

Orange County's Foster Children **Need You**



INSIDE
Find out how you can
make a difference in
the life of a child



Our Community. Our Commitment.

County of Orange Social Services Agency

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A Special Advertising Supplement



FOSTER YOUTH NEED YOUR HELP

2,200 — Number of foster youth living in Orange County.

50-60% — Percentage that are able to reunite with birth parents. The rest need permanent homes.



Resource Families are Needed for:

Sibling sets	Children with medical/behavioral needs	Teens
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Resource Parent 101

What does 'Resource Parent' mean?

The new term for an individual, couple or family that is prepared to mentor, strengthen and support foster youth who cannot be cared for by birth parents.

Who can be a Resource Parent?

- A child's kin (grandparents, aunts/uncles)
- An adult with a connection to the child (coach, teacher or neighbor)
- An adult with no relation to the child

What does a Resource Parent do?

- Provide high-quality parenting
- Respect a child's culture and background
- Maintain a connection to biological family
- Mentor birth parents
- Maintain a lifelong commitment to the child
- Collaborate as part of a team of professionals working toward the best interests of the child

Orange County's Foster Children

Need You

by
Thea Marie
Rood

Let's make a commitment to Orange County's foster youth

What makes a child feel loved and safe? Simple things, really: someone to make their favorite food, tuck them in a warm bed at night, comfort them when they are feverish and get them to school on time. Someone who loves them every day, no matter what.

On any given day in Orange County, many children are in need of someone to give them a loving home. These are children from your community. They may even be children you already know, who attend local schools, and participate in Little League or Girl Scouts.

"People say, 'I'd like to meet a foster child,'" says Joanna Hussey, the Resource Family Liaison for Orange County Children and Family Services. "And they don't realize they likely already have."

Invisible as they might seem, there are more than 2,200 local babies, children and teens living away from birth parents who are unable to care for them.

Many people in our community have made a commitment to help these children by volunteering or donating to support foster youth. Others have become resource parents.

You may have heard the term "foster parent" in the past, but now under a new streamlined process, parents willing to open their hearts and homes to a child in need are called resource parents. Resource/foster parents may provide permanent care for the child if the child cannot return to birth parents. There are no extraordinary requirements to becoming a resource parent. "You need to live in Orange County and be at least 18," Hussey says. "And you need to want to take care of a

child." The rest — gender, income, marital status, sexual orientation, whether you rent or own — doesn't matter. "And there's no maximum age," she adds.

You also don't need to be an "expert" at anything — even if you accept a child with medical needs, behavioral issues, a set of siblings or a teenager. In fact, these are the populations that are hardest to place and most in need of welcoming homes.

The needs are great, and resource/foster parents are never alone on this journey. Resource parents receive at least 24 hours of training — 16 hours initially and 8-12 hours annually — with more training available if the child has special medical or behavioral needs.

Senior Social Worker Diemmy Tran remembers two brothers who had to be split up because of a lack of homes to take siblings.

"Every time I saw one of the boys, he would tell me, 'I want to be with my brother,'" she recalls.

Gradually, the child's behavior became worse — both at school and at home. "But finally we found a family who understood sibling relationships and took them both," she says. "He instantly got a whole lot better."

Being a resource parent can be challenging at times, but County of Orange Social Services Agency is committed to supporting and encouraging caregivers so they can give their best to the children.

Read on to find out ways you can make a commitment to foster children in Orange County.

**"PEOPLE
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Joanna Hussey
Resource Family Liaison,
County of Orange
Social Services Agency

Where There's a Need

Resource parents
specialize in
helping special
needs youth

by Anna Quinlan



Nancy Meek, far right, and her husband, Elton Welham, left, adopted daughter Evelyn, center. Nancy says she knows she's making a difference in the lives of foster youth and often keeps in touch with them after they reunite with parents.
PHOTO BY AMANDA MILDEBRANDT

It was a friend in need who first made Nancy Meek think about becoming a resource parent. Her neighbor, a single father, found himself in a situation where he might not have been able to care for his 1-year-old daughter. That's when Nancy sprang into action.

"His relatives all lived in Chicago," she says. "He was really in a tough spot. But we'd become friends and I had always thought that I could be a foster parent one day, so that's how it all started."

The "it" Nancy is speaking about is being a resource parent with County of Orange Social Services Agency. Over the past 14 years, Nancy has cared for 15 children and counting! Ultimately, Nancy's neighbor was able to turn his situation around and avoid having his daughter placed in foster care, and Nancy proceeded to take the necessary steps to become an approved resource family home. She found herself especially drawn to caring for children with special medical needs.

"At first I didn't think I could do things like that," Nancy says. "I thought that since I didn't have a nursing background that I wouldn't be able to handle it, but all of the social workers have been awesome, especially the special medical team."

Nancy has found support and guidance from many social workers on this journey, but also from biological parents and family members.

Nancy shares that it is hard to say goodbye to children when it comes time for them to reunify with their biological parents. "I get so depressed when they leave my home," she says, "but staying in touch with them really helps. I'm making a difference in their lives, and continuing the relationship even after they're not in my home anymore allows me to see that."

Nancy is especially close with the family of the very first foster child she cared for in her home. She recalls asking the assigned social worker if she could cut the toddler's hair, since she didn't know how to maintain his

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Nancy Meek
*Resource parent to children
with special medical needs*

cornrows. Shortly after, Nancy received a collect call — it was the boy's mother asking her to keep his hair long.

"We still joke about that today,"

Nancy says of her relationship with the mother of the boy, who's 15 now. "Here's two people, so opposite in a lot of ways, but now we're friends."

Nancy understands it is in the best interest of the child to work with the biological parents, but she has learned firsthand that not all children can return to their biological parents. In one situation where a child in her care could not be returned to the biological parents, Nancy made the lifelong commitment of adoption. Today, her daughter Evelyn is a happy member of the family. Nancy shares that her family is continuing to grow as she is in the process of adopting an 8-year-old boy and a 15-month-old boy, both with Down Syndrome.

"All these little guys have no control over their situation," says Nancy, "and like everyone else they just want to be safe and loved."

SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Children with a wide range of medical conditions need our support to heal. Loving people are needed to make a commitment to these children and their special needs. It may seem like a lot of responsibility, but you will never be alone.

Agency staff is dedicated to ensuring your success as a medical resource parent. All you need to do is take that first step.

Care

Reasons children may need special medical care include:

- diabetes
- muscular dystrophy, spina bifida, cancer
- drug exposure as an infant
- physical abuse
- diagnoses that require special medical equipment (injections, oxygen, etc.)

Support

Medical foster homes receive:

- child-specific training
- funding for child's needs
- medical insurance for child
- medical appointment support

Partnership

Your professional partners include:

- medically trained social workers
- public health nurses
- physicians
- therapy specialists



Gabriel and Mayra Reyes have had five foster girls live with them. Mayra Reyes, who has two biological daughters pictured here, says she enjoys giving teenage foster kids a great foundation for adulthood.

PHOTO BY AMANDA MILDEBRANDT

A Stepping Stone

Resource family gives teen foster girls a safe spot to land

by Anna Quinlan

Eight years ago, when Gabriel and Mayra Reyes decided to open their home and become a resource family for foster youth, they weren't exactly sure what to expect. Mayra had been told that she would be great at it, but she was hesitant at first.

"I was worried that it would open our family to a lot of risk," says Mayra, who has two biological daughters, ages 11 and 4. "But it's been great for us. [My daughters] understand that we're helping others and they receive the girls with open arms."

To date, the Reyeses have welcomed five foster girls into their home, all teens who have been classified as having emotional disturbance or delinquency. The teens are usually with the Reyes' for one to two years and then are reunified with a parent or relative.

Mayra shares the story of one particular youth who came to her home at the age of 17. Caring for this child taught Mayra that a lot of her role as a resource parent is about helping youth prepare to be a successful adult.

"I'm like a stepping stone for the youth," says Mayra. "My job is to shape behaviors that have been getting in the way."

Knowing that she would be the last stepping stone for this particular girl before she lived on her own, Mayra focused on essential life skills as much as possible.

"She had been in foster homes since she was 9 years old and there were gaps where she hadn't been taught simple things," Mayra says. "I taught her how to do laundry and tried to squeeze in as much money management as possible."

County of Orange Social Services Agency also provided a dedicated social worker that supported the Reyeses and facilitated additional life skills classes for their foster daughter.

"She was eager," Mayra says. "She was really positive and she knew she didn't want to end up in the same situation as mother."

County of Orange Social Services Agency also provides weekly support group meetings for Mayra and other resource families. "We talk a lot about how to deal with stress," says

Mayra of the meetings, which are lead by the program supervisor. "We share specific struggles and discuss how we can handle them better."

After the Reyeses' foster daughter left their home, she went on to attend junior college and secure a job.

"She was really determined to make the best of her situation," Mayra says, "and I just wanted to help her do that."

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Mayra Reyes
Resource parent



Open Your Heart
to the idea of helping
a foster child

Attend Orientation

call (888) 871-KIDS (5437),
or e-mail oc4kids@ssa.ocgov.com
to register

Receive Training
on understanding
childhood trauma

Complete
Resource Family
Application

Complete Approval
Process (background/
home checks, family
study)

Welcome a child or children to
your home

Provide Love and Support

The More You Know

FAQ for Prospective Resource Parents

by Thea Marie Rood



We asked three County of Orange Social Services Agency social workers – Diemmy Tran, who specializes in recruiting; Arlene Erickson, who focuses on placement approval; and Diane Smyth, who coordinates placements for teens – to answer some of the most common questions resource parents have:

What am I required to do?

You must complete an application, fingerprinting, a physical, training and a TB screening. Your home will be assessed to make sure it's safe and there is a place for the child to sleep. In the past you may have heard the terms “foster” or “adoptive” parent, but under a new streamlined process, the County will approve you to be a “resource parent,” someone who can offer children permanence and love throughout their journey.

“Research shows if a child has a meaningful connection with just one adult, that child’s trajectory really changes,” says Tran.

How much will this cost?

Resource families receive monthly stipends to help with the care and raising of their foster children. There may be some minimal costs during the approval process, such as a co-pay for your medical screening or installing a smoke detector, says Tran.

Equipment – like strollers or cribs – may be donated. Scholarships for swim teams or ball clubs are common, says Tran. But like all parents, you will undoubtedly incur some expenses in raising a child.

Can I take a set of siblings?

There is clearly a huge benefit to keeping siblings together. In some situations, depending on age and gender, siblings cannot always share a room. However, the County makes every effort to keep siblings together and work with families willing to provide care. “Most people’s hearts are totally there,” says Tran, “but it’s often an issue of space.” So if you have multiple bedrooms and are willing, you are greatly needed to help keep siblings together.

What about children with medical needs, behavioral problems or on the autism spectrum?

These populations are growing – particularly children with autism spectrum diagnoses. Some resource parents are worried they are not qualified to provide care to special needs children. Erickson says you will be prepared to care for a child, with training specific to his or her needs. You will have support from social workers, therapists, physicians and other resource caregivers to help you with the children in your home.

Can I really make a difference for a teenager?

Teens are the most challenging to successfully place, in part because they’ve been abandoned by everyone and are unwilling to trust again. In fact, Smyth says many teens prefer to go to a group home so “their emotions won’t be tested.” But these youth are often more aware of their circumstances and appreciate the opportunity to be with a family: “They’re old enough to know what they’ve lost, to understand what you’re doing for them,” says Tran. “We’re really asking for a lifelong relationship.”

“IF A CHILD HAS A MEANINGFUL CONNECTION WITH JUST ONE ADULT, THAT CHILD’S TRAJECTORY REALLY CHANGES.”

Diemmy Tran
County of Orange Social Services Agency
social worker



Our Community. Our Commitment.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS **YOU** CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN
THE LIVES OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN ORANGE COUNTY.

A D O P T

Make a lifelong commitment to a child.

F O S T E R

Provide love and support to a child in need.

M E N T O R

Spend a few hours and change a
child's life forever.

S P O N S O R

Help a child achieve their dreams.

V O L U N T E E R

Give of your time to children in foster care.

D O N A T E

Gift your resources in supporting
children in foster care.

E D U C A T E

Help raise awareness about the needs of
Orange County's foster youth.



MAKE A COMMITMENT TODAY!

Call **1-888-871-KIDS (5437)**

Email **oc4kids@ssa.ocgov.com**
with how you want to help.

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information.

