

Board's work boosts current, prospective foster parents

A Foster Parent Advisory Board established by the Department of Human Services (DHS) is supporting not only current foster parents but helping in DHS's work to encourage more adults to become foster parents for teens.

Under the facilitation of veteran foster parent Hank Lipinski, Director of Development/Supervisor of [Allegheny Family Network \(AFN\)](#), the 14-member board has been providing input to DHS about foster parenting and support to current and prospective foster parents.

Specifically, the board has been helping with DHS's [Foster Goodness](#) campaign to recruit new foster families, giving input to the marketing firm, Blender Inc. of Shadyside, about content, and it has assisted in a survey about foster care services distributed to all Allegheny County foster parents. The board has also sponsored foster care information and appreciation events and gave input to a foster care handbook that is under development.

Hank said it has been impressive watching how the Foster Parent Advisory Board has channeled decades of foster care experience to support the parents who are helping teens. Board members come from established foster care providers, including Three Rivers Adoption Council, Project STAR, Wesley Spectrum, Pressley Ridge, Auberle, Mon Yough Community Services and Every Child Inc.

Foster Parent Advisory Board member Bridgette Jodon is among those who leaped at the chance to help other foster parents. As a special education teacher and foster parent who also adopted two children, volunteering for the board offered "the perfect opportunity to serve and hopefully, make a positive change for not only the children but those who serve our children," she said. "Seeing a group of passionate people come together for the common good of children is inspiring."

Sara Bennett, another foster parent who is a board member, said she welcomes the voice the board gives to foster parents.

"We have been able to speak to decision makers about both recruitment and training for foster parents for adolescents, and regarding issues affecting foster families in broader contexts. The professionals we have been working with have been wonderful. I feel like I have a front row seat to watch our tax dollars working as they are supposed to to make a better situation for these children and families," Sara said.



The Department of Human Services marks Foster Care Month every year. Foster care provides the individual attention to behavioral and physical health needs that can help children and teens thrive.

DHS established AFN to support and partner with families raising children with emotional and mental health needs. AFN contracts with DHS and Community Care Behavioral Health to provide programming, serving about 350 families a month, including about 50 foster families.

The Foster Parent Advisory Board and the Foster Goodness campaign are both part of DHS's participation in a \$1.5 million federal Diligent Recruitment grant to increase capacity in the foster care system and to improve supports to children and families. As part of the grant, AFN also has provided two foster family support partners for families who are fostering adolescents. In the board's first year of operation, the support partners assisted 107 foster families. The partners have assisted families at court hearings; made referrals to therapists; assisted at school conferences and with applications for programs such as school lunches; and provided families with lists of services that are available for foster children.