

Indiana foster care system is in crisis

THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN INDIANA IS IN CRISIS.

Jessie Higgins (/staff/10051944/jessie-higgins), Courier & Press

<https://www.courierpress.com/story/news/2017/06/24/evansville-857-foster-kids-150-foster-homes/1028...> 2/14/2018

foster homes.

"We are in a crisis as a state right now," Schultz said. "We need foster families, and as soon as possible."

Evansville couples respond to the
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The Villages is a private foster care company that used to take kids that standard foster homes would not – kids with behavior problems, teenager or large groups of siblings.

"That has totally changed now," Schultz said. "Now, we take anyone. We have to. I got 50 referrals so far in June. Of those, I was able to place three."

The cause of the sudden crisis is no mystery, state officials say.

It's the opioid epidemic.

"For some places, it is prescription pills, some places it is heroin," said James Wide, a spokesman for DCS (<http://www.in.gov/dcs/2982.htm>). "The common thread is, these drugs comatose the users so they're not thinking about their children."

The foster home shortage became critical about three years ago as opioid abuse in Indiana reached epidemic levels.

The number of children with addicted parents entering foster care skyrocketed. At the same time, kids were remaining in care longer.

It can take parents with opiate addictions a long time to regain custody. They have to get clean first. Recovery takes time – and is often peppered with relapses, Wide said.

Judges hesitate to grant parents' custody until they show uninterrupted periods of sobriety, Wide said.

The result is an overcrowded foster care system that can further traumatize children.

"It's already traumatic for the kids if we're involved," Wide said. "We don't want to make it worse."

The state would prefer that children be placed close to home. That way they remain in their schools and around other community supports.

It's not always possible, Wide said.

"Right now, say, we'll get a kid from Evansville, and the next closest place is in rural Pike County," Wide said.



Ashley McReynolds and her husband Kyler McReynolds take care of their new foster baby at their home in Newburgh, Ind., on Friday, June 16, 2017. The couple received a call asking if they would be willing to care for the baby on June 1, the day before their ten year wedding anniversary, while they were on vacation in New York City.

(Photo: SAM OWENS / EVANSVILLE COURIER & PRESS, Sam Owens)

Because there are so few places, many kids are placed temporarily in a foster home, only to be quickly moved a few months – or even days – later.

“A family may have an opening for just a few days,” Schultz said. “So we put them there, then figure out what to do next.”

The frequent movement between homes can be traumatic for children.

“Kids need stability,” said Ashley McReynolds, a local foster parent.

McReynolds experienced this firsthand when she became a foster parent. Her foster daughter, Lily, moved between families several times before arriving at the McReynolds home.

It took a toll on the child, then 7.

Lily hid in closets whenever a DCS caseworker came to their house, afraid she would be taken away. And when the family moved a year ago, Lily was sure she would be left behind.

It was a difficult time for the new family.

“She’s been through more than she should have,” McReynolds said. She squeezed her hands together in her lap, and took a deep breath. “But, she’s ours now. She’s OK now.”

McReynolds and her husband adopted Lily about a year ago.

It was the best – and easiest – decision they’ve ever made, she said.

“She is the coolest kid,” McReynolds said, beaming. “She has a bucket list of things she wants to do that she made all herself. She really is a hoot.”

McReynolds and her husband recently signed up to foster another child, and were quickly given a newborn.

“I got a phone call on Thursday, while we were on vacation in New York City,” McReynolds said. “And they said, ‘Do you want a newborn?’”

She laughed. Sitting in her Newburgh living room one day last week, she was surrounded by baby clothes, toys and bottles.

“We picked him up on Saturday from the NICU,” she said.



Lily McReynolds (left), 9, kisses the new foster baby living in her home as her adopted mother holds him in Newburgh, Ind., on Friday, June 16, 2017. Lily has been living with the McReynolds for over three years.

(Photo: SAM OWENS / EVANSVILLE COURIER & PRESS, Sam Owens)



The newborn, who McReynolds lovingly refers to as Baby-T, has an uncertain future. His biological mother and father are both working to regain custody, visiting the child multiple times a week.

McReynolds would love to adopt the boy. But she also hopes his mother is able to get him back.

"To be a foster parent, you have to have a willingness to be flexible," McReynolds said. "You never know what is going to happen. It takes a lot of openness. You have to love them, and at the same time take care of yourself."

Fostering is one of the best thing she has ever done, she said.

Right now, the state needs more people like the McReynolds to foster children.

"We're burning the candle at both ends," Schultz said. "We have to deal with this crisis right now."

She paused a moment.

"We all see that things are still getting worse," Schultz said. "We need to be talking about these issues as a society. Because putting kids in foster care is just a Band-Aid. As a community, we need to work on the bigger issues that are causing this problem."

Ashley McReynolds rubs her adopted daughter Lily McReynold's back as her husband Kyler McReynolds holds their new foster baby at their home in Newburgh, Ind., on Friday, June 16, 2017. The couple received a call asking if they would be willing to care for the baby on June 1, the day before their ten year wedding anniversary, while they were on vacation in New York City.

(Photo: SAM OWENS / EVANSVILLE COURIER & PRESS, Sam Owens)



Lily McReynolds (left), 9, holds the new foster baby living at her home in Newburgh, Ind., on Friday, June 16, 2017. The two-week-old boy joined the family at the beginning of June.

(Photo: SAM OWENS / EVANSVILLE COURIER & PRESS, Sam Owens)

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