



FOSTERING

Linking Families Together for

ILLINOIS

Children's Futures

Top-Scoring Foster Care Implementation Plans Win Awards

Director Jess McDonald awarded certificates to the five foster care agencies that wrote the top-scoring Foster Parent Law implementation plans for 2000. According to the Foster Parent Law, every agency that contracts with DCFS and the DCFS regional offices that provide foster care services must complete an implementation plan. The plan outlines how the agency will provide services to uphold the rights of foster parents and support foster families as they meet their responsibilities under the law.

Winners for 2000 were:

Ada S. McKinley Community Services
ChildServ
Little City Foundation
Lutheran Child and Family Services
YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago



Angela and Forrest McHerron join Meg O'Rourke of Little City Foundation in accepting the Implementation Plan Award from DCFS Director Jess McDonald.

Foster care staff, management and foster parents were in Springfield to accept their awards for serving foster parents and the children in their care.

"If child welfare staff will work *with* foster parents, it will be a success, not a challenge," said Brenda Bland, a foster parent with YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago.

The YMCA is a repeat winner. A standout of their plan was the degree of involvement of foster parents. The organization placed two foster parents on its Board of Director's Child Welfare Committee to ensure that foster parents had a voice at a decision making level. ChildServ also made a second appearance in the winners' circle. The staff and foster parents worked on the plan as a team in meetings and through a phone survey.



Foster parents Joyce Reed and Brenda Bland with YMCA program Director Leon Intrader accept their second-time award from DCFS Director McDonald and Statewide co-chairs Joyce Loy and Patricia Cooper.

The highest scoring plan was submitted by Ada S. McKinley Community Services. Their plan also emphasized foster parent involvement and included quarterly surveys to evaluate their services. Little City Foundation turned in a plan with substantial improvements over last year. As one new feature, the agency is developing a foster parent support group. To further involve foster parents, Lutheran Child and Family Services reviewed its plan quarterly with foster parents. Their plan also highlighted co-training foster parents and staff so that everyone would receive the same materials and understand the other's role.

Each year the implementation plans are submitted to the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council for review and scoring by council members. The scoring is based on the criteria outlined in the Foster Parent Law. The winning plans scored 92 or higher out of 98 possible points.

"These implementation plans show the Foster Parent Law can be a tool for improving performance," said Director McDonald.

More than 25 plans scored 90 or above for 2000 compared to only 5 in 1999. The incentive for developing a solid plan was increased by the opportunity to win a \$5,000 grant for foster parent training.



Mark Bouie, Director of Child Welfare, and Gene Svebakken, President and CEO of Lutheran Child and Family Services, receive recognition from DCFS Director Jess McDonald.



Director McDonald congratulates foster parents Althea Davis, Viviane Ngwa and Gladys Boyd of Ada S. McKinley Community Services on their highest scoring plan.



Director Jess McDonald awards ChildServ's Jean Xoubie, Director of Specialized Foster Care, Elizabeth Heneks, Vice President and James Jones, President and CEO, a plaque for a second-time, top-scoring plan. Jones is also a Statewide Council member.

DCFS Sets New Standards for Levels of Care

In February, the Department of Children and Family Services implemented a revised process for determining when a child qualifies for specialized/treatment foster care. Part of this process includes revised Level of Care (LOC) forms that are standardized across the state. This LOC assessment process will identify children who have special needs and determine when a child meets the criteria for specialized or treatment foster care. This in turn will effect the intensity of services provided by the agency, the expectations of the foster parents, and the board rate.

The revised LOC assessment is designed to objectively and consistently identify children in care who have medical/physical, mental health/behavioral, and/or developmental special needs. Over the years, children were designated as having 'special needs' under a process that was not standardized or consistent across the state. For the last five years, the Department, in conjunction with private agencies and foster parents, has been developing ways to ensure that children receive the supports that they need using fair and consistent procedures.

"Moving forward, DCFS will have one form and one process to ensure that children are getting the help they need," said Tom Finnegan, DCFS Operations Chief of Staff.

The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council worked with the Department on the revised Level of Care forms and process. The Council added input on both foster parent and foster child considerations. The new Level of Care Assessment Form (CFS 418) has been tested for accuracy and was implemented in February. The Department provided training to caseworkers on these new forms and procedures in January and February.

In order to have a case reviewed through the LOC process, the caseworker must gather specific documentation and submit it to the DCFS Level of Care Reviewer in the appropriate region. One of the required documents is the 'Caregiver Report'. The Caregiver Report must be completed during an in-person meeting between the foster parent and the caseworker. The purpose of the Caregiver Report is to create a venue for foster parents to provide information about the child's special needs. Once all of the documentation is completed, the information will be reviewed by a specially trained clinical coordinator at DCFS. DCFS nurses will assist with these reviews when a child has a medical/physical condition.

Children in specialized/treatment foster care will go through the LOC process at a



minimum of once a year. Children who have been determined by the LOC Reviewer as having chronic, severe medical/physical or developmental needs will not have to be reviewed every year.

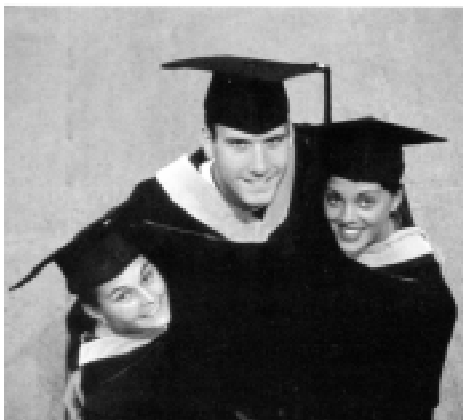
There are approximately 5,000 children in specialized/treatment foster care. These cases will be reviewed with the new LOC forms between February and June. Foster parents who are caring for a child in specialized/treatment foster care should have received a letter in January that discussed these reviews and the overall changes taking place in specialized/treatment foster care. The Department's goal is to ensure that every child is afforded the services that will help the child to thrive while they are in DCFS care and prepare them for future success.

College Planning and Financial Aid for Foster Children



The time to begin thinking about college is while the student is still in high school. Junior and seniors should arrange to take the ACT and/or SAT academic tests required for college admissions. Students should be researching and visiting schools, which includes traditional four-year institutions, community colleges or vocational schools. Through all this, parents are wondering how to pay for college. There are many resources available to help foster children with financial aid. When applying for federal and/or state financial aid, most foster children will find they are eligible for maximum state and federal grants, if they fill out the applications correctly.

Every student applying for financial aid must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). All need-based assistance requires this form. Students should complete it as soon as possible after January 1 of the year they plan to attend college. The



FAFSA determines the student's need for financial aid. For youth in foster care or guardianship, the most important questions on the FAFSA are those pertaining to dependency. Students who are wards of the court are considered independent of their birth families. Thus, their parent's income (birth parents' or foster parents' income) will not be factored into the financial aid formula that determines the family's expected contribution. Only the student's assets and income count in determining financial aid need, if considered independent.

The dependency questions may change a bit from year to year, but the most important one to foster children will generally read: "Are you an orphan or ward of the court or were you a ward of the court until age 18?" All youth in foster care should answer YES. Youth in guardianship after being in foster care should answer YES. Students who were adopted before 18 must answer NO. Adoptive families can request to include special circumstances, such as extra-ordinary medical expenses, through the college financial aid officer.

After students send in the FAFSA, they will receive the Student Aid Report (SAR). This form recaps the answers on the application to check for accuracy and make corrections

if needed. It also lists the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) that indicates how much of the cost the family and student are expected to shoulder. The lower the EFC amount, the higher amount of financial aid that can be offered.

The student's selected schools will also receive the student aid report. Then financial aid offices will send the student an award letter that lists the type and amount of financial aid it can offer. This could be a combination of grants, loans, work-study programs or school scholarships. Students must notify the financial aid office of any private scholarships they receive and schools are required to make adjustments. As a final step, students return a copy of the financial aid award letter accepting or declining each item. Then it's time to head off to school and focus on the academics rather than the financials — until the next year.

As students plan for life after high school, there are several programs for foster children that can help.

DCFS Youth in College Program

For DCFS youth who are attending college, the Youth in College Program provides a monthly stipend (currently \$444.85) and the state medical card. The YCP does not include tuition and fee waivers. So students must apply for financial aid through federal and state programs. The student's caseworker can help with the application process and with eligibility requirements that include: acceptance by a college and attending the Life Skills Training Program. Youth in College participants must carry at least 12 credit hours and maintain a passing grade point average.

DCFS Scholarship Program

The DCFS Scholarship is a two-part award that includes up to four consecutive years of tuition and academic fee waivers along with a \$444.85 monthly stipend to meet additional expenses. The scholarship winners will also continue to receive a medical card. All wards of the state and former wards who have been adopted or are in guardianship are eligible for the DCFS scholarship.

Interested youth should request an application from their caseworker. Applications were available in February. To apply, students must include academic test scores, high school transcript, three recommendations and a case history. A selection committee of high-level child welfare experts appointed by Director McDonald evaluates the applications and selects the winners.

Last year the Department awarded 48 DCFS scholarships. Students are expected to maintain at least a "C" average while carrying a minimum of 12 credit hours each semester. For more information on the DCFS Scholarships, contact the Statewide Scholarship Coordinator in Springfield at 217/524-2030.

DCFS Youth in Employment Program

College may not be the answer for every young person. For those who choose to work after completing high school, DCFS has the Youth in Employment Program (YEP). Through YEP, DCFS youth 17 and older with the goal of independence can receive a monthly stipend (currently \$252) and a medical card. The youth must be employed at least 20 hours per week or six hours if in a part-time college or vocational program. For more information, contact the Division of Education and Transition Services in Peoria at 309/671-4725.

Foster Parent Association Scholarships

The Illinois Foster Parent Association (IFPA) offers scholarships starting at \$500 to the foster and adopted children of its members. Questions about the IFPA scholarship program should be directed to Sarah Baker at 217/762-4471. The National Foster Parent Association offers scholarships for foster, adopted or birth children of members. The application is available on the website at www.nfpainc.org or by calling 800/557-5238.

Adoptive Family Today

Adoptive Families Today (AFT), which serves families in Lake, Cook, Kane, McHenry and DuPage counties will have a number of scholarships available to graduating high school seniors in those areas. For an application call the AFT office at 847/382-0858 or visit the web site at adoptivefamielstoday.org.



Financial Aid Resources:

Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC)

The ISAC web site at www.isac-online.org can assist with the search for scholarships by matching your Student Profile Form with private scholarships and other sources of financial aid. You can also order the brochures *A World of Opportunity, What Could Be Yours and Choices*.

U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Department of Education publishes the booklets *Financial Aid - The Student Guide* and *Funding Your Education*. They explain the Financial Aid Form, aid programs and financial aid terminology. The booklets are available through high school counselors and college financial aid offices. They are also available on-line at www.ed.gov/studentaid. This web site offers an on-line version of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSF) and has questions and answers about the financial aid form.

Tax Help for Foster and Adoptive Parents



Tax season is upon us again. Collect your W-2's and 1099's, track down information on your charitable contributions during 2000 and make sure that you apply for all the state and federal tax credits that you and your family may be eligible for.

To help you secure all the federal and state tax benefits for which you may be eligible, the Center for Law & Human Services mailed out its *Tax Booklet for Foster and Adoptive Families* earlier this year. With support from DCFS, this timely and informative booklet lays out, in a simple and accessible format, all you need to know to prepare your taxes.

The booklet answers a wide range of questions that you as a foster or adoptive parent or legal guardian need to know at tax time. Answers are provided to questions such as:

Tell it Like it Is

Fostering Illinois wants to hear the "real deal" on fostering from those who know best - you! Occasionally, I will ask readers to respond to a question about the fostering experience. Then I will share some of your answers in an upcoming issue so that we can all benefit from your experience.

The question is: What is the nosiest question an outsider has asked about your family structure and how did you respond?

You can contact me by e-mail at foster@chicagonet.net or by phone at 773/548-3888. I am looking forward to hearing from you.
Vanessa James, Editor

- Can I be taxed on the money I receive to care for my foster or adoptive children?
- May I claim the Earned Income Tax Credit for my foster or adopted children?
- If I spent more than my child's board payment on my child can I claim a charitable deduction?
- Since I became my child's legal guardian are the tax rules different for me?

The booklet also provides information on where low- and moderate-income families can obtain free tax counseling and tax preparation assistance through the Tax Counseling Project. With 21 community sites throughout Illinois, the Project serves 10,000 families each year with timely tax assistance and tax preparation services. More information on the Project can be obtained by calling 888/827-8511 or in Chicago 312/341-0106.



As you get ready to file your tax returns or seek professional assistance, you're encouraged to keep accurate records and receipts for all expenditures you make for your foster children during the year. Depending on your income and tax situation, you may be able to deduct all or a portion of these expenditures. Remember to carefully consult the *Tax Booklet* and seek professional advice and support if you feel you need assistance.

Advocacy Office for Children and Families

HOT TOPIC: Placement Issues

Q: I completed training and have had my license for months, but I haven't had any children placed with me yet. Why not?

A: Your caseworker uses a "matching tool" to establish the best fit between the child and the potential foster home. This process is in place not only to serve the best interests of the child, but also for the benefit of the foster parents. It protects the foster home from placements that aren't right for them and increases the chances for a positive, successful placement. A child will be placed with you when the right match between your family's strengths and a child's needs are found.

Q: Do I have to take a child that my caseworker wants to place in my home?

A: No, you are not required to take a child. Your caseworker may encourage you to accept a placement under some circumstances when it is in the best interest of the child, such as to keep a sibling group together or as an emergency placement. However, you always have the right to refuse the placement.

Q: What about siblings? Do they get placed with me too?

A: It is the policy of the Department to place siblings together unless it is in the best interest of one or more of the children to be placed apart or to remain apart from his or her siblings. At the time the Department is awarded custody of one or more siblings, a diligent search to locate a joint placement for the siblings is conducted. Your home would be considered for possible placement of additional siblings.

Q: How many children can I have placed in my home at once?

A: The number of children that can be placed in your home is determined by your licensed capacity. Many factors are considered in determining the capacity of a foster home such as space, the age and number of children residing in the home. The number of children permitted in a foster family home shall not exceed six children who do not require specialized care. The number of children permitted in the home will be reduced when there are children that have special needs.



The Advocacy Office for Children and Families assists foster parents, birth parents, guardians, workers and community members in obtaining needed services for children, as well as understanding DCFS rules, policies and procedures. Call the Advocacy Office toll-free at 800-232-3798.

Fostering Illinois would appreciate your input on other "hot topics" to explore with the Advocacy Office for Children and Families. Please direct suggestions or questions to Vanessa James by e-mail at foster@chicagonet.net or by phone at 773-548-3888.

Voice Your Opinion on DCFS Policy

Foster parents and other interested parties can review and comment on proposed DCFS policies before they are enacted. By law, new policies have to allow for a 45-day review period for public comment. You can use that opportunity to review and weigh in on proposed changes.

The DCFS Office of Child and Family Policy (OCFP) is responsible for establishing rules, procedures, policy guides and other policy documents. This group takes the proposed measure and handles the process for establishing it as a rule. The first step after internal DCFS review and revisions, is to publish a "first notice" on the proposed rulemaking in the Illinois Register. This administrative step announces the rule and begins the 45-day public review period. After public comments are gathered and incorporated accordingly, the "second notice" is sent to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR). This body will make the final decision on the proposed change.

Anyone can view a list of the rules sent out for first and second notices on the DCFS web site at www.state.il.us/dcfs. There you can read the proposed change and send comments electronically or by mail. If you don't have computer access, you can call OCFP at 217-524-1983 for an update on new policies. Written comments made within the 45-day comment period may be sent to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Office of Child and Family Policy, 406 East Monroe Street, #65, Springfield, Illinois 62701.

For more information about departmental rules, contact the DCFS Office of Child and Family Policy at cfpolicy@idcfs.state.il.us or by phone at 217-524-1983.

Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council Bulletin

The Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council works with DCFS to ensure Department policies reflect the interests of foster children and their foster parents. Following is a recap of some of the priority issues the Council is addressing on behalf of the state's foster parents.

Discussions with Director McDonald

DCFS Director Jess McDonald works closely with the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council. At his invitation for open discussion, council members and other participants had the opportunity to address a wide range of issues. The Director shared the foster parents' concerns about staff turnover and training. He discussed the Department's plans to provide a base level of training to all new workers. He also emphasized the need for staff and foster parents to work together as a team. He has established a team building task force to develop ways to improve the relationship between DCFS and foster families.

Babysitting Policy

Statewide is providing input to a new policy that is being written to address babysitting by DCFS wards. Currently there is no criteria for wards babysitting children outside of the home or other children in the home. The Council wants to ensure that the rights and safety of all children are considered if wards are in a position to oversee other children. The Council is also working to make sure that any new policy considers the needs of the family for whom the ward could be babysitting.



Product Safety

Foster parents received a letter from the Department requesting that families check items in their home against the product safety recall list. Because this list is so exhaustive and changes frequently, the Council is examining a more efficient way to comply with the rule and keep young children in care safe. Foster parents should continue to work with the caseworkers to address safety concerns as Statewide explores possible updates to this policy.

If you have questions about the activities of the Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council, please contact Joyce Loy, Chairman, at 309-523-3189.

Building Better Foster Parent and Caseworker Teams

Good working relationships between foster parents and child welfare staff are essential for ensuring that foster children get the best care. To help in building and maintaining those positive relationships, DCFS Director Jess McDonald has established a special Task Force on Foster Parent/Worker Teamwork, which has been meeting monthly since August. The Task Force, co-chaired by Jerry Welenc, an experienced foster parent, and DCFS Deputy Director of Operations Jerry Slomka, includes two senior foster parents from each region, the six Regional Administrators, Jane Elmore, Wade Parker, Jeff Buhrmann and Bob Mindell.

At the Task Force kick-off meeting, Director McDonald articulated the group's mission and his commitment to implementing the Foster Parent Law in letter and in spirit.

"We need to make sure that foster parents are included in planning and decision-making for the children in their care and that they are treated with the respect and consideration they deserve, as colleagues and as the core resources for children in our system," stated Director McDonald.

The Task Force has held focus groups to identify issues and created work groups in each region to begin to address any concerns. Each region is

designing its own set of initiatives to build better collaboration. Some of these are:

- ✓ Scheduling evening ACRs so foster parents can attend.
- ✓ Producing an executive summary of the often lengthy regional foster parent law implementation plan to make it more accessible.
- ✓ Establishing joint training and cross training for foster parents and staff.
- ✓ Utilizing senior foster parents as mentors for new foster parents and new staff.
- ✓ Training all foster parents and new staff on the Foster Parent Bill of Rights at each office within six months of starting in the system.
- ✓ Exploring greater use of child and family teams in planning for children.
- ✓ Refining regional grievance processes for foster parents.
- ✓ Using Regional Quality Councils to address local foster parent issues and increasing foster parent involvement in the RQCs.
- ✓ Including foster parents more in DCFS regional meetings.



DCFS Director Jess McDonald talks with foster parents John and Deborah White at the Illinois Foster Parent Association Conference.

The Task Force is also collaborating with work groups from the Division of Training and from the Office of Best Practice to build a consistent focus on foster parent rights in Foundation Training for new workers and in Best Practice guidelines for all staff.

The foster parents and DCFS staff participating in the Task Force have expressed very positive feelings about the collaborative spirit within the working group. Co-chair Jerry Welenc stated, "We are determined to make this work. We know from experience that case managers and foster parents working together brings out the best in themselves and in the children they are taking care of."

My Wish For You



*Let sunshine warm your
every day and light the path
you walk*

*Let laughter be your
loudest voice and truthful be
your talk.*

*Let happiness sustain your
heart and compassion be its beat*

*Let music be the sounds you
hear and all you hear be sweet.*

*Let beauty fill your every
vision and honest be your eyes*

*Let fairness be your judgment
guide and your minds be strong
and wise.*

*Let worthiness assume your
soul and patience be your stand*

*Let loving ways adorn
yourself and tender be your hands.*

*All these things I wish for you
and the children that you bear*

*For qualities like these my
loves are often much too rare.*

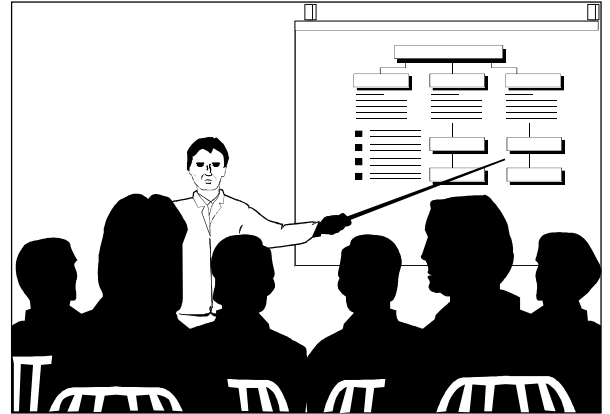
*I wish that I could make them
gifts but they must come from you*

*You have to work to give
them life in all you say and do.*

*By Jan Blaustone from
Every Family is Special*

“Basic Training” Requirement For New Child Welfare Social Workers

Foster families may soon come to expect that new workers will be prepared for the task of providing basic child welfare services before receiving their first case assignment. Director Jess McDonald has proposed a mandatory training program for all new child welfare caseworkers. The “Foundation Training Program” will provide basic training for all DCFS and private agency direct service investigators, caseworkers and foster care licensing representatives without previous Illinois child welfare experience.



The “Foundation Training Program” will provide basic training for all DCFS and private agency direct service investigators, caseworkers and foster care licensing representatives without previous Illinois child welfare experience.

“Now is the time to lay a foundation of common knowledge and skill for all new child welfare permanency, child protection and foster home licensing workers before they begin the awesome task of child welfare work,” said Director McDonald.

Timeframes for achieving permanency for children shortened with the passage of The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. Thus, child welfare work demands quicker responses to troubled families. The Foundation Training Program will prepare child welfare staff to intervene with families more efficiently, as well as learn how to negotiate systems and serve children and their families within these new timeframes.

The proposed Foundation Training Program consolidates and directs training resources toward offering 20 days of classroom and field preparation. The program will lay the groundwork for child welfare staff to provide Best Practices and community-based services to families that promote permanency and protect children by ensuring their safety and well being. Child welfare staff can build on this initial preparation with additional, ongoing training. The Foundation Training Program will start in the early part of 2001.

Fostering ILLINOIS

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Address Changes: Foster parents must notify their agency, who will notify DCFS. Agencies should change addresses of office locations or request staff copies through the Editor.

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Do You Know A Family For Me?

Shakyra and Gregory

These kids are anxious to please. Gregory enjoys playing in the school band, as well as playing with pets and riding his bike. He is ten years old. His sister Shakyra, eight years old, likes to ride her bike and play outside. She is good at expressing affection.

Gregory's foster parent described him as "a very loving child who wants to be helpful." Shakyra's worker said that she is "friendly and outgoing" and smiles easily.

Anthony and Iesha

These two kids share a love of video games, bike riding and watching television—especially together.

Anthony has a strong will and interacts well with other children. He is eleven years old and in the fourth grade. His sister Iesha is a determined young lady who likes to play with other children. She is nine years old and in the third grade.

Their foster parent said that Anthony and Iesha like to help each other and they depend on each other.

Skyler

The charming young man is an excellent basketball player! Skyler enjoys all sports and video games, too. He particularly likes spending time with adults, playing games, watching movies and dining out. He would like any pet except a snake!

He is thirteen years old and in the sixth grade. His teacher said that he is "friendly, cheerful, very helpful and a pleasure to be around." His caregivers said, "Skyler has a lot of potential. He interacts well with his peers, he is friendly to adults and he loves attention. He is very loving."

Jeremy

This young man loves to win! Jeremy enjoys playing baseball, basketball, swimming and playing video games. He is eager to go to college. Jeremy is thirteen years old. His foster parent said that "he would make any person a wonderful son."

Joshua

Joshua loves to help others and shows real enthusiasm about doing his chores! This energetic youngster is ten years old. He also likes to play video games, and his favorite food is pizza. His foster parent said that Joshua is "pleasant to be around."

If you are interested in adopting any of these children or learning about other children waiting to be adopted, please call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois at 800/572-2390 (within Illinois) or 800/TO-ADOPT (outside Illinois).

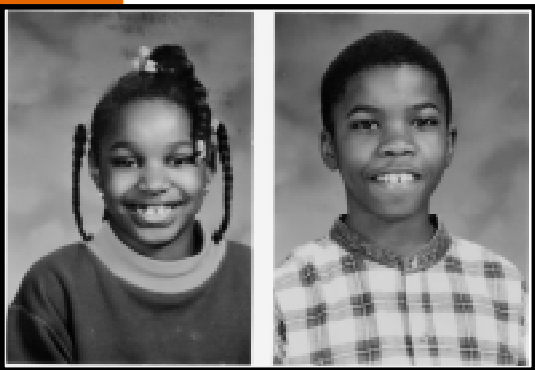
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DO YOU KNOW A FAMILY FOR ME?



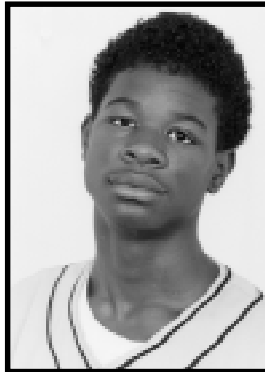
Gregory (C6639) and Shakyra (C6640)



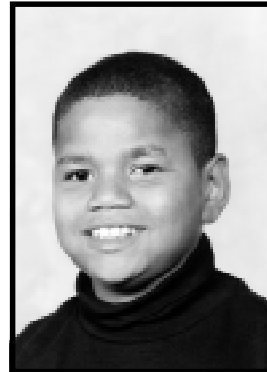
Iesha (C6638) and Anthony (C6637)



Skyler (C4843A)



Jeremy (C5937)



Joshua (C4904A)

Inside:

College Scholarship Information
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New Level of Care Plan to ID Special Needs
New Training for Social Service Workers

Call the Adoption Information Center of Illinois 800/572-2390.