

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A SECOND CHANCE FOR PARENTS TO PARENT

EDISON— She had just turned 12 when authorities, citing parental neglect, determined she should be removed from her mother’s custody. For the next 20 months the girl moved from one temporary foster home to another — four different temporary residences in 20 months. Today, she’s 14 and she and mom have been reunited in Ocean County and are moving on with their lives — together.

The teenager, in fact, just proudly graduated from eight grade and she and her mother are among 12 families from throughout the state being cited by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) for taking whatever steps were necessary to reunite and bond anew after the children had been removed from the family homes.

LSNJ’s annual celebration, known as Family Reunification Day, will be at 2 p.m. June 23 at the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick. As with past ceremonies, there will likely be many tears and hugs from the reunited families, as well as the spectators witnessing the outpouring of emotions at the public event.

Every year the state Division of Child Protection & Permanency (DCP&P) removes several thousand alleged neglected or abused children from their parents’ custody and about half eventually are returned after the parents have completed various self-help programs involving proper parenting skills and other needs. Essentially, for most it amounts to a much-desired

second chance for reframing the family unit. Still, sociologists and child welfare advocates note there often are lingering collateral problems, especially for school-age children who have had their educations disrupted by moving from one foster placement to another, resulting in periodic changes of schools districts and little continuity with classmates, teachers and lesson plans. The experts say research, for example, shows school- age children in foster care nationally on average attend up to nine different schools by the time they turn 18, and that even a child who changes school more than twice is 50 per cent more likely to ultimately become a school dropout. Further, when all is said and done, between a third to half such youths ultimately exit the foster care system without a high school diploma or GED — a key factor in what their future portends.

That school instability dilemma is the focal point of this year's LSNJ Family Reunification Day celebration, with child advocates at LSNJ and others saying it's an issue that needs more public attention, as well as measures to confront and minimize the problem.

The 14-year-old Ocean County girl who just passed eighth grade was in and out of foster placements for nearly two years, but was fortunate in that she had at least one very caring foster mother — known as a resource mother — as well as a string of other advocates that made sure the biological mom was kept well informed about the girl's activities and even made significant suggestions prior to being reunited.

Experts say one of the problems generally is that such coordination, especially in regards to schooling, all too often is not the norm, though state authorities increasingly are trying to change that.

That's crucial says Jeyanthi Rajaraman, supervising attorney for Legal Services' Family Representation Project. "Maintaining at least a stable school environment clearly reduces the

inevitable trauma of being removed from the family home for neglect or abuse, and helps the children more easily advance educationally and socially. They are with the same classmates and playmates, and they are far more likely to be in the school district familiar with their academic needs and family problems. It's so important for a foster child's future."

A number of experts on the issue have been interviewed by LSNJ and videos of their comments will be shown at the Family Reunification Day gathering. Included will be the perspectives of attorney Cara Chambers of the Legal Aid Society in New York.

"When a child is removed from the family home and loses day-to-day contact with the parent, with their family, with siblings, oftentimes schools can be the only source of stability that remains in a child's life. And from an emotional standpoint that can be incredibly important," she said. "Oftentimes children have very strong relationships and ties with teachers, with classmates, with guidance counselors, with other members of the school community, and having that aspect of their life remain stable while everything else is in turmoil, can be incredibly helpful."

Generally, most recommendations for dealing with the school instability issue involve more intense coordination and planning efforts among state authorities, school districts, child advocates and biological and foster parents.

Superior Court Judge Madelin F. Einbinder, the presiding jurist of the Ocean County Family Court, and Maura McInerney, senior attorney for the Education Law Center in Philadelphia, will be the featured speakers at the Family Reunification Day event.

The 12 reunited families are from Camden, Essex, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Morris, Ocean and Warren Counties.

Tributes also will be paid to a number of child advocates, DCP&P staffers, resource parents and others, who are being cited as “Reunification Day Heroes” for their efforts in bringing the reunifications to fruition.

The event is part of the American Bar Association’s celebration of Reunification Month.

Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state’s Legal Services system, a network of five independent non-profit corporations and has been providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties for more than 50 years. Since its inception, LSNJ has provided representation in more than 2.4 million cases.

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