



General questions

What is foster care?

Foster care is the temporary placement into public custody of children and teens up to 21 years of age. While in foster care, youth might live with a relative or close family friend who becomes licensed as a foster parent (kinship care); an unfamiliar foster family (family foster care); in a group home, or residential center.

Why are children and teens in foster care?

Youth enter foster care for a variety of reasons. Most commonly they come into foster care because they have experienced abuse or neglect in their home. Other youth are placed in foster care: while their parent handles a personal or family emergency, because parents are unable to safely manage a child or youth's health needs, or because a judge has ordered foster care placement due to truancy or a juvenile justice concern.

How does foster care work?

The county may only place a child or teen into foster care pursuant to an order of the Court of Common Pleas. Once a judge has entered a placement order, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) worker attempts to identify a relative who could provide kinship care, or contacts Allegheny County's network of family foster care providers to search for a foster family who can care for the youth. Most youth are ultimately reunified with their family of origin or other relatives, so out-of-home care is temporary. But in some cases, safe reunification is not possible and in those situations, adoption becomes the goal.

What is the need for foster care in Allegheny County?

At any one time, there are approximately 1,300 children and teens placed out-of-home in Allegheny County. About half of those youth are cared for by relatives who are licensed as foster parents (kinship foster parents). Foster families are always needed to care for any youth who cannot be placed with a kinship foster parent.

What's the difference between foster care and adoption?

Foster care is temporary and the family of origin retains parental rights. Adoption is permanent, and occurs after the family of origin has relinquished parental rights or parental rights have been terminated. Sometimes a child placed in foster care is not able to return to their birth family safely and the child may need an adoptive family.



For families

What's involved in being a foster parent?

Foster parents take care of the day-to-day needs of the child or teen in their care, including providing a nurturing home environment as well as food, clothing, transportation, etc. Foster parents are expected to welcome the child as full members of the family. Foster parents receive a stipend to pay for basic necessities.

What is meant by a “nurturing home environment?”

A nurturing home environment provides:

Nurturing care – Youth entering a stranger's home need to be welcomed as full members of the family. They need caregivers to go out of their way to learn about them, their interests, motivations and fears, and to work hard to integrate them into the family routine and structure.

Emotional and physical safety – Youth need to be safe, and they need to feel safe. They need foster parents to attend to actions small and large that increase their sense of physical and emotional safety.

Attention to day-to-day needs – Foster parents need to provide daily care in the same way they care for their own children, providing meals and clothes, transportation to activities and appointments, etc. in a way that does not stigmatize the foster youth.

Help navigating feelings – Youth in foster care already have families, but those families cannot care for them right now. It is sometimes difficult for a youth to manage feelings of divided loyalty between a foster family and their family of origin. They need help from a caring foster parent who does not “take sides” but rather supports them through a process of coming to terms with what happened to them and how to make sense of their new relationships.

Will I communicate with the child's family of origin?

Probably. Each family of origin approaches their interaction with the child welfare system and the foster family differently. We expect foster families to be open to communicating with families of origin when they're ready, and to ask for and use support navigating that communication if it becomes difficult.

What about child care for working parents?

Assistance covering the cost of child care is available for foster parents who work.



How long does it take to become a foster parent?

If you and the adult members of your household are able to provide all information, complete screenings and attend trainings in a timely fashion, the process of becoming a licensed foster parent should take approximately 60 to 90 days.

Are foster parents paid?

Foster parents are provided with a stipend to cover the costs of caring for the youth (food, clothing, activities fees, additional transportation costs, etc.). In addition, all children and teens in foster care are provided with medical insurance. Foster parents do not need to include foster youth on their own medical insurance plan.

Can I talk with a person who has been a foster parent?

To speak with someone who has experience fostering, there are several options:

Contact the Allegheny Family Network at 412-246-2030 and ask to speak with a resource parent support partner.

Contact one of the family foster care providers in our network, and ask to speak with a current foster parent.

Will I have support?

YES. No one fosters alone!

You will have regular visits from the provider's case worker as well as a caseworker from CYF.

Your provider agency may run support groups or offer other ways of formal and informal supports.

If you are fostering a teen, you can take advantage of the Allegheny Family Network Resource Parent Support Partner Program by calling 412-246-2030. Resource parent support partners are foster parent alumni who are available to listen, troubleshoot, or help you manage challenges at any time.

Call the Director's Action Line at 1-800-862-6783 with your questions or concerns.

How do I get started?

The Foster Parenting section of the DHS website provides a good introduction to what it means to be a foster parent. We suggest that you begin with a careful review of the Get Started page and visit other pages in the section.



For current foster families

Where do I turn with questions?

For questions about the day-to-day care of a child or teen in your home, such as: stipends, health insurance, transportation, permanency planning, Court issues, visit schedules, treatment programs, etc., please contact the caseworker assigned by your provider agency. If you have trouble reaching that person, you may also contact the CYF caseworker or supervisor assigned to the child in your home. You should also ask to be invited to the child's teaming meetings, which are family meetings facilitated by CYF on a regular basis. Teaming meetings address the progress of the family's overall case, and include discussions of permanency plans and the family's progress toward their desired outcomes.

What do I do if I have a problem?

We recommend starting problem-solving with the caseworker who is assigned to you by the provider agency, and his/her supervisor. If that is not helping, you can also contact the CYF caseworker or supervisor assigned to the child in your care. If none of those steps are helping to resolve your problem or concern, please contact the Director's Action Line at 1-800-863-6783.

Are there opportunities to interact with other foster families?

Yes, there are at least two ways to interact with other foster families

The Allegheny Family Network hosts support groups for foster parents. Call 412-246-2030 for more information.

Some of the foster care agencies in the Allegheny County network host foster parent support groups within the agency. Ask your agency whether there is a support group available.

How can I help other foster families?

Contact the provider agency you are affiliated with. There might be opportunities to become a trainer, to facilitate support groups, or to form advisory councils.

If you are fostering a teen, you may wish to serve on the Foster Parent Advisory Board. Contact Allegheny Family Network at 412-246-2030 for more information.

You might also be interested in learning more about becoming involved with the Pennsylvania State Resource Family Association.

How do I schedule to take a training?

All foster parents are required to receive training hours each year to maintain their certification. In Allegheny County, most foster care agencies participate in a training cooperative that offers a broad spectrum of trainings at convenient times and locations. Please talk with a representative at your foster care agency to find out how many hours they require. Your agency can provide a schedule so you can see what topics, times and locations best fit your needs. Please remember to RSVP so the trainer can make the appropriate preparations.