

View foster care through their eyes

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By BOBBE J. BRIDGE

Seattle Post-Intelligencer Guest Columnist

Four months, six months, eight months ... up to 16 months. How long must this feel to a 4-year-old child waiting for a family and a home to call their own?

Nationally, foster children wait between four and 16 months for the court hearing that will decide where their permanent home will be. More than half of all foster children spend nearly three years in foster care and are placed in three different homes during this time.

As many of the approximately 9,500 foster children in Washington state will tell you, that's too many placements, with too long of a wait. Even a month in the life of a 2-year-old can seem an eternity.

To help those in need, court processes must change. Collaboration between courts and child welfare agencies must be smoother and automatic. Appeals must move quicker. We must critique our process through the eyes of a child.

Washington's courts and judges are dedicated to reducing the amount of time children spend in foster care, by doing what can be done in the judicial arena to make that happen.

The Washington Supreme Court's Commission on Children in Foster Care has joined the National Center for State Courts "Call to Action," a comprehensive, state-by-state plan to reform foster care from a courts perspective.

Our state plan includes establishing a judicial training academy focused on child dependency cases, exploring annual audits of active child dependency cases, improving court rules expediting child welfare appeals and increasing child and parent representation in court. The commission is also assisting in the coordination of a state youth summit for foster children and alumni.

In November 2005, Washington also held its first statewide National Adoption Day, with judges completing adoption of more than 50 foster children as part of a celebration to raise awareness and commitment to care. We hope this statewide event will continue to grow in size each year and find many more homes for our foster children.

Currently, the average stay in foster care in Washington is 540 days -- forever in the life of a child. Birthdays, holidays, class conferences, losing a first tooth, performing in a school play, navigating middle school -- life moves fast for children, especially those needing parents and a family.

Perhaps the right move is to return them to strengthened biological families. Perhaps the right move is to find them stable and loving adoptive parents.

As judges, in either case, that decision must be made more expeditiously because growing up cannot be put on hold, and the impact of being without a permanent family is felt each day by a child.

Since our court system holds only one piece of the puzzle to help assure that our state is providing foster children with the protection and services they need, it will take change, leadership and the will of our communities to make it happen. It is critical for our state to strengthen the collaborations between the partners in the system -- foster care parents, legislators, CASA workers, service providers, state agencies and the caring members of our community.

The foster care system in our state is complex and there is a lot to do. Washington's judges and courts are committed to doing all that we can to improve that system for our state's children.

Washington Supreme Court Justice Bobbe J. Bridge is chairwoman of the Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care. More information on the commission can be found at www.courts.wa.gov The "National Call to Action" can be found at www.ncsconline.org.

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