

The Faces And Voices Of Foster Care



Ashley Kyle, 20, considers herself lucky for her experience in the Florida foster care system. Only staying in two homes, one for 16 years, she was spared the upheaval that comes with the frequent moves that others in the system see.

**KELVIN MA/
The Tampa Tribune**

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This project began on a Saturday morning in February, when I took a 10-year-old, redheaded foster child named Cynthia shopping at Westfield Brandon mall.

It was the first time she had ever picked out her own clothes.

Cynthia brought to mind the losing hand so many kids in our community are dealt when they are removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect or abandonment.

It is not a small problem. There are some 5,000 Hillsborough County children in foster care today.

After Cynthia, I learned about Lillie Southerland, a 15-year-old chronic runaway from the foster care system who already has had one baby and may be pregnant with another. Local child welfare officials have been unable to place her in a safe environment that she can't run from. Her sister Loretta, 16, is also on the run and has had two babies who are now in care.

Columns about these girls were followed by messages from a host of folks in the community. Many of those messages criticized the system, which in Hillsborough has been run for the past four years by Hillsborough Kids Inc.

The package of stories presented in today's BayLife represents months of work and scores of interviews. The topic deserves such coverage. These kids need our help and the system needs our vigilant attention and enthusiastic support.

Our purpose was not to slam any agency or any individual but to shed light on a system that operates largely behind closed doors. It is important to emphasize right upfront that most foster children are well cared for by dedicated foster parents and child welfare workers.

But not all.

Some of the most touching interviews were with teens who have aged out of foster care, some after many years in the system. They turned 18 without finding a family to call their own.

Those teens are now involved in an independent living program run by one of the agencies in the Hillsborough Kids network, Camelot Community Care. Part of that program, Connected by 25, attempts to teach them how to be adults - to open a bank account, budget money, find a job, go to school, make good decisions - skills they did not learn in the system.

Their view of it is from the inside out. For the most part, they were not complimentary. They spoke of physical, sexual and emotional abuse in foster homes or facilities. They talked of being treated differently than the biological children in the family; they were denied food, made to sleep on the floor, kept from participating in extra-curricular activities at school - and worse.

It should be pointed out that many of the young people who age out of care don't need the services of Connected by 25 because they were sufficiently guided to maturity by the adults in their lives. And because of that, we didn't interview any of them.

Ashley Kyle, 20, had the best experience. During her time in foster care, she was in only two homes, one for 16 years.

Then there's Zack Sylvester, 19, who was moved from one place to another. Finally, he began to run away - and, ultimately, he ended up living on the street. Like most of the teens in the program we talked to, Sylvester admits he was a problem child. One wonders, however, how many of his problems started or were exacerbated by the sometimes sad, nomadic life of a foster child.

Kathy Hardy, 18, also was moved from one home to another and claims there was abuse. Although she has a beautiful smile and a positive attitude, she says she wishes there was more oversight over foster homes. She said when she complained once about treatment, the caseworker told the foster parent, who then punished her.

Cameron Anderson, 18, was only in care two years. He came out relatively unscathed and says he's being called by God to an as-yet-unknown service.

Then there's Tocara Middleton, 19, who also was moved from place to place. She recently met her biological mother for the first time but has lost contact with her siblings, who were also in the system. Middleton is about eight months pregnant and living at The Spring, a shelter for domestic violence victims. She hopes to be able to provide a caring home to her unborn daughter so that child doesn't end up in the system.

A life in foster care, it seems, is something that runs in families. To end the cycle, kids need to be taught by loving adults how to live, love - and parent.

Spurred by persistent complaints from readers and acquaintances involved with Hillsborough County's foster care system, I set out some months back to determine if the situation was really as bad as I'd heard.

I had no idea what I was in for.

I was dazed and amazed by the stunning complexities of the system, and awed by the tragic and enormous task those involved must undertake every day.

First, some statistics:

- **In Florida, 50,000 children are in foster care. About 4,600 live in Hillsborough County, which has fewer than 500 foster homes.**
- **"The tab to provide for these 4,600 kids, who range in age from newborn to 18, and whose needs are as wide-ranging as their ages, is about \$60 million this year. Most of that money is provided by the Florida Department of Children and Families; some comes from the federal government.**
- **No matter which pocket it comes from, taxpayers spend a huge sum on a system whose mission - sometimes thwarted or unmet - is to provide safety and permanence to incredibly vulnerable children.**

Let's accept certain things right up front:

- **"You can't blame the state and the foster care system for the failure of parents, although many in child welfare suggest that if more money was available for prevention, the number of children in foster care could be reduced.**
- **"Bureaucracies of any kind - even the most caring - make bad parents.**
- **"Any entity trying to coordinate the care of more than 4,500 fragile kids while observing a dizzying list of local, state and federal rules and regulations is going to be complex. Not to mention that its budget is bigger than that of some small countries.**
- **"Any large entity, no matter how dedicated or efficient, makes mistakes.**
- **"Any entity dealing with children's lives and the exquisitely sensitive relationship between those children and the adults who care for them is incredibly vulnerable to criticism.**

During the months that I pursued this story, I talked to about 50 people who work with or in the system or are trying to navigate it. I also talked to some who have survived it.

I received e-mails or letters from about 50 more.

Virtually all criticized the system in some way.

Many said it isn't a system at all but a web that too frequently snares, confuses and impedes those who attempt to navigate it.

In Hillsborough, a network of agencies operates under the umbrella of lead agency Hillsborough Kids Inc.

HKI was created four years ago to take over services from the Department of Children and Families under Gov. Jeb Bush's community-based care plan. The idea behind privatization was to put the care of our most vulnerable children into the hands of local people and to provide some local competition, as well as community support.

But statewide decentralization has not saved Florida any money. It actually costs more to provide community-based care. Decentralization in Hillsborough, some say, has created neither competition nor support but has led to a Rube Goldberg-like system that puts too much power in the hands of too few people who have too little sensitivity.

HKI doles out money and negotiates and writes contracts; thus, it controls other agencies that provide direct client services. It also provides many administrative services, including financial management, data services and communications, and quality assurance.

Some call HKI cold, uncaring, rigid, top heavy and myopic, with highly paid executives who are overly bureaucratic and overly focused on money rather than kids - though few will say any of this on the record.

Fear Of Retribution

To publicly criticize HKI, some critics say, is to risk retribution, such as firing or reduction of assistance. Fear of retribution is also what keeps many foster parents from speaking out.

That fear may be the result of personality conflicts, pure paranoia, bureaucratic politics or a sensitivity born out of frustration, poor communications and infighting. In any case, it rules any conversation about the system in general -- and HKI and its chief executive officer, Jeff Rainey, in particular.

The hate runs so deep in some that they find fault with even the positive stories and successes, including the increasing adoption rates in Hillsborough since HKI took control.

Others say the mess isn't Rainey's fault - that he has a thankless job and is the victim of an inefficient, underfunded, fledgling system and a weak and disconnected board of directors.

Some maintain that Rainey is growing into the job, which he took over after popular CEO Chris Card left the agency in January 2005.

Whether the complaints are dead-on or sour grapes fueled by personality conflicts and frustration depends on whom you ask and what questions you ask them.

It is certainly true that HKI has become the generic target for any and all criticism. The Department of Children and Families filled the same role before HKI.

After several months of poking around, my take is that it's not as bad as some make it out to be, but not as good as it could be.

In fairness, HKI is a young agency trying to work out the kinks in a monumentally complicated system during a time of great cynicism toward bureaucracy - some of it earned.

And the veil of confidentiality that protects the children, their families and "the system" itself prevents HKI and the agencies it contracts with from defending themselves when something goes wrong.

Solutions On Way, CEO Says

Rainey is aware of many of the problems and offered no excuses during several lengthy interviews. He said the agency is working to solve many of them.

He agrees that some of the problems - communications seems at the root of many of them - appear to be fairly easy to correct.

Rainey also provided me with a pile of information, and he was very cooperative when we spoke or exchanged e-mails.

He sees the flaws and realities of a system inundated with children who come into care - often bruised, and sometimes savaged, physically, mentally and/or emotionally.

Certainly, an emergency shelter is needed, one at which substantive assessments can be made. Such a facility is on the drawing board.

Dottie Berger McKinnon, the mother of Joshua House and a new HKI board member, is searching for land. Another group is also trying to put something together.

The money part of the system - rates paid to foster parents - is controlled by the state and can be changed only by the Florida Legislature. That will only happen if there is pressure by voters and action by legislators.

Such action also should be taken to fix the huge inequity in the amount of money the state gives each county or district to provide for these kids. Other urban counties are reimbursed at a much higher rate than Hillsborough. The state average is \$12,000 per child per year.

Hillsborough gets about \$10,000. Seminole County gets \$17,335.

There is much the local community can do, however, besides putting pressure on the Legislature.

"We need help," says Rainey.

Fundraising efforts certainly could be increased. This is a generous community, and HKI should use its considerable influence to promote more involvement.

There is an effort under way by HKI and the Hillsborough County Commission to increase the number of foster and adoptive homes.

Those who can't foster or adopt can help by buying a school outfit or some school supplies or take a gift tag from one of the Foster

Angel trees that will soon pop up around the community and buy and wrap the gift for a foster child.

HKI needs to be more proactive in alerting the community to specific needs.

Breaking The Secrecy

The success of any of this involves breaking the bureaucratic tradition of secrecy and opening things up to the community.

There also obviously needs to be better communication and more openness between HKI, the agencies in its network and foster and adoptive parents.

This may be the area that needs the most critical attention. Quality foster parents recruit other quality foster parents.

HKI does provide some support to the Sylvia Thomas Center, a community-based organization supporting foster and adoptive parents. But cultivating the attitude of partnership with foster parents means offering a degree of equality.

Perhaps a foster parent should be on the HKI board of directors.

The community also can get involved with the Community Alliance, a group mandated by the state.

The alliance, headed by LuAnn Panacek of the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, focuses on identifying and solving problems in child welfare. Anyone can attend the group's meetings, which are held from 9 to 11 a.m. the second Tuesday of the month at the Children's Board at 1002 E. Palm Ave., Ybor City.

In November, a child welfare system review initiated by the alliance will begin in Hillsborough. It is meant to focus on the big picture, or as Panacek put it, "proactive problem solving from 10,000 feet rather than in the trenches with a loaded gun pointed at our heads."

Participants are hopeful some solutions will bubble up.

Right now, however, there seem to be a lot of agencies, organizations and groups that represent pieces in this giant puzzle, and they're a long way from forming a clear picture.