

Iowa's social workers see growing foster care caseloads

[Michaela Ramm](#), The Gazette

A three-year-old boy opens the back door to follow Krista Kronstein as she goes to bring in the family dog at the home of Kronstein and Emily Steeples, who were caring for four foster children in Cedar Rapids on Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017. (Liz Martin/The Gazette)

Chapter 1:

Trying their best

As a social worker and a foster parent, Emily Steeples sees foster care's shortcomings up close.

Steeple is a foster and adoptive family connections specialist for Four Oaks in Cedar Rapids, which provides support for families across most of the state. She and her spouse, Krista Kronstein, 36, also have been foster parents since 2015.

"I think (Iowa Department of Human Services workers) definitely are trying their best," Steeples said. "I don't think there's anybody out there, and I haven't had contact with anybody, who's not really trying to do what's best for kids."

But what Steeples and others interviewed for this series have said DHS child welfare system lacks a number of key things — enough foster parents to care for displaced children; enough social workers to support birth and

foster parents; and enough resources to bring foster care up to top capacity for those it surrounds.

Recent events have brought more scrutiny to DHS, as well as more public awareness to the strains it faces managing the child welfare system. In two separate cases, two teenage girls in central Iowa — Natalie Finn and Sabrina Ray, both 16 years old — died after being adopted by their foster parents.

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After these very public cases, Janee Harvey, DHS child welfare and community services bureau chief, said DHS conducted a systematic review of policies, procedures and practices from the very first call to department's child abuse hotline and all the way through the assessment of the alleged abuse.

DHS found that intake staff were seeking more information to open a case than what policy actually required, Harvey said.

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To address this, DHS conducted more training for intake staff — those who take calls of reported abuse — on burden of proof.

Harvey said DHS also changed its policy for supervisors at intake. Instead of reviewing all cases accepted into the child welfare system, these supervisors now are required to review all rejected cases “to make sure the policy, procedure and the employee manual is really being followed.” These internal changes, as well as the increase in reports following the deaths of the two Iowa teenagers, has resulted in more cases for DHS.

In 2016, DHS received more than 50,000 reports of alleged abuse on its abuse hotline, and social workers accepted about 52 percent of those cases. This year, the current rate of accepting cases is almost 65 percent, Harvey said.

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“When you’re looking at resources, I’m not going to lie, we’ve been extremely busy,” said Karen Johnson, DHS child abuse protective assessment worker. “Our caseloads right now are probably double what they were a year ago.”

Krista Kronstein comforts one of the foster children currently being cared for by Kronstein and her spouse, Emily Steeples, at their home in Cedar Rapids on Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017. (Liz Martin/The Gazette)

Chapter 2:

'You just get comfortable with being uncomfortable'

There are two classes of social workers that handle DHS child abuse cases. All abuse allegations are investigated by social worker 3s, who then make a determinations on the case, such as if a child should be removed from the home.

According to a legislative presentation from DHS in March 2017, there were 182 social worker 3s employed throughout the state.

Social workers 2s, on the other hand, oversee ongoing cases within DHS, including those children in foster care. There are 336 such workers in Iowa.

The average caseload for these social workers is based on state standards, noted Wendy Rickman, DHS division administrator for adult, children and family services. However, she added both social worker 3s and 2s are probably handling double the caseload recommended by the Child Welfare League of America.

A national organization made up of public and private agencies, the League, recommends 12 to 15 children per worker.

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DHS social worker 3s throughout Iowa

For DHS social workers, such as Steve Henderson, there are no typical days on the job. Most days, “you just get comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

“There’s times where workers are actually scared to go to homes,” said Henderson, an ongoing caseworker. “I know I have a certain home that I’m nervous every month I go out there, and I text my supervisor when I get there and when I leave there because I’ve had threats made, and I still have the requirement to see the family. Knowing what’s going on with someone, maybe not necessarily in that home, but in that person’s life, can make it scary.”

According to data from March of this year, DHS worked with 4,247 families with an ongoing case per month. In addition, the department worked with 1,818 Iowa youth per month, along with more than 2,200 foster families.

A basket full of children's shoes sits near the door of Krista Kronstein and Emily Steeples' home in Cedar Rapids on Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017. Steeples and Kronstein were caring for four foster children in October, and two of the children have since returned to their biological parent. (Liz Martin/The Gazette)

Chapter 3:

Turnover

Four Oaks’s Steeples said burnout in foster families can be caused by a variety of things. Perhaps they’ve had a series of placements with children with a lot of health or behavioral challenges. Maybe there was a disagreement with, or no support from, their social worker.

Case worker Henderson said DHS social workers also juggle frequent turnover among their ranks. While a revolving door of staff increases the workload for other social workers, it also can be a strain on the families they service, such as the Cooks.

Natalie and Tony Cook, fostered twin boys until the couple adopted them at the beginning of this year.

While their sons were in foster care, Natalie said the family went through three different DHS workers due to turnover, as well as a different Family Safety, Risk and Permanency Service worker — who would oversee birth parent visits — each week.

“So much turnover, so many people, that there wasn’t a constant person that they’d go with” on visits, Natalie said.

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DHS social worker 2s throughout the state

The Cooks’ third and final DHS case manager, Laura Palumbo, was a social worker who had been working in foster care 20 or so years.

“I know we probably wouldn’t have the boys right now if it weren’t for her,” Natalie said. “She was the No. 1 person in the system who gave me hope that there are people in the system who really care about these kids — it’s not just another caseload to them.”

Emily Steeples looks on as Krista Kronstein lifts one of their foster children out of his sister's bunk bed as they get ready for stories at their Cedar Rapids home on Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017. Steeples and Kronstein were caring for four foster children in October, and two of the children have since returned to their biological parent. (Liz Martin/The Gazette)

Chapter 4:

Making it work

Even with hurdles faced by social workers and foster families, some in Iowa — such as Four Oaks’s Steeples — still take on both roles.

Steeples had worked in child welfare in Ohio for several years, and she and her spouse Kronstein said many of their friends were foster parents or had adopted children through the system.

So when they moved back to Iowa in 2014, it was a quick decision to get the licensing themselves.

“We were able to see both the need, but also how good foster parents can be for children that are placed in their care,” Kronstein said.

The couple recently had been caring for four children, two sibling sets aged five and under.

“I have to admit because getting one preschooler to get their shoes on in the morning can sometimes be challenging,” Kronstein said. “Getting three preschoolers and a kindergartner to get their shoes on in the morning — and a dog that wants to be in the mix — it just sometimes gets a little chaotic, but still a lot of fun.”

“We make it work,” Steeples added.

As a piece of DHS’s goal to reunify children with parents, foster families are encouraged to communicate with birth families, forming relationships with them to better facilitate the transition for children and to keep birth families in the children’s’ lives.

While it doesn’t always work, Kronstein and Steeples say they have seen the positive results of this when these relationships are mutual. Of the four children the couple were taking care of, they had formed a good relationship with the birthparents of one set of siblings.

That relationship has continued, they said, after the siblings — a four-year-old girl and her three-year-old brother — returned to their birthparents at the end of October. The children, as well as Kronstein and Steeples’s current foster kids, still attend the same preschool and dance classes.

After most placements, Steeples said they typically don’t remain in contact with the birth family or the children they cared for.

“Building that bond and building that relationship has definitely paid off,” Kronstein said.

Since the two foster children left for home, Steeples said they have been finding little reminders of them around the house. A toy left behind, or an article of clothing. The house itself has been quieter with two fewer children.

“Of course, it’s hard because you grieve,” Steeples said. “You’re grieving because you had a routine, and every spot along the way in your day, you’re reminded of your empty nest essentially.”

But at the same time Kronstein and Steeples can’t help but cheer on those children and their families.

“It’s still worth it to get attached to them because when you build that attachment with the child, that only helps them to strengthen the other attachments in their life,” Steeples said. “If you can get a strong bond with a child in your home, they’re going to have a stronger bond with their parent and that’s going to help that relationship flourish.”

After Nicolas, an infant Breanne French had fostered for eight months, left her care in August 2015 and went back to his birth mother, she, too, felt loss. But said French did her best to root for Nicolas’s birth mother.

She was in recovery from drug addiction, and while DHS still was involved with Nicolas, the pair seemed to be doing well.

In October, Nicolas’ birth mother invited Breanne to his first birthday party. In photos Breanne keeps in a scrapbook, he looks happy. But months later, after his birth mother stopped all contact with Breanne, she started to worry again about Nicolas.

More about Nicolas and his story in next week’s Gazette.

Gazette reporter Molly Duffy contributed to this report.

Comments: (319) 368-8536; michaela.ramm@thegazette.com
