

Foster care program to help children with unique needs

By Julie Levin | Special Correspondent

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Foster children dealing with unique needs soon will have a new place to turn.

The National Youth Advocate Program, through a contract with ChildNet, will offer what's known as enhanced foster care.

"It's for kids that have some kind of a behavioral issue, something that is going to make them more challenging to work with," said *Katie Warner*, the director of program development in Broward County.

The local focus right now is on recruitment.

Warner said the Plantation-based agency is currently training potential foster parents and hopes to open the first three homes by March.

"Our kids are going to have issues. We need people who are dedicated to doing this," said Warner.

Initially, they will focus on finding homes and services for three groups of children: those who are medically fragile; have a recent history or current issues with substance abuse; or are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning.

According to Warner, they are the first group in Broward to provide such specialized care, particularly the children dealing with their sexual identity or a substance abuse problem.

"There's never been an agency that's specialized in getting homes for these kids," she said.

Foster parents will receive special training to help the kids through their struggle for identity, in addition to making sure they have access to services available to them.

"Our parents will make sure the kids get any therapy they need or go to any groups that can support them," she said.

The same will be true for foster parents taking care of children with a recent or current history of substance abuse, many of whom have had trouble with the law because of their addictions.

"We need foster parents who will have the patience to deal with something like this and make sure to see their probation officer or go to outpatient groups," Warner said.

The medically fragile children are those not in need of full-time care.

They might be children with severe asthma who require breathing treatments, infants going through drug withdrawals, or a child on a heart monitor.

The National Youth Advocate Program was established nationally in 1978, initially to work with at risk children. They have since expanded their mission into child welfare services, including specialized and therapeutic foster care, shelter care, medically fragile care, adoption services and care management.

"We have high hopes that NYAP will do great things for the foster children in our area," said Lila Cavasos, director of licensing and contracts with ChildNet through a prepared release.

Potential foster parents will go through 30 hours of training, plus an additional 30 hours to handle the enhanced needs.

"We are looking for anyone who has a heart for kids and is willing to be dedicated to a child who will come with issues," Warner said.

To be a foster parent

Anyone interested in becoming a foster parent should send an e-mail to referrals@nyap.org or call 877-692-7226. Go to www.nyap.org for information.