

The Daily Union

Saturday, May 11, 2019

Title: Strong Families = Strong Communities

About a decade ago, my husband and I completed the training, background checks, home visit, and application process to become foster parents. The training was eye opening and it provided us with a deeper understanding of the many and significant challenges foster children and foster families face. It also heightened our awareness of the many ways a family unit can break down – resulting in the need for children to be placed in foster care.

May is National Foster Care Month. By proclaiming this as such, human services agencies work to focus on public awareness about many aspects of the foster care system in the United States. The month of May serves as an opportunity to acknowledge foster parents, family members, volunteers, mentors, policy makers, child welfare professionals, and other members for the community who help children and youth in foster care find permanent homes and connections. Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner at the Children's Bureau, shares this insight as part of his message about the 2019 effort:

"Families enter the foster care system with multiple needs and hurts—emotional and physical. Birth parents may need to work on strengthening parenting skills or undergo substance use or mental health therapy. At other times, they may simply need help with meeting their children's needs for safe housing and concrete needs. Children may need trauma-informed therapy for potential behavioral or emotional health concerns. Families may need to learn new ways of caring for their children so that all can emerge from foster care with resilience and strength. Our goal should be to enhance individual and family well-being."

There are over 440,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States. This number had been on the decline until a change in the trend that began in 2012, which experts believe, is linked to the parallel increase/rise in opioid addiction and overdoses. What has resulted is a struggling and overburdened child welfare system. The challenge before every community in every state is to provide the necessary support and resources to assist these youth and adults they are connected to in building a framework for reintegration.

As stated in initiative's media outreach message, strengthening families and focusing on their well-being is the key to building strong communities. Whether it is promoting a collaborative relationship between birth parents and foster caregivers, or providing parents with the right combination of supportive services to enable reunification, keeping families together is the primary goal in a successful child welfare system.

This message coupled with the nation's concerns surrounding our Child Welfare System likely added steam to the engine driving the historic reform legislation that was passed in February 2018: The Family First Preservation Services Act. The purpose of this legislation is: *To amend parts B and E of title IV of the Social Security Act to invest in funding prevention and family services to help keep children safe and supported at home, to ensure that children in foster care are placed in the least restrictive, most family-like, and appropriate settings, and for other purposes.* As part of Division E in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 (H.R. 1892), Title VII is geared to invest in prevention and support of families by revising provisions that can aid states in providing certain foster-care prevention services and programs.

Source: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1892?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22steve+king%22%5D%7D>

There is not any one agency, or professional, that can do the work of family support and preservation alone. It takes a network of professionals and volunteers who are committed to helping families grow more resilient and stronger as they face the many challenges society places before them – stable employment, adequate and affordable housing, financial security, quality education, a safe living environment, and more.

In 2014, The Modern Parenting Initiative coalition (MPI) formed to help provide a broader base of support and resources for families in Geary County and the surrounding area. Active agencies represented at this coalition include Geary County K-State Research & Extension, 8th Judicial District Community Corrections, Pawnee Mental Health, Geary County Schools - USD 475, Saint Francis Ministries, Kansas Department for Children and Families, and Fort Riley Child and Youth Services. The group meets bi-monthly to discuss the needs of families, especially those with children, in our area who could benefit from additional support by taking a Strengthening Families class or through referrals to other services available in Geary County. If you are involved with a community agency or organization who would like to share in our desire to provide a network of support for Geary County and area families, call the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office for information about our next meeting, May 13, 2019.

The MPI sponsored Strengthening Families classes provide guided experiential exercises so that parents and children work together to build stronger communication skills including active listening and , identify and establish age-appropriate boundaries, practice problem solving and anger management, and plan intentional quality family time.

Not just for families in crisis, Strengthening Families is a program designed for those that are feeling good about their relationships but desire to build their strength even more. Families who participate in the 11-week program will learn about targeted activities to build strength and resiliency in the family unit, how to improve communication with children as they age and grow more independent, identify the importance of family rituals and traditions, and learn from other families on the many

ways to stay connected to their own children. Families leave the class with a wealth of resources and links to local activities that promote strong families.

By helping families build stronger relationships and supporting their well-being, the neighborhoods and communities of Geary County become stronger. For more information on the Modern Parenting Initiative coalition and the classes they provide to families, or the many resources our community provides that support families, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!