

Flaws In The Screening Process For Foster Parents

by Carla Thompson
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The last of the children have departed. The house is empty. And you realize as you sit half listening to the television news that the years of changing diapers, wiping runny noses, and attending school field trips weren't all that bad. You liked being a parent. And you've come to realize that you have room in your heart and home for more children.

That is the story of most foster parents, according to Nicki McNeil of [New Alternatives for Children](#), one of 42 agencies with whom the city contracts for foster care.

"Parenting is something they feel they do well and that they love to do," McNeil says. "They want the satisfaction of watching a child grow up."

But this is not the picture being painted by critics of the foster care system, who point to the latest tragedy as proof, the death of eight-year-old Stephanie Ramos. Stephanie was found dead earlier this month in a garbage truck. Police say her foster mother, Renee Johnson, placed Stephanie's 28-pound body in a garbage bag. As the Times reported, Johnson "has told the police that she panicked when the girl died. She is being held on charges of unlawfully disposing of a body and tampering with evidence. Law enforcement officials have said her home was filthy - covered with vermin and fecal matter - and are investigating whether neglect played a role in the child's death."

The question critics are asking is: How did this person become a foster parent?

THE SCREENING PROCESS

Becoming a foster parent does not look easy. One must be certified. The applicant must provide a medical report, income tax return, and three personal references. He or she must also be fingerprinted, undergo a criminal background check, and participate in a 10 week parenting training program, MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting).

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Each person must also be assessed for personal motivations and life style, as well as the overall living conditions, during a "home study" which, says the Administration for Children Services, can take up to several months.

For all that, though, "it is an inherently flawed system of substitute care," charges Hank Orenstein, the director of the Child Welfare Project within the [Office of Public Advocate](#) Betsy Gotbaum. The flaws, critics say, can be found in key areas of the screening process.

IN IT FOR THE MONEY?

Shortly after it was established in 1996, the Administration for Children's Services quickly set out to overhaul the child welfare system, focusing on what the agency calls neighborhood-based services. "Our aim is to place children close to home, so they can maintain social, cultural, identity ties, attend the same school, go to the same doctor," says agency spokesperson McClean Guthrie.

Designed to remedy one challenge, the shift to neighborhood placement may have created yet another.

Since many of the children who come into foster care are from low income areas, the agency began looking for foster parents who were from the same areas. And people from low incomes are more likely to be attracted by the stipend and other funds provide to cover the child's expenses.

To weed out those who might be in it for the money, the agency requires proof that a potential foster parent's income, whether from work or public assistance, at least covers their own expenses.

IS THE WHOLE HOUSEHOLD SCREENED?

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When conducting the home study, the agencies aren't just interested in the home itself which must meet basic physical and safety requirements, but the hearts and minds of its inhabitants.

"A good foster care agency should screen for genuine, caring, and empathetic foster parents, and should get to know them as human beings," says Orenstein. And that means everybody in the home.

"Everyone is interviewed separately," says McNeil. And all family members living in the home who are over the age of 18 including the potential foster parents must be fingerprinted and processed through the State Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR).

As for those under the age of 18, "they don't look closely at minor children in the home," says Orenstein. The law prohibits anyone from conducting a criminal background check on a minor.

THE SCREENERS

The screening process is only as good as the person who does the screening, and the caseload of caseworkers in New York City is well above the national average, which may explain why there is a 40 percent turnover in caseworkers.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING?

Being a foster parent, like being social worker, is quite stressful.

"They might be relatively stable today, but a month from now, they might have some crisis," says Orenstein.

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McNeil agrees. "Many are working full time. They may have someone who dies. They have to deal with their own grief while dealing with the child."

Sound psychological testing can help to determine who is mentally and emotionally fit to care for a foster child in both good times and bad.

One agency, New Alternatives for Children, which places children with severe medical and physical disabilities, requires that potential foster parents undergo psychological testing.

"Every prospective foster parent meets with our psychiatrist. It helps us help parents decide if this is for them. It helps us rule out possibilities of problems down the road," says Dr. Arlene Goldsmith, executive director of New Alternatives.

It is not certain whether Renee Johnson underwent psychological testing.

Though foster care agency executives like McNeil believe that most foster parents are "good hearted people who want to care for children," critics like Orenstein see a system that removes children from their parents for neglect, and places them "in a situation that's not any better.

"When a child dies it's a lightning rod, says Orenstein. "Tragically, some children die. But there are a lot of others that are not having a healthy or happy time. "

Carla Thompson is a Brooklyn-based journalist.