

## Foster parenting rates don't reflect real expenses

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Bridget Foster has foster parenting in her blood, and her name for that matter.

It's a calling for the single mother from St. Louis, who has adopted two children from state custody and typically offers a home to two other foster children.

"I believe it's been my purpose in life to serve children," she said.

But what foster parenting is not, in Missouri, is a smart financial decision.

As hundreds of Missouri foster parents will attest, the amount the state pays monthly to compensate foster parents doesn't come close to covering true costs.

A national study commissioned by an advocacy group reinforces that claim, reporting widespread shortfalls in spending on foster children nationwide, while offering a dismal biting assessment of Missouri in particular.

According to the report, commissioned by the group Children's Rights, Missouri would need to increase monthly foster care support payments 120 percent to 131 percent to cover actual living costs.

Just two states — Ohio and Nebraska — fared worse in the report. Illinois ranked only marginally better, also falling within the 15 lowest states.

"I think the issue is that abused and neglected children are not really powerful in the state budget process," said Julie Farber, who helped prepare the study for Children's Rights. The University of Maryland School of Social Work and the National Foster Parent Association also collaborated on the project.

The report recommends monthly

payments ranging from \$629 a month to \$790 a month, depending on the age of the child. That's roughly a third less than the national average and more than double the payments in Missouri.

The report attempts to do something no other study has in the past — calculate the actual costs foster parents are likely to experience and compare them to state rates.

### FIGURING COSTS

In the past, if states have looked at cost of living at all, they have focused on estimates from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Those figures look at expenses common to all families.

In contrast, the new study looks at expenses particular to foster parents.

For example, it does not include mortgage payments, because it is presumed that a foster parent would already be paying for shelter. But it does consider costs needed to "normalize" a foster child's life, such as money for soccer uniforms, arts programs and other enrichment activities.

In Foster's case, that can mean hundreds of dollars a year to cover such items as prom dresses, back-to-school clothes, bus fare and school supplies for her high-school-age foster children. Currently, the state pays her about \$700 a month to care for the two girls, with an annual \$250 clothing allowance for each child.

"We're talking about teenage girls here," she said.

The report shows that those kinds of out-of-pocket expenses can hurt state efforts to recruit foster parents, but it offers no hard data to support that claim.

Foster said she is committed to continue taking in kids. But she said she wonders whether she'll have to cut back and only house one child at a time.

### IS IT ABOUT MONEY?

Celesta Hartgraves, of Missouri's Children's Division, said the state is aware of the sacrifices parents such as Foster make. But Hartgraves said she's not aware of the state's rate hurting recruitment.

"I've never heard a person say that the reason they chose not to be a foster parent is money," she said.

Hartgraves said comparing states' foster care payments is like comparing apples to oranges. She said that unlike some states, Missouri pays for some services separately, such as certain transportation costs and annual clothing allowances.

Missouri also has boosted its reimbursement rates this year by about \$50 a month.

Likewise, Illinois rates increased last year by about \$10, and state officials say they are working toward further increases.

"The department is committed to increasing these rates," said Kendall Marlowe, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Those who prepared the report warn that states may find themselves compelled to increase payments by the courts. Children's Rights has already won court battles in states such as Maryland, where a settlement increased payments.

In Missouri, meanwhile a ground-breaking federal court ruling in 2003 forced the state to increase payments to foster children, but only those living in group homes. Some say the new report could provide ammunition to win a similar court victory for children living with foster parents.

"I think states ought to be aware that children are not completely powerless when it comes to litigation," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights.

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