

Foster parents needed to help Hispanic children

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For six years, Betty Gonzales and her husband, Lou, wanted a child of their own.

She had two sons from a previous marriage; he had none. The Tolleson couple couldn't conceive, so they tried in vitro fertilization. Then, they started talking about becoming foster parents, or maybe adopting.

"I had never thought of adoption," said Betty, 43, now mother to 3-year-old Austin. "Being Latina, you just don't hear about that many (Hispanic) people doing it. It's not something in our culture, to adopt."

The social service agencies that work with the state to place children in foster and adoptive families are combing the Valley for Hispanic families like the Gonzaleses. Armed with fliers in English and Spanish, the agencies are going to churches, schools, community centers and homes to teach Latino families about the foster-care system and recruit them to become foster parents.

They can't find enough.

Hispanic children make up about a third of the estimated 9,800 children in Arizona's foster-care system, according to the state's most recent numbers. The state does not track the ethnicity of licensed foster parents, but social service agencies said the percentage of licensed foster families who are Hispanic is very low, and they struggle to match Hispanic children with Hispanic families.

When agencies try to place children, they assess cultural, educational, health care and behavioral needs. To make the move less traumatic, they try to keep them in the same communities, schools and neighborhoods and close to birth parents or relatives to allow visits.

The concept of temporary care is foreign for many immigrants and second-generation Hispanics, experts said, because Mexico and other Latin American countries do not have foster-care systems that operate like that of the U.S. After recruiters explain the system, it's almost impossible for prospective parents to overcome distrust of the system and be convinced to sit through background checks and months of training classes.

"It's not as common in the Hispanic culture to take in a stranger's child," said Norma Hernandez, a licensing specialist for Christian Family Care Agency who tries to recruit Hispanic foster parents. "With foster care, the biggest problem is getting them to commit to the classes. They're just not willing to jump through the hoops."

Children and services

Arizona's population of Hispanic children is growing, and so is the number of Hispanics in its foster-care system. In September, Hispanics made up about 34 percent, or 3,361 of the 9,833 children in Arizona's foster-care system, up from 30 percent, or 1,833 of the 6,121 foster kids five years earlier, according to Department of Economic Security numbers.

Most of the children in care are from Maricopa County and are removed from their homes by the state because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. Some are bilingual, some speak mostly Spanish and some are the children of undocumented immigrants, said state officials and social workers.

"We see the number of (Hispanic) families isn't keeping up with (Hispanic) children," said Augusta Carbray, program coordinator for the Todos Los Niños program at Aid to Adoption of Special Kids, which works with the state to place children.

"A lot of these kids are already traumatized, and being in a place where their identity is the same, and having someone who understands their traditions, their foods . . . makes them feel more at home. It's easier to adjust."

Recruiting more Latino parents where there are high rates of foster children is "absolutely paramount to us as we look to the success of a child," said Ken Deibert, deputy director of the DES division of Children, Youth and Families, the department that includes Child Protective Services. Several of the 19 Valley agencies that work with DES to find homes for foster children have tried to recruit Hispanic parents through Spanish-language newspapers, TV and radio.

"We've been pretty much unsuccessful," said Margaret Soberg, a recruiter for the Christian Family Care Agency. "It's hard to get families to follow through. There's a lot of paperwork, a lot of meetings. I think that's true with all families, but even truer with Hispanic families."

Finding families

At Aid to Adoption of Special Kids in central Phoenix one recent morning, children played with plastic building blocks against a backdrop of a mural of giraffes, zebras and orangutans. Many of them were Hispanics who live in group homes and are waiting to be placed in foster homes.

"We've seen a lot more Hispanic families start to step forward, but it's still challenging," said Diane Walker, the group's director of development.

Last year, Aid to Adoption of Special Kids started a partnership with Creciendo Unidos, a Latino non-profit in Phoenix that means "growing together." Aid to Adoption trained about 35 members of Creciendo Unidos' leadership program to go into the Spanish-speaking community and talk about how the foster-care system works, the requirements, the children and the need for Hispanic parents.

About a dozen times monthly, Creciendo Unidos leaders reach parents in classes in the Roosevelt, Creighton and Murphy school districts in central Phoenix.

They also visit evangelical and Catholic churches throughout the Valley, where they speak to congregations and put foster-care announcements in church bulletins. They canvass neighborhoods and host informational meetings in homes and apartments throughout Phoenix.

"We don't grow up hearing about adoption or foster care because no one talks about it," said Amy Marmol, program coordinator of Creciendo Unidos. "This is all new to them." Meeting people is the easy part. Overcoming their cultural myths about foster care is the toughest, recruiters said.

Overcoming challenges

Many immigrants and second-generation Hispanics believe they have to be wealthy, own big houses or be married to become foster parents. Some think they have to be fluent in English, have driver's licenses and be U.S. citizens. (The state requires legal U.S. residency, not citizenship). Many don't understand that sometimes foster care can lead to adoption.

For Enrique Amarillas, a firefighter, the hardest part of the process was the months of tedious meetings.

Two years ago, the firefighter and his wife, Nancy, decided they wanted to adopt after having four children of their own. They ran across an advertisement and showed up at an orientation meeting at Aid to Adoption of Special Kids.

A few months later, they became foster parents to Jesse, a 6-year-old Hispanic boy. Today, the paperwork for a formal adoption is close to going through, and Jesse is best buds with his soon-to-be older brother, Josedaniel.

"When we were going through the process, we've always said the race didn't matter to us, that we would take any child," Enrique, 37, said. "We have kids here that need a home. I felt like I was doing something good. He's a good kid."

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