

The Pennsylvania State Foster Parent Association History

The Pennsylvania State Foster Parent Association (PSFPA) was founded in 1974. The organization was originally designed to recruit new foster families and provide supports to existing foster parents through networking and training. Over the course of the last thirty-three years, PSFPA has grown considerably and now boasts more than 600 family members and more than 170 agency members. Since their inception in 1974 focusing primarily on foster parents (still the primary group they serve), they have also broadened the population they serve to include the bigger definition of resource families, which is legally defined in Pennsylvania as “*a family which provides temporary foster care or kinship care for children who need out of home placement and which may eventually provide permanency for those children, including as an adoptive family*”.

The mission statement of PSFPA sums it up nicely:

The Pennsylvania State Foster Parent Association advocates for all those who care about children and their families. We work supportively with foster, adoptive, and kinship families, and with local foster parent associations and agencies who care for the children we serve.

There are 20,000 children in foster care on a daily basis in Pennsylvania. To provide them with the care they need, Pennsylvania relies upon 12,619 non-relative foster families and 1,867 kinship foster families who are approved providers that are registered with our statewide foster, adoptive and kinship registry, known as the Resource Family Registry. Additionally, since 1992, more than 21,000 children have been adopted from the Pennsylvania foster care system and those adoptive families are also eligible for PSFPA membership and services. PSFPA provides services to these children and families even if the families are not members of the statewide association.

PSFPA provides scholarships for foster children and children adopted from foster care to attend college or another type of post-secondary educational institution, such as a trade school. Each scholarship that PSFPA provides is matched with in kind dollars from the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA). Since 1998 PSFPA has awarded \$83,770.00 in scholarships, all of which was matched by PHEAA bringing the total amount of scholarships awarded to foster and adopted children to \$167,540. PSFPA raises all of the scholarship funds themselves through a variety of methods including solicited donations, an annual raffle and an annual auction.

PSFPA also has provided cash assistance to local foster parent associations that is to be used to pay for items or activities which are not typically paid for through a foster family's per diem. The PSFPA Children's Activity Fund provides foster children with such “extras” as sporting equipment, prom gowns, high school year books, class rings, day camp programs, dance lessons, etc. The Children's Activity Fund is intended to be used to support those activities so that foster children are able to participate in extra-curricular activities like other children without causing their foster families undue financial burdens. Since 2002 PSFPA has provided \$75,000 directly to children in foster care so that they can participate in the same activities or purchase the same high school keepsakes as children not in foster care not only have, but also take for granted.

Funding cuts have impacted this program, but we are looking at the possibility of restoring this through other avenues.

PSFPA also manages a blanket and backpack program for children and youth entering foster care. PSFPA accepts donations of blankets and backpacks from community leaders, businesses, organizations and other entities which they distribute to county agencies to provide to children entering foster care. The blanket and backpack program is designed to help children enter care with more than just their belongings stored in a trash bag. PSFPA has collected and donated more than 500 blankets and backpacks to children in care.

PSFPA advocates for resource families and the children they serve in a variety of ways. Because PSFPA believes that the best way to advocate for resource families is to empower them with the knowledge needed to advocate within their own agencies and communities, PSFPA maintains this website, that not only includes information about their organization, but also includes an advocacy section designed to provide information to foster, adoptive and kinship families and foster children about such things as resource family rights, guardian ad litem responsibilities, the right of foster families to testify in court and adoption subsidies.

Additionally, in an effort to provide foster parents and those interested in learning more about fostering with much needed information, PSFPA created a guide about foster care and how the child welfare system works in Pennsylvania. The PSFPA Manual For Foster Parents was written and edited by PSFPA and was approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) as being compliant with existing Pennsylvania laws and regulations. The Manual For Foster Parents includes information regarding what foster care is and covers a variety of other issues of concern to foster families including: foster parent responsibilities; foster family issues; annual foster family evaluation information; health and dental care for foster children; child abuse; universal precautions; foster youth and driving; foster youth and the military; federal taxes as related to fostering, and other valuable information for foster families and foster youth. When finished, copies of the Manual for Foster Parents were provided to public and private foster care agencies across the state and to PSFPA members. The PSFPA Manual for Foster Parents is also available for download on this website.

In addition, PSFPA advocates by participating in numerous workgroups and committees that have a direct effect on child welfare practice in Pennsylvania, such as participation in the Child and Family Services Review and on other committees that are formed to implement new legislation pertaining to foster, adoptive and kinship families and the children they serve.

PSFPA produces a quarterly newsletter, *Families Helping Families*, that is sent to all members of PSFPA and is posted on their website. Families Helping Families includes articles regarding the activities of PSFPA and encourages resource families to be advocates within their own agencies and organizations. Articles are provided by the PSFPA Board of Directors, the SWAN Program, DPW, public and private foster care agencies, resource families and foster children. Each newsletter is unique, depending upon the hot topics at the time.

However, PSFPA's best advocacy efforts are seen in their legislative activities. PSFPA has been an advocate for legislative change in Pennsylvania that has had a direct effect on foster, adoptive and kinship families. PSFPA drafted language for two important pieces of legislation that have a direct impact on resource families and worked closely with the Pennsylvania Legislature on the creation and passage of the two new laws. On November 22, 2005, members of PSFPA were on hand to witness Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell sign both of these new bills into law.

The Resource Family Care Act requires public and private child welfare agencies in Pennsylvania to provide to all Resource Families the following: notification of scheduled meetings concerning the child in order to actively participate and have input into the case; support services to assist in the care of the child consistent with the child's approved permanency plan; open, complete and timely responses from the agencies when contacted by the resource families; information about the child's medical history, general behaviors and information regarding the relationships between the child and his/her biological parents; consultation with resource parents in the development of a permanency plan; assistance with the coordination of services for dealing with family loss and separation when a child leaves the resource family's home; information on all county or private agency policies and procedures that relate to the role of a resource parent; appropriate training that will enhance the skills and abilities of the resource parent; information on how to receive services and reach agency personnel on a 24-hour a day, 7 day-a-week basis; confidentiality regarding allegations of abuse involving a member of the resource family; and the opportunity to be heard regarding agency-decisions or practices.

While many of the requirements outlined in the *Resource Family Care Act* are matters of best practice that were already occurring in Pennsylvania, this is the first time several of these activities have been required through legislation. While other states have enacted similar laws, often referred to as Foster Parent's Bill of Rights Laws, Pennsylvania's legislation is unique in that it does not pertain only to foster families, but to kinship and adoptive families as well, thereby ensuring that all prospective and current resource families are not only treated with dignity and respect by the agencies that serve them, but are given as much information about the child as possible and are allowed to participate in the development of the child's permanency plan.

The *Foster Parent Consideration Act*, also signed into law by Governor Edward G. Rendell on November 22nd, ensures that when a foster child's court-ordered goal is changed to adoption and the child has resided with an approved foster family for six or more months that the foster family shall have the right to be interviewed as an adoptive resource for the foster child. The legislation further requires the county children and youth agency with custody of the child to document the reason, if any, that the agency may have to consider any adoptive resources other than the foster family and that no foster family will be denied primary consideration as an adoptive parent for a child in their care for six or more months simply because of concerns regarding the foster family's inability to foster other children in the future.

PSFPA recently drafted some new legislative language designed to provide Pennsylvania foster children and children adopted from foster care in Pennsylvania with free college or other post-secondary education through a tuition waiver. This new legislation is in the infancy stage and PSFPA hopes to have it passed by the end of the current legislative session which runs two years. To meet this deadline, PSFPA has already met with members of the Pennsylvania Legislature, DPW and PHEAA and they are preparing to have the legislation introduced in the near future.

PSFPA has partnered with YMCA's across the Commonwealth to provide reduced YMCA memberships and other YMCA benefits to foster families and the children they serve. Because of this partnership, foster children are able to participate in their community YMCA programs including swimming lessons, gymnastics, basketball leagues, day care, day camps and other activities typically sponsored by YMCA organizations.

Additionally, PSFPA has also partnered with the Grange Association to provide health insurance to foster families at a group rate.

For the past 31 years, PSFPA has provided an annual conference for resource families and professionals. Approximately 300 people attend this annual event that features two keynote speakers and more than 40 workshops on child welfare and foster care related issues. In addition to the training provided the annual raffle and auction that benefit the PSFPA scholarship program are held during the conference week. In addition to the training and fund raising activities, the annual conference allows foster, adoptive and kinship families to network with each other and with agency and state personnel.

PSFPA also does workshops and trainings at the Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) and the Pennsylvania Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP) annual conferences. They use both of these training opportunities to educate resource families and those who serve them about the issues important to foster families and the children they serve.

PSFPA is currently working with Spaulding for Children to develop a computer based training program for resource families. Currently in development, the training will be a revised Parents As Tender Healers (PATH) training that will be specific to Pennsylvania laws and regulations. Pennsylvania foster families are required to attend a minimum amount of initial training and a minimum amount of annual training in order to be certified and approved foster families. This PA PATH training will be approximately 24 hours long when completed which will help foster families meet that requirement. The content of the training will be approved by The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare to ensure compliance with existing laws and regulations. Once approved and completed, PSFPA will provide copies of the computer based training to all public and private foster care agencies in Pennsylvania at no cost so that they can use the training to meet the minimum annual training requirements and ensure that all foster families in Pennsylvania have access to the same training and are trained in the same manner. This project is approximately half completed; we expect to be able to distribute the completed training in the fall of 2007.

PSFPA is the state association that collaborates with public and private local foster parent associations across the Commonwealth. In addition to working with local foster parent associations PSFPA works with foster, adoptive and kinship families and the professionals who serve them. PSFPA is overseen by a Board of Directors that is comprised of volunteers from across the Commonwealth, the majority of which must be foster/resource family members. The Board of Directors, comprised primarily of foster, adoptive and kinship families is cognizant of its responsibility to include resource families in all of PSFPA's activities.

PSFPA works cooperatively with its resource families through a strategic planning team that helps to accomplish their goals, including their legislative, training and public awareness activities. The strategic planning team is comprised of PSFPA Board of Director members, professionals and most importantly, resource families from across the Commonwealth who volunteer their time and efforts to the strategic planning committee to help to determine which projects the association will support or engage in. Those families also do the work identified by the strategic planning committee, such as recruiting new foster families, writing new policies and procedures and participating in legislative activities. PSFPA believes that encouraging foster, adoptive and kinship families to take an active role in their state's child welfare system is not enough. An effective organization must also provide resource families with a vehicle through which they will see systemic change and thereby improve their lives and the lives of the children they serve.

PSFPA works collaboratively with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, county children and youth agencies and private foster care agencies across the Commonwealth. PSFPA participates in meetings and workgroups pertaining to new laws and regulations related to child welfare in general and to foster care, specifically so that they can advocate for the best interests of the children and families they serve.

In addition to providing training to other programs as noted above, PSFPA relies upon local foster parent associations, foster care agencies and foster families to facilitate workshops and trainings at their annual conference. PSFPA sends out a call for proposals asking for those agencies and individuals who have expertise in the child welfare arena to be presenters at their annual conference.

In addition to all of the efforts mentioned above, for the past several years PSFPA has encouraged foster families to work closely with the biological families of the children in their care. PSFPA has offered trainings and best practice approaches to working with biological families at their annual conference and other training events. Working with the biological family will also be addressed in the computer based training program currently being worked on in collaboration with Spaulding for Children.

When the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare was in the process of developing a new media campaign to recruit resource families, PSFPA made arrangements for resource families to be interviewed by the media contractor in charge of developing the new advertising campaign. The media contractor was interested in learning what causes some people to follow through and become a foster or adoptive parent. The results of what those families told the media contractor can be seen in Pennsylvania's new foster and adoptive family recruitment campaign which focuses on the real life things that families can provide to children in need.

PSFPA partnered with Hersheypark, a large amusement park in Pennsylvania to provide foster families with discounted tickets to the park. If not for this discount, many foster families would not be able to take their families to this well-known Pennsylvania attraction. (See Attachment #10)

PSFPA uses this website to allow foster, adoptive and kinship families to register with the website so that PSFPA can maintain electronic contact with families across the Commonwealth regarding upcoming events and activities, including legislative activities such as upcoming hearings about proposed legislation.

PSFPA maintains a toll free telephone number, 1-800-951-5151 for resource families and others interested in learning more about foster care to call. The telephone number is staffed from 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. daily and in addition to providing general information about foster care, staff respond to other issues and concerns expressed by current foster families including where to seek help in working with their agency or how to handle allegations of child abuse.

In addition to the legislative activities mentioned, PSFPA has testified in front of the Pennsylvania Legislature regarding proposed child welfare legislation numerous times and always represents the interests of the resource families and the children they serve.

PSFPA holds an annual Legislative Awareness event each May in recognition of Foster Family Month. A variety of activities have been held, including legislative breakfasts attended by resource families, representatives of the Pennsylvania Legislature and child welfare professionals as well as public awareness events held in the Pennsylvania Capitol. This year's event, to be held in the Pennsylvania Capitol Rotunda, will feature a children's choir along with awards given to a

member of the house and a senator. Speakers, as always, will include foster children, and resource families as well as politicians and members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate.

PSFPA recognizes outstanding foster families, foster parent associations and professionals during its annual Awards Banquet held during the annual conference. Nominations for awardees are sought from foster parent associations, agencies and the general public. Awardees are recognized during an annual banquet where they are presented with a keepsake and given the opportunity to address those in attendance.

PSFPA is a long time member of the National Foster Parent Association. PSFPA also serves on the Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) Advisory Committee and is a member of the Promoting a Positive Perception of Permanency Subcommittee.

In addition to sponsoring an annual conference, PSFPA participates in the annual SWAN Permanency conference and the CASSP. PSFPA also participates in the annual Independent Living Youth Retreat sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and participates in NFPA's annual conference.

PSFPA has worked collaboratively with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare to develop two different media campaigns. The first one, which launched in 2004, included a television commercial, brochure, posters and print advertisements. The campaign was very successful and calls to the 800 number increased 400%.

PSFPA recently collaborated with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to develop a new media campaign that is designed to recruit new foster and adoptive families. Three new television advertisements were created based upon information provided to DPW's media contractor, the Neiman Group, by foster and adoptive families who were surveyed during the annual PSFPA conference. The new television campaign began running in January 2007 and will continue across the state until September. The new media campaign is also very successful, primarily because of the cooperation of PSFPA and their membership who provided the idea that became our campaign to the Neiman Group.

PSFPA is an association that is committed to improving the lives of all Pennsylvania resource families and more importantly, the children they serve. PSFPA has established working relationships with foster, adoptive and kinship families across the Commonwealth. But perhaps more importantly, they recognize the need to improve the public perception of foster children and the families who serve them. PSFPA recognizes that many people do not understand exactly what foster care is or how children end up in foster care and do not realize that the children in care are there through no fault of their own. PSFPA has struggled to make their needs known and to make it known that the responsibility of caring for children in foster care belongs to every citizen, not just to the families who take the children into their homes. In order to provide many of the services they are able to offer, PSFPA has had to make connections with businesses, organizations, local communities and other stakeholders, including the Pennsylvania Legislature to inform them about foster care and the needs of the children and families they serve.

What began as a small association so many years ago in the kitchen of a foster family has grown into a statewide association that is well respected across Pennsylvania and is recognized for the outstanding advocacy efforts and services it provides to foster children, children adopted from foster care and the families who serve them. Thank you for your continued support and most of all for what you do to help the most vulnerable members of our society, the children.