

## Loving Homes Are Needed to End the Foster Care Crisis

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May 3, 2016

On any given day, there are more than 415,000 children in the foster care system in our nation and more than 2,000 children in our region alone who have been removed from their homes due to abuse, abandonment or neglect. In Broward County, at least nine children wait each night for foster home placement. And there is a great need for loving, Christian homes to take in these children.



“Last year there were 332 kids waiting for homes who did not get placed in a foster family in Broward County,” according to Tom Lukasik, vice president of community engagement for 4KIDS of South Florida, a faith-based, state-licensed foster program based in Fort Lauderdale. That’s about 28 percent of the foster kids in Broward. Without a foster family to care for them, these kids are placed in group homes, shelters or moved out of the county where they lose all sense of normalcy, Lukasik explained. This is the case for about 38 percent of the children in foster care in Palm Beach County, he added.

Because many people are reluctant to take a teenage foster child into their home, Lukasik explained that sadly “a good kid comes into care and if there is no one to take that teen into their home, they go to a group home where there may not be enough supervision or support, they may be bullied, school begins to fall apart and they begin to be brought down.”

These kids need love and guidance. They deserve hope and a dream for the future in order to break the cycle that is developing.

Statistics provided by the Justice Project have found that young women who were in foster care are six times more likely to experience an unplanned pregnancy. Thirty percent of those experiencing homelessness were once in the foster care system. More than 70 percent of inmates have spent some time in the foster care system. And 60 percent of children involved in human trafficking were in foster care at one time.

However, Christian foster families can make a difference.

The scriptures in Isaiah 1:17, encourage us to “Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless...”

### **Every church = Every child**

Now there is a move among the churches in South Florida to unite around this cause. On a quarterly basis, churches gather in Palm Beach and Broward counties to fast, pray and support one another.

“Christ Fellowship was the catalyst to bring us into the fold and ask how the church can have a huge impact in 2016,” said Charles Bender, founding executive director of Place of Hope, a faith-based, state-licensed foster care program based in Palm Beach Gardens. “They decided it’s through foster care. Now individual churches are pushing these initiatives in their own churches and supporting those within their church who choose to become foster families,” he said.

Todd Mullins, pastor of Christ Fellowship, explained, “The most basic application of our faith is to love Jesus and love others... beginning with the “least of these,” such as orphans.... If there are people hurting in our community, the church must be the first to step up and offer hope and healing.”

In fact the scriptures call for it in James 1:27, which states, “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress ...” (NLT).

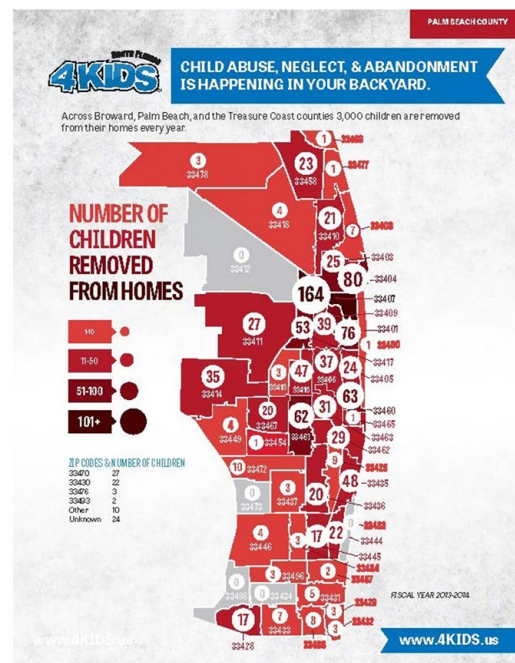
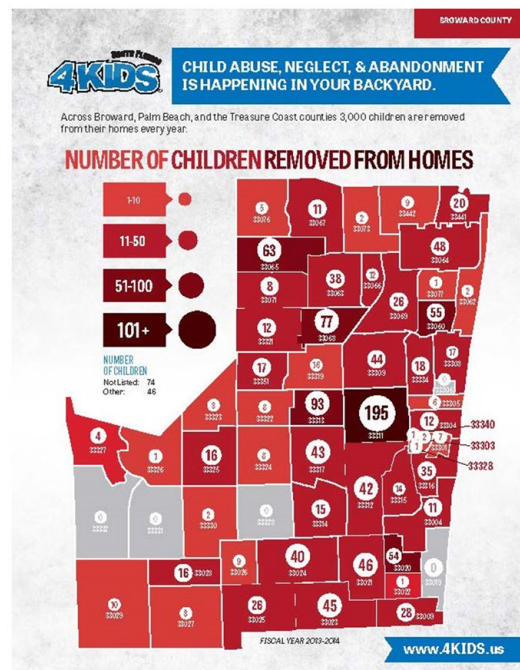
What is the hope for the Church United effort? “Simply, that there would be no more waiting children,” said Mullins. “Though we have an amazing group of wonderful foster families, there are currently more foster children than local foster homes. In our region, nearly 250 children are sent out of their home area because of a lack of available space; dozens are sent to temporary shelters. When Church United collaboratively sees and responds to this need, those children will have homes.”

Lukasik said, “There are currently 1,173 children in foster care in Broward and 1,100 churches. If one family in each church took in one child, there would be no more waiting children. All it takes is every church to take one child.”

## Families of faith wanted

Although child welfare is still a state function, Bender explained the state welcomes people of faith. “It has been proven that kids thrive in places covered in faith, so it makes sense,” he added.

It made a difference in the life of Tex Guignard. At 16-years-old Tex was called into the office at his high school where two officers were waiting for him. Because his father was a drug addict, he would be placed in foster care. He and his nine siblings were separated. “When I got to my placement, I laid in bed and started crying. I just wanted my family to be put back together and be normal,” he said. “Thankfully, the Christian community invested in me and showed me I had a purpose,” said Tex, who now gives other kids hope through his work at a crisis intake center.





# Open Hearts to Children in Crisis

## The Tully family

After learning about about foster care through volunteer involvement in the annual Big Cardio fundraiser each May for 4KIDS, Hunter Tully began to feel called to become a foster parent. But it wasn't until after hearing Pastor Doug Sauder, former president of 4KIDS and pastor of Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale, speak on the topic that his wife, Caryn, began to hear the call. "To be honest, I didn't have this passionate desire to foster," said Caryn. Then one day I asked God specifically about it while praying. My eyes floated down the page to Luke 9:48 when Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me..." Okay God. There was no audible voice, but I knew this was God speaking to me."



Foster parents since January 2015, they have welcomed 10 children from newborns to two-year-olds into their home. They both say the best things they have experienced about fostering is the ability to share their faith. "Because of fostering, our eyes have been opened to the brokenness and hurt around us," said Caryn. "Not only do we get to pour love into these children, but sometimes (depending on the circumstances) we get the opportunity to know the families. For one young mom in jail through letters and visiting, we developed a mentoring relationship and got to share the life transforming power of Jesus and His love and grace toward her. Without fostering, our paths would never have crossed. Lastly, because of fostering our children are growing in compassion and love as they see the need and get to actively do something about it."

## The Saap family

Chris and Michelle Saap, who have a 5-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son of their own, are currently caring for two sisters in foster care. Beginning as foster parents six years ago, they have taken in about 24 kids and mainly take in siblings. "The average length of time a child has been in our home has been a year and three months," said Michelle. She said they got involved with foster care while they were trying to get pregnant with their second child and their biggest concern was dealing with behaviors that are difficult as these kids go through their emotions. "You have to find what works," said Michelle, who has taken advantage



of E.P.I.C. parenting classes offered by 4KIDS. She said getting involved in foster care has made her a better parent to her own children.



Michelle said she has been blessed by the support she has received from volunteers. “We got a phone call from a lady at church who was interested in fostering and wanted to help. Now she comes in, makes dinner for us twice a week, and watches the younger kids while I work with the older kids on homework. We’ve had respite help from families who take our children for the weekend when we just need a break. And a lady volunteers to come and do our foster daughters’ hair. It definitely takes a village,” she said.

### **The Curtis Family**

Seeing Chris’ parents become medical foster care providers inspired Chris and Jessica Curtis to become volunteers at one of the His House cottages in the early days of their marriage. At first, Chris would bring his students for service hours, but it quickly turned into an activity for his family. The couple was especially impacted by the babies and toddlers who wanted to be held and carried from the moment they walked in. “God put the thought in our minds and



on our hearts then that we could impact one little life by bringing him or her into our home.” They have been foster parents since December 2014 and currently have a foster daughter who has been with them for 15 months.

Chris and Jessica feel that their biggest challenges are the “what ifs” and not having control or total knowledge of the children’s situation. But when they become scared or sad, they rely on and “remember God’s love and that He loves [these children] infinitely more than we ever could; His purposes are above ours and His timing is perfect.”

They encourage others to considering fostering that, “whether you love and care for a child for one week, one month, one year, or a lifetime, the love of Jesus that you will show them can make an impact for an eternity.”

### **The Bernard Family**

Melissa Bernard, a single mom with three children of her own, recently made the decision to become licensed as a foster parent with Mount Bethel. Once a foster child herself, Bernard said, “because I was in the system and I know what it’s like, I wanted to give back.”



Entering foster care at age 14, she was initially placed in a shelter with boys and girls who were very diverse. “I was scared and nervous and wondered, are these people going to hurt me?” However, Bernard said, “My foster mom made me feel so comfortable and natural. She’s still involved in my life today. And I want to do that for another kid.”

Having shared her personal story with her kids, Bernard said her children are also very receptive to helping a foster child. “My son is willing to share his room and his play station.”  
Asked what she would tell someone who is considering becoming a foster parent, Bernard said, “Give it a try. All children are not bad or disrespectful. Give them a chance and you just might fall in love with the child. Don’t be afraid of the unknown. Move forward and give it a chance.”

## Faith Based Foster Care Services Make a Difference

When taking the step to care for a child in foster care, most agree that having the proper training and support is critical to success. Here are four faith-based foster care agencies who are making a big difference in South Florida.

### Place of Hope

Celebrating 15 years of service, Place of Hope is the largest family-based state-licensed children’s organization in the region with 260 youth in their care daily. Based in Palm Beach Gardens, Place of Hope serves children and families at several campuses as well as recruiting, training and supporting people of faith to become licensed foster families.

With cottages in Palm Beach Gardens, West Palm Beach and Boca Raton, Place of hope provides family-style residential foster care (emergency and long-term). Joann’s Cottages provide a family-style maternity home for young mothers and mothers-to-be. Youth aging out of the foster care system receive residential support and life-skills development through the Village of Hopes in Palm Beach Gardens. Seven Stars Cottage is a home

for abused and neglected boys. And Hope House provides a faith-based safe house for victims of domestic minor sex trafficking that provides 24-hour live-in care as well as educational and therapeutic services.

“To anyone considering foster care, I want to say lean forward and learn more of what it is,” encouraged Charles Bender, founding executive director of Place of Hope. “There are a lot of ways you can help. Maybe you can help with diapers, tutoring or prayer, maybe you know someone who is fostering and you can get involved supporting them... We just need more.”

Place of Hope regularly hosts the following orientation meetings for new foster families

First Monday of the month at 6:30 p.m. in Hobe Sound

Second Thursday at 6:30 p.m. in Boca Raton

Third Thursday at 6:30 p.m. in Port Saint Lucie, and on the

Fourth Thursday at 6:30 p.m. in Palm Beach Gardens.

To find out more email [homesofhope@placeofhope.com](mailto:homesofhope@placeofhope.com) or call 561-775-7195.

