Holston Home Searching For Foster Parents

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For employee Erin Shores, working at Holston Home is like being part of a family, and the organization wants to find placements for foster children to provide that same feeling.

May is National Foster Care Month. It serves as a fresh reminder for Shores of how much she appreciates what foster parents do and the importance of finding more people to share their lives with children in need.

In her position as foster parent recruiter and trainer at Holston United Methodist Home for Children, Shores is asked many questions about foster parenting and hears the many reservations people have about opening up their homes.

There is no typical foster parent, she said. "Some people think it requires some special skills to be a foster parent," she added. "But, you just need to be willing to open your home to these kids, loving them and working with them."

People are sometimes hesitant to explore the possibility of becoming foster parents because they have a preconceived idea that children in foster care are "bad kids."

"Our children are not bad kids," Shores said. "Some have come from a rough background or experienced trauma that sometimes leads to some bad behaviors."

In training, foster parents are taught how to not take a child's behavior personally because it is a result of the trauma they have experienced, she added.

Holston Home provides foster care for children in a large portion of East Tennessee. Its Greeneville office provides services for children in Greene, Cocke, Hawkins, Hamblen and Jefferson counties. The Johnson City office serves the rest of the counties in Northeast Tennessee, while the Knoxville office serves about 15 counties

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around Knox County.

One question Shores is often asked is whether a single person become a foster parent. The answer is yes, she said. Holston Home has foster parents that are single, married, have blended families or adult children.

There are some foster parents who are not able to have children of their own who are also interested in adoption. There is no cost to parents who adopt through the foster care avenue, Shores said. The process to become foster parents can also be used in the adoption process, and Holston Home also provides private adoption services.

Age ranges that foster parents would like to have in their home vary as well, Shores said. Some want elementary school age while others prefer teenagers. "Every family has its niche."

Holston Home's greatest needs are families who will accept teenagers, those willing to take sibling groups and those who can care for medically fragile children, Shores said.

In addition to needing full-time foster parents, there is also a need for respite foster parents, she said. These are parents willing to care for a child for short periods of time to allow the full-time foster parent to handle an emergency situation or take some time to care for themselves.

Once an individual or couple decides to become a foster parent, the process of preparing them for placement of a child in their home begins.

Prospective foster parents are required to attend a series of classes, with sessions lasting 10 to 12 weeks depending on the class, Shores said.

An orientation course provides an overview of the program and is a good session for people who are not sure about becoming foster parents but are interested in learning more, she said. Those unsure about becoming a foster parent are encouraged to participate in Holston Home's mentoring program.

Holston Home uses the PATH — Parents as Tender Healers — curriculum from the state Department of Children's Services in its training courses. The courses address a variety of topics, Shores said, including the foster care process involving the court system and the Department of Children Services, the effects of trauma on children, behaviors that can be expected from foster children and effective discipline techniques for children who have experienced trauma.

One of the most popular facets of the training classes is a panel discussion with current foster parents, foster children and professionals from the court system and the state.

"People want to hear from people who experience foster care day in and day out," Shores said.

An extensive background check is completed on individuals who want to be foster parents.

Holston Home conducts personal interviews to learn more about the prospective family. Sometimes questions are asked about topics that some people may consider to be personal matters.

"We are not being nosy," Shores said. "We are trying to make the best match as possible. Our goal is to provide the best home for our kids. And we want to make the best match for families who are making the sacrifice and opening their home to our children."

One of the concerns that people express about becoming foster parents is not having a say about what children come into the home, Shores said.

However, at Holston Home, that is the purpose of the lengthy process to get to know each family to determine which children would do well in their homes, she continued.

When a placement is proposed, foster parents are told about the children and asked if they want to accept them as foster children, Shores said.

"We don't want them to feel pressure," she said. "We emphasize to them that 'no' is an acceptable answer."

Another frequent concern of prospective parents is getting emotionally attached to foster children who are then returned to their biological families, Shores said.

Many times when foster children are returned to their biological families, the foster parents become like extended family members, she said. Foster parents have told of former foster children still calling them on Mother's Day or Christmas, she continued.

Foster parents are encouraged to build a relationship with the biological family when possible, Shores said. There have been instances in which, once children have returned to their biological family, the foster parents have become babysitters.

Holston Home provides around-the-clock support for foster parents. A counselor is assigned to each family and remains available to them anytime Monday through Friday, Shores said. Counselors rotate duty on the weekends, and families are provided a list so they know who to call if help is needed, she added.

Families with foster children receive a stipend to provide reimbursement for the cost of their care and most foster children receive Tenncare, she said.

A foster parent class begins Tuesday, May 29, at 6 p.m. at Holston Home. Those who interested in providing foster care are invited to attend.

For more information about the foster care program, contact Shores at 787-8786 or email erinshores@holstonhome.org.



PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE SUN

May is National Foster Care Month and Holston United Methodist Home for Children is seeking foster parents for children throughout East Tennessee.