



Media Release

Contact:

Kate Luck, DHS Public Information Coordinator
(501) 682-8650

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Parents Who Adopted Children Detail Effects of Abuse
Advocates, others gather on Capitol steps to Observe Child Abuse Prevention Month

Two mothers who have adopted from Arkansas's foster care system told a crowd gathered at the Capitol Wednesday that children who suffer abuse will face struggles even after they are removed, but can thrive if they have stable, loving homes. The women spoke during the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Rally against Child Abuse.

Ashley Herring of Heber Springs, who fostered and later adopted a 13-year-old girl, said her daughter was abused emotionally and physically until age ten. She said her daughter witnessed drug use and was taught to lie to authorities. Now, she struggles with honesty and trust. Herring says she is making wonderful progress through the help of a stable home life and professional counseling.

"We are hopeful that she will continue to heal, mature, and recover from the trauma that she experienced in her early childhood, but some painful memories will never be forgotten," said Herring.

Herring emphasized that prevention and early intervention are key when dealing with abuse.

"The earlier we are able to identify a family in crisis, the more time we have to help them identify resources, develop a support system and prevent the family unit from disrupting," she said.

Melissa Choate's family has also been a foster family for four years and adopted a son through the state. Her father-in-law also served as a juvenile judge for more than two decades.

"He saw many cases of abuse through multiple generations of the same family," said Choate, also of Heber Springs. "It is never a child's fault that they were neglected or abused and child abuse prevention is not something that we should rely solely on law enforcement and government agencies. I believe that each of us has a responsibility to take an active role in some way to care for our neighbors."

Milton Graham, who serves as area director for the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), spoke about the importance of engaging families to prevent child abuse before it happens. In Arkansas, DCFS was involved in 33,353 investigations of alleged maltreatment in State Fiscal Year 2013.

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He also spoke about the state's Differential Response program, which is a new method of responding to low-risk child maltreatment. Rather than approach a family in an accusatory manner, staff take on a more supportive and engaging role so they can help address a family's needs and keep them from cycling in and out of the child welfare system.

Herring, who also works with The CALL to recruit foster and adoptive families, said she is seeing that approach work in her own community.

"Our community now has a single mom's home that is empowering women by helping them locate jobs, homes, and teaching them life skills. Our desire is to get to the root issue of a family in need and to help that family reunify healthier and stronger than before."

So far, Arkansas has used the differential response program to serve more than 2,800 families, Graham said.

"We don't want to take children into foster care if there is a safe way to leave them with their families," Graham said. "So we are making the goal of supporting families is at the center of everything we do."

He said while the new family-centered interventions will not work in every child abuse and neglect case, it will allow DCFS caseworkers additional time to focus on the more egregious cases of abuse.

After the rally, DCFS will be hanging signs in the Capitol Rotunda that show the number of maltreatment investigations by county. Those signs will be on display for a week.

To learn more about how to prevent child abuse go to www.stoparchildabuse.org. To learn more about becoming a foster parent, go to www.fosterarkansas.org.