

Goal is to save both families and money

By Ruth Liao

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Two years ago, Launie Forbis and other teens in foster care were brainstorming ways that families in crisis could be helped.

Jim Seymour, executive director of Catholic Community Services, was listening.

That conversation hatched Fostering Hope, an initiative that has gained the leverage of \$1.4 million in grant funding. Fostering Hope intends to build neighborhood-based support systems for families. Its goal: reduce child maltreatment by 50 percent in the next 10 years, or by 2020.

Forbis grew up with abuse. While in foster care, she bounced from home to home.

"As foster kids, we're usually second-class, and not considered equal as adults," she said.

Now, Forbis is a freshman at Western Oregon University, pursuing a double major in English and history. She's thrilled to think that through an initiative such as Fostering Hope, other youth like her could get a chance.

"To see this could change for other kids, I'm all for it," she said.

On Thursday, about 130 community leaders attended a breakfast announcing the formal kick-off of Fostering Hope.

Oregon Supreme Court Justice Paul de Muniz has become the spokesman of Fostering Hope.

"As a society, we need to do everything we can to intervene in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens — our children," he said.

The effort is a collaboration among 25 agencies and organizations that serve youth and families, including nonprofits such as Catholic Community Services, the Salem-Keizer School District, churches and Oregon Department of Human Services.

Fostering Hope centers around a family's needs — such as providing counseling for youth and families, tutoring for students or housing services — but doesn't establish a new program. It's meant to intensify how that family receives help.

Seymour said it would be a dream of his for any service provider to answer a call for a family's

About Fostering Hope

Safe Families for Children is seeking host families to volunteer. The average length of a child's stay is about six weeks, but it can range from two days to a year.

For information, call (503) 540-2929 or e-mail SafeFamilies@ccswv.org.

need within three days.

"It isn't so much about program services, but it's a way of working together — taking what we have and doing more," Seymour said.

Fostering Hope has been launched in three pilot neighborhoods: Washington and Swegle Elementary school catchment areas and a neighborhood in McMinnville. The areas were selected based on high numbers of children on free or reduced lunches.

Its funding is targeted for a three-year pilot project, with hopes that the efforts can be replicated around the city and become sustainable.

Fostering Hope intends to prevent children and families from having to enter the child-welfare system by providing them with support in times of crisis.

The Oregon Legislature recently enacted a law establishing Safe Families, a volunteer network of families caring for children whose parents are in crisis without having to enter the state child-welfare system. Safe Families is part of the Family Hope project and currently is seeking volunteer families.

Seymour said the cost-savings of preventing children from going into state custody is significant — it would cost about \$6 a day for a child to be supported through Safe Families, and between \$25 and \$50 a day for a state to provide shelter.

Fostering Hope also emphasizes early childhood support.

The project earned a \$1.4 million grant from the Center for the Study of Social Policy as part of the Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood, which is funded by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Fostering Hope was one of four national recipients to receive the research and demonstration grant, which will go toward hiring Pacific Research and Evaluation of Portland to track outcomes.

Mid-Valley philanthropist Larry Tokarski donated \$120,000 to Fostering Hope.

Other funding included a \$200,000 grant from Meyer Memorial Trust that will go toward parent education support groups and outreach coordination.

The grants will pay for additional home visitors for the program Healthy Start, which serves first-time parents identified as high-risk — such as being a teen parent or living in poverty.

Another Fostering Hope partner, Exchange Clubs of Salem/Keizer, will provide trained volunteers as parent mentors.

Amy Grenz, a parent who went through losing custody of her kids and has since reunited with them, now serves on the Fostering Hope parents' council.

Grenz offered advice for other parents who may be struggling: "Don't be afraid to ask for help, and don't be afraid to give help."

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