



As foster care placements increase in Georgia, intensive services offer hope

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

A recent report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) found some alarming trends about foster care in the United States.

According to the report, the total number of children in foster care in the U.S. continues to increase. In 2016, there were 437,000 American children in foster care, an increase of 10,000 from 2015, and nearly 40,000 more than in 2011.

HHS found similar trends in Georgia. In our state, there were nearly 12,400 children in foster in 2016, compared with less than 11,000 in 2015, and only about 7,600 in 2011. In fact, the report noted Georgia is one of four states with the largest increases in foster care from 2015 to 2016.

Most alarming, federal health officials found parental substance abuse was a factor in 34 percent of foster care cases in 2016, up from 32 percent in 2015. Increases in foster care placements over the past four years have largely mirrored the increase in opioid abuse.

Placing children in foster care is often necessary to protect their health and safety. In addition to parental substance abuse, child neglect and abuse, and housing insecurity might all lead authorities to conclude children may be best served by removing them from their home.

But foster care is not a panacea. It can be traumatic for children – especially if they are separated from their siblings or moved from one foster home to another – and may not address the underlying family problems that led to them being removed in the first place. Ideally, families should receive the help they need before children are removed.

Helping families in crisis, before it becomes necessary to place children in foster care, is the idea behind the Home Again program. Started by Highland Rivers Health in 2016, Home Again is an intensive approximately two-week program that works with an entire family – children, siblings, parents and other caregivers – to address their most pressing needs and problems.

With a multi-disciplinary team that includes therapists, a nurse, physician, peer counselors and case managers, Home Again can provide timely intervention for mental illness, substance abuse and emotional problems, and the problems those issues cause in the family dynamic. Home Again also links families to community resources to address other needs that can cause stress in the home – food insecurity, help with utilities, and health and medical problems, among others.

By helping families get the treatment and help they need, Home Again aims to stabilize families and solve critical issues, reducing the likelihood that children will need to be removed from their

home. Currently Highland Rivers offers Home Again in Gordon, Gilmer and Floyd counties, and is hoping to expand it further in our service area.

But for families facing serious emotional, mental health or substance abuse challenges, Highland Rivers offers outpatient mental health and substance use treatment services for residents of every county we serve. We have therapists that specialize in family therapy, children and adolescents, adults and veterans. Like Home Again, these services help families solve problems and find other resources in their communities to increase stability and build family cohesion.

Highland Rivers also offers intensive outpatient and residential substance use treatment that can help parents recover from substance abuse and addiction, including opioid addiction – a factor in more than a third of foster care placements.

Although foster care is critical for some children, keeping children with their parents and in their home – if possible – is better for children in the long term. If you or your family is facing mental health or substance abuse challenges, contact Highland Rivers for help at (800) 729-5700. We want to help children and families be strong and stay together, and help them have a safe, nurturing home, again.