

Florida's adoption program gets \$10 million

Florida leads the nation in finding permanent homes for abused and neglected children. This year, it's worth nearly \$10 million in federal aid.

By **CAROL MARBIN MILLER**

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Florida child-welfare administrators have received a big bundle of joy from the federal government: nearly \$10 million in aid for the state's adoption program -- which has become a national model after several years of poor performance.

For the second year in a row, the Department of Children & Families has led the nation -- by a wide margin -- in the number of children successfully adopted from foster care. For their efforts, DCF will receive a hefty bonus that can be used to boost next year's adoption program.

Each year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awards ``bonuses'' to state social service agencies that improve upon the prior year's performance in finding permanent homes for abused, neglected or abandoned children whose parents' rights have been terminated.

This year, 38 states and Puerto Rico shared a total of \$35 million in adoption-incentive bonuses - - with more than \$9.75 million, or close to 30 percent of the total -- going to DCF. The state with the second-best performance, Texas, was awarded half of Florida's total, nearly \$5 million in bonus money.

COMMON MYTHS

DCF Secretary George Sheldon credits a statewide campaign spearheaded by Gov. Charlie Crist and Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, called Explore Adoption, that sought to debunk many of the common myths about adopting from state care.

Families that adopt foster children, for example, can receive state college tuition waivers, health insurance under Medicaid, and a monthly stipend to help defray the costs of raising a child. Sheldon said many parents were afraid to adopt, fearing it would cost too much money.

At a recent adoption ceremony in Jacksonville -- which led the state with 500 finalized adoptions this year -- Sheldon said he asked a 17-year-old boy why he chose to be adopted when he was on the cusp of adulthood anyway. ``He said, `Now I have a place to go home to for Thanksgiving and Christmas,' '' Sheldon said.

`DON'T GIVE UP'

In recent months, DCF has focused on finding homes for the 100 children who have remained in state care the longest. Typically, such children are older, and might have a developmental disability or mental illness. ``Any child can be adopted as long as you don't give up," Sheldon said. ``There is no such thing as a child who is unadoptable."

For budget year 2009, 3,777 Florida foster children found permanent homes through adoption. Among them were 381 Miami-Dade children and another 231 from Broward, said DCF spokeswoman Carrie Hoepfner. The previous year, 3,674 foster children were adopted, including 320 from Miami-Dade and 228 from Broward.

In Miami, Fran Allegra, the head of Our Kids, the private foster-care agency under contract with DCF, was named a 2009 Angel in Adoption by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute for Our Kids' success in finding permanent homes for foster kids. Allegra, and 190 others, will accept the award at a Sept. 30 ceremony in Washington, D.C.

``Every child deserves a permanent and loving home," said Allegra, whose agency has found homes for 1,500 children since its inception in May 2005.

`JOY'

Sheldon said many people consider adoption as a way to help a vulnerable child or to give something back to their communities. What they don't understand, he said, is that adopting can be profoundly satisfying to the *parents*.

``It really does bring as much joy to the adoptive parents as it does to the child," Sheldon said.

And not just the parents.

Ana Rojas, 40, said her baby girl, Ashley Sophia, has brought her entire extended family closer together.

Rojas, of Miami Shores, adopted Ashley in October 2008. The infant's birth mother, a chronic drug abuser, lost custody of Ashley and three older sisters due to persistent neglect. Rojas picked the newborn up from the hospital, and the state encouraged her to adopt from the beginning.

``I wanted to have a family, to get married and have kids of my own," Rojas said.

``Unfortunately, that didn't work out for me."

When Rojas asked friends and family members for advice, they told her the best thing to do was adopt an abused or neglected child from the state. Rojas took classes and was trained to work with vulnerable kids. Ashley was the first child she fostered, and the infant was placed with her in hopes they would forge a permanent bond.

`AMAZING'

``My extended family made it so easy for me to make this happen," Rojas said. Her mother, who is fighting cancer, helps care for Ashley when Rojas is at work with a securities firm. Her brothers, grandmother and cousins all help out. ``It was amazing to me that they all accepted Ashley into the family with the blink of an eye.

``She was a Rojas. The minute I brought her home, she was a part of my family."

So much so, Rojas said, that her mother -- despite her ailing health -- insisted that Ashley spend her days with grandma while Rojas is at work.

``She has brought so much joy to everyone," Rojas said.

``She makes them feel younger. My mom wants to get herself better. She is doing everything possible because she wants to spend as much time as possible with Ashley in the future."