully certified after contacting the organization.

According to Marszalek, Northern Rivers works closely with foster parents throughout the entire process.

“We talk a lot with parents about where they see their successes. The matching process between child and parent is probably the most important piece because it’s what can make or break a placement,” Marszalek said. “We want children to be successful. We try to do whatever we can to make it work and the best way we can do that is to make the right match.”

During the early stages of the process, Marszalek said his goal is to reunify families. In some cases it is possible that foster care is only temporary. In other cases, families are struggling with serious problems and are difficult to work with, he said.

Marszalek, who has been working in this field for nearly two decades, said the most important aspect of foster care is that a child feels a sense of permanency. Marszalek used his own children as an example.

“My kids know that when they come home this evening, I’m going to be there,” he said. “They know that somebody is going to get them off the bus. They know they’re going to get dinner and they know tomorrow morning they’re going to wake up and go to the same school they went to yesterday. Then they’re going to come home off the bus and I’m going to be there again.

“Foster kids lose that very quickly. When they lose that, they react. You see the aggression, poor school work and all of the behavioral stuff we hear so much about. Many kids have been through this multiple times where they think they’re going home and then they go to court and mom and dad didn’t do what they were supposed to do so now they’re not going home anymore. Many of these kids just don’t know when it’s going to end.”

Marszalek said that foster parents must be incredibly flexible since the children they are matched with are often students.

“They’re still adjusting to foster care and they might be having issues in school. They’re in a new school district and in a new home,” Marszalek said. “So foster parents need to be ready to get that call and be ready to support that kid through whatever is going on with them.”

Those interested in becoming a foster parent can call the Johnstown office of Northern Rivers Family of Services at 518-736-1780, or visit the office at 338 North Comrie Ave. Several other locations and additional information about the organization can be found at www.parsonscenter.org