

## Background checks well worth it to reform our foster care system

BY PAT DEWINE AND GREG HARTMANN | GUEST COLUMNISTS

After the tragic death of Marcus Fiesel last year, we began to take a hard look at the foster care system to ensure we were doing everything possible to protect the safety of children entrusted to the County's care. We have become convinced that a two-fold approach is necessary to improve our system:

Increased efforts to ensure that each of our children is in a safe environment through regular background checks and heightened monitoring of home environments.

Stronger efforts to recruit good, loving foster parents. The vast majority of our foster parents are good, loving people who make incredible sacrifices for some of our most vulnerable kids. But there are serious problems that we cannot allow to be swept under the rug.

We created an instant notification program that would alert appropriate officials any time one of our foster parents, or adult over the age of 18 living in their home, had contact with the criminal justice system. The results of our checks are troubling. They have indicated that, despite some recent improvements, there remain deep-rooted, systemic problems in our Department of Job and Family Services (JFS) that require increased attention and scrutiny.

Detractors of the instant notification program recently began to criticize the process. They argue that the background checks we instituted provide no additional information JFS wasn't already aware of. Furthermore, they complain about the increased scrutiny and contend that it portrays foster parents in a negative light and will only dissuade good people from serving as foster parents. While their concerns are important, they are unfortunately misinformed.

Our background checks over the past two months have produced new and real results. More than 12 percent of our foster parents have had contact with the criminal justice system, and 76 percent of those contacts resulted in convictions. Ultimately, these checks caused JFS to petition for the removal of 13 children from unsafe and dangerous home environments.

Many of these arrests and convictions were not known to JFS officials before the instant notification program's background checks. If a foster parent or adult living in their home has had contact with the justice system, each case undergoes an individual review to determine what action, if any, is necessary. It does not guarantee that a foster child will be immediately removed from a home. Charges ranging from endangering children to domestic violence have raised serious questions about how JFS monitors their foster parents. These cases would have gone unnoticed were it not for the instant notification system.

The instant notification program is only part of our efforts to improve the system. We have assembled a partnership of children's services professionals with various private sector industry experts to develop a comprehensive foster parent recruitment initiative. Right now, largely because of the shortage of Hamilton County foster homes, more than 22 percent of our foster kids are placed outside of Hamilton County. We have to do better. Our initiative is aimed at dramatically decreasing this number of out-of-county placements. We know that the good people of Hamilton County will answer this call to service and our foster care system will improve because of it.

It is a fact that bureaucracy failed Marcus Fiesel. There were dangerous signs that it was failing here in Hamilton County as well. The foster children in our care are wards of the state, and we have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure their safety. Given the immediate problems in our foster care system, we cannot wait for solutions to come from Columbus or Washington. We need to do all that we can at the local level.

The reforms we have put in place will weed out those who shouldn't be in our foster care system, and our recruitment initiative will stress that most foster parents are wonderful people who provide a much-needed service to the children of our community.

These reforms require cooperation, patience and the understanding of everyone involved, including foster parents. To do anything less would be negligent. To do nothing would be simply wrong.

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