

ARKANSANS FOR

Children's Advocacy Issue – FALL 2023

# SmartJustice



## COMMUNITIES CARING FOR CHILDREN

Judge Tjuana  
Byrd Manning

## A FILM & A DREAM

Children Share  
Hopes For  
Adoption

## THERE IS A HOPE AND FUTURE

Former Foster  
Child Allie Graves

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## THE 2 A.M. PHONE CALLS

FOSTER WORK  
IS PERSONAL  
FOR CASE  
WORKERS

GOV. SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS

# A SAFE PLACE

FOR EVERY ARKANSAS CHILD





ARKANSANS FOR  
**SmartJustice**

A PUBLICATION OF  
**RESTORE HOPE ARKANSAS**

1400 W Markham St, Ste 300, Little Rock, AR 72201  
501-404-9865 – smartjustice.org – restorehopear.org

## Children's Advocacy Issue Fall 2023

VOLUME 2 – ISSUE 1

### Our Mission

To reduce incarceration and the need for foster care through collaborative partnerships.

### Our Model

We do this by utilizing our Crisis to Career model and our collaborative case management system, which allow for effective partnerships between agencies, community service providers and faith-based organizations, resulting in significantly better outcomes for communities.

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## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE



## A Chance at Life

**W**ELCOME TO THE LATEST ISSUE OF **SMART JUSTICE** MAGAZINE, WHERE WE FOCUS ON THE WELL-BEING AND FUTURE OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM. In this edition, we spotlight visionary individuals who are reshaping the system and breathing new life into the concept of care and support.

In February, Governor Sanders issued a compelling executive order, underscoring the need to Protect Children, Support Families, and Improve Foster Care. With approximately 4,000 children in foster care as of January 2023, this call couldn't be timelier.

The stories shared here shed light on the challenges, from the shortage of foster families to the plight of those aging out of the system. But they also teem with hope and action, inviting us all to be part of the solution.

As you read, we encourage you to consider your role in this narrative. Whether through fostering, adopting, mentoring, or supporting, your contribution can make Arkansas a beacon of opportunity and promise for every child.

Together, we can shape destinies and improve futures, weaving a tapestry of acts that make Arkansas the best place to raise a family. ◀

**Paul Chapman,**  
Executive Director  
Restore Hope Arkansas

**“TOGETHER ... IT'S OUR ROLE TO FILL THE BIGGEST GAPS IN CARING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES BEFORE, DURING, AND BEYOND FOSTER CARE IN OUR STATE.”**



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### ON THE COVER

Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders.  
Photography by Amy Bell.

## AN AGENCY FILLED WITH HOPE AND REDEMPTION



Second Chance Ranch, Inc.

**SECOND CHANCE YOUTH RANCH IS A FAITH BASED, PRIVATE PLACEMENT AGENCY PROVIDING A COMMUNITY OF HOMES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE.** Serving those who have the biggest needs, including large sibling groups, teenagers, and children with therapeutic needs, 2CYR is passionate about impacting the lives of youth in foster care in a very real and personal way. Our appreciation to Perry Black, his gracious staff and foster parents for partnering with us on this meaningful, impactful issue of *Smart Justice* magazine.

# THE CHURCHES' ROLE IN FOSTER CARE

From two members of Every Child Arkansas

## Christen Butler The Call

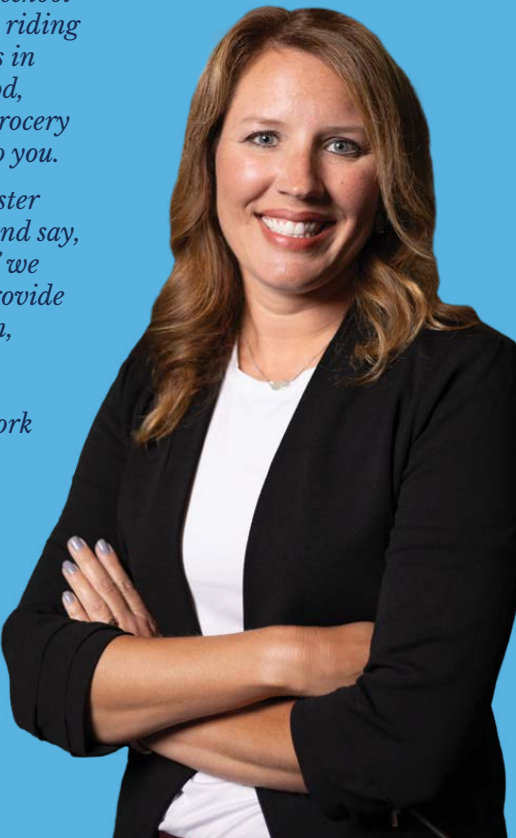
*Right now the majority of kids have to be placed out of their county. That creates a twofold issue. One, they're separated from the bonds that they did have – they lose that relationship with maybe a church, a coach, a counselor, a teacher, their friends. Now they're separated from their home and their biological family and every other connection that they have. And it doubles the workload on the state, overloading the system that's already overloaded.*

*This mission field is local, and it's right here in your own neighborhood. These kids are in school next to your kids, riding bikes and scooters in your neighborhood, shopping at the grocery store right next to you.*

*Once potential foster families step up and say, 'We're interested,' we train them, we provide trauma education, and we really work to engage a community network around them and provide support, continuing education and immediate care needs.*

There are  
approximately  
**4,200**  
CHILDREN  
IN FOSTER CARE  
IN ARKANSAS TODAY.

WE HAVE AROUND  
**1,600**  
FOSTER  
FAMILIES  
IN THE STATE, BUT WE  
NEED CLOSER TO  
**2,400.**



## Derek Brown Arkansas Baptist Children and Family Ministries

*The children in foster care today will grow up to become parents. One of the reasons why we now face such a big challenge is that we didn't do (foster care) well during the previous generation.*

*Many parents of children in foster care were in foster care themselves at some point. We can't let children go into the next generation without the support that they need to understand healthy relationships and provide for their future children. We can fix this for the next generation and do it well this time around.*

*When we look at Scripture, the preferred place of care for children is always in the family. We want to do everything we can as an organization to support that and to make it possible. But we can't do that alone; it takes all of the church stepping up.*

*If each of our churches could take that mission on, we would create a proactive solution for this generation to change that trajectory for the next generation.*

**IF 1% OF EACH OF OUR CHURCHES** actively fostered on a regular basis, we could do **MORE THAN SOLVE THE URGENCY** of the crisis – we could create healthy families in our community. **IS 1% OF YOUR CHURCH WILLING TO STEP UP FOR THIS SEASON?**







## SEEING COMMUNITIES *as Family*

By Robin Mero

**“I FEEL LIKE,  
SOMEWHERE  
ALONG THE  
WAY, WE LOST  
THE SENSE OF  
COMMUNITY THAT  
I GREW UP WITH.  
MY NEIGHBORS  
WERE PART OF  
MY EXPERIENCE.”**

**- JUDGE TJUANA  
BYRD MANNING**

◀ **PHOTO:** Judge Tjuana Byrd Manning serves Pulaski and Perry counties in the Juvenile Circuit Court.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KC'S PHOTOGRAPHY

## **S**PREAD YOUR WINGS, ARKANSAS, AND TAKE UNDERNEATH THEM THE WELFARE OF THE CHILDREN IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD.

For our next generation to thrive, the children must have that guidance and strength from their communities, says Tjuana Byrd Manning, Juvenile Circuit Court Judge in Pulaski and Perry counties. So many children are overlooked in Arkansas today.

“Children are too often fending for themselves. They are trying to figure out what they’re going to eat. They have parents who either don’t have the capacity or are stretched too thin, or have their own adverse childhood experiences that have carried over into their parenting.

“And so kids find themselves just struggling to survive, doing the best they can. But it’s way short of what is needed for kids to be healthy and make the kind of progress that we want them to make.

“I feel like, somewhere along the way, we lost the sense of community that I grew up with. My neighbors were part of my experience; if there was an adult around me, that person had some say, an influence in what was going to happen with me.”

In many families, generational problems, traumas and poverty feel normal.

“Clearly, what the parent or parents have experienced plays over into what our children are seeing and are experiencing, if not addressed. Kids find themselves just struggling to survive, doing the best they can. But it’s way short of what is needed for kids to be healthy and make the kind of progress that we want them to make,” she says. “At the end of the day, it’s happening on our watch.”

Fresh from law school, Manning worked in Juvenile Court for Circuit Judge Joyce Warren. “And the bug hit me,” she said. “I knew that was the work that I wanted to wake up to in the morning and do. Judge Warren is one of the smartest people I know. She knew the law; she was super smart. But there was this ‘Aunt Joyce effect’ with the way she managed the people in our courtroom. And I had to say, I want to be that when I grow up ... I need to be part of the solution to improve the status of our kids.

“We all have a responsibility. It’s everybody’s responsibility. Our society is what we make it, what we put into it, how we contribute to it,” she says.

Manning’s wish list includes more therapists who are willing to work with children.

“For the therapists who are in these private practices, who are doing a great job at the work that they do, if they could carve out a space for a child or two who are part of this process. We need more therapy for our children. I would imagine it’s hard. I know it’s probably draining, but our kids need it.”

She also longs for peer mentors to support parents who face lost custody of their children,

because those parents struggle to see the state’s efforts as helpful, rather than oppositional.

“Matching people who’ve had the experience of the foster care system, of being a parent who had to go through this process and successfully reunify with their family, with parents that are going through the process,” she says. “Because a lot of times the court is expecting the parents to do most of the work, to change the situation, to be able to put the family back together. And if people who have successfully done that could handhold, walk together with, explain that although this feels like everyone is against you, the objective is to get your family together – and the quicker you can fix your mind to that, the more success you are likely to have.

“When families get back together, they often realize, ‘I thought you were against me, but I now see that this family service worker is my best friend.’ That doesn’t happen all the time, but the sooner that they could get to that point, it changes the mindset of the parent to believe that this process is about keeping families together and then putting them back together when they’ve had to be separated.”

Judge Manning oversees cases involving delinquency, Families in Need of Services, and child welfare or dependency neglect cases where children are removed from the legal custody of their parents to protect them from a risk of harm, abuse or neglect. Often there are mental health and substance use issues, or parents face criminal charges and there’s no other legal caretaker for a child.

“The most amazing days for me are the days when I can play, because I’m good about queuing up a song on YouTube when we know something good is going to happen. When a family is able to reunify, because a parent has worked his or her butt off to make sure that their child knows that they are a priority, I que up ‘Happy’ or ‘Celebrate,’ and we have a party. When families can’t get back together, when a child gets a forever family, we make a celebration about that, too.

“The community was part of making me who I am, so I feel a responsibility to do that for others. Then when the community is involved with families, kids are less likely to become part of any of the court systems to begin with.” ◀



## ARMS OUTREACH AT Searcy's Fellowship Bible Church

By Robin Mero

*What is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)*

**A**T THE MOMENT A CHILD IS BORN WHO WILL BE ADOPTED, JOY AND SORROW COLLIDE.

The experience is hard to describe in words, says Pastor Chris Massey. Loss and gain are simultaneously experienced by both the birthing mother and the family who will take the child.

Massey was adopted as an infant by his mother's new husband, so when he and his wife were looking to start their own family in 2014 they started with adoption. They asked to be matched with a birth mother who would be open to continued relationship.

"Our heart wanted that; there is loss on both sides, but we wanted to gain a relationship with

the birth mother, not something that was separate – to have family together in that," he says. The adoption agency called on a Friday to say we'd been matched. We met the birth mother on Tuesday, and the baby surprised us all by being born on Saturday – five weeks early. "It was a crazy whirlwind story. From beginning to end it was about seven or eight months. And Stella Kate has changed our lives," Massey says. Wallace, a biological daughter, joined the family next, and then Ada Grace, now 2, through a second adoption.

"I love the girl gang that the Lord has blessed us with," Massey says. "And that's how our family got started on adoption. And my heart has been

▲ **PHOTO:** Pastor Chris Massey (left) talks to congregation members in the lobby of Fellowship Bible Church in Searcy.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLLY MOORE

**"IF YOU TAKE NEW CHILDREN INTO YOUR HOME OR HAVE A BUSY SCHEDULE AND DON'T HAVE TIME TO GET A MEAL TOGETHER, YOU CAN STOP BY THE CHURCH AND GET SOME SOUP OR A CASSEROLE."**

– CHRIS MASSEY  
OPERATIONS PASTOR  
AT FELLOWSHIP  
BIBLE CHURCH

changed in such a way that I'm compelled to ask: How can adoptive families be supported? How can foster families be supported? So that they can be successful in their families and marriages and all the areas that can tend to blow up when things get tough. And that's my heart behind trying to encourage our church body." Massey is operations pastor at Fellowship Bible Church in Searcy, where all families – and increasingly those who've adopted or are fostering – can turn for everyday practical support, discipleship, prayer and fellowship.

"I feel like it's what God calls us to do, each and every one of us, to take care of the least of these and come along and serve them as well," Massey says.

The church operates within 70,000 square feet of what used to be a Kohler sink warehouse in Searcy. Space is gradually being converted to support programs and ideas for helping the community. Church staff noticed in the late 2010s that more church members were becoming foster parents, and sometimes those families needed extra help. "Then those families started adopting a lot of those children when reunification wasn't happening. So there were some greater needs," Massey says. "We realized that not only can we help our own foster families, but we can help all the foster families in the city. We became the "casserole church" for the community. If you take new children into your home or have a busy schedule and don't have time to get a meal together, you can stop by the church and get some soup or a casserole."

Recently the church organized a service day to go into local homes and help foster families with

laundry, car detailing, yard work and projects as needed. Another vision has developed to build a visitation area where biological parents can comfortably and safely visit with their children who are in foster care. "It's heartbreaking to go to Chick-fil-A or McDonald's and see a biological parent trying to bond with their kids and show them love and care. We knew that we could be a part of giving them a space to just be, in privacy." Someday, the church hopes to build such a dedicated indoor area, and for now existing preschool areas are made available for this type of use.

"We have enough space for anyone in the state who needs to have a visitation in White County," Massey says. The church building is open from about 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., and a coffee shop, Imago Dei, operates in the lobby.

Recently, the church brought on staff a 100 Families caseworker who collaborates with existing community resources to help a family in crisis get help with a spectrum of practical needs: housing, transportation, food, employment, education and/or recovery. Paired with the church's ministries, most any needs that a family might encounter can be addressed.

"When people come in, they might meet our case manager, our ministry assistant, any pastors who are on staff. Everyone is on board with what is going on, and anybody who's in that front office will be there to offer some water or food or whatever is needed to show love and respect. It's truly amazing to see someone walk out carrying groceries, having been seen and loved and heard for those few minutes they were in our offices." ◀

► **PHOTO:** Pastor Chris Massey and his wife Jennifer with their daughters Stella Kate, Wallace, and Ada Grace.





## A DAY IN THE LIFE: Foster Families

By Robin Mero



**N APPROACH TO THE HOME OF DENNIS AND NATALIE BERRY IN GARLAND COUNTY, A CHILD NOTICES THE ROAMING BARNYARD ANIMALS: CHICKENS, TURKEYS, GOATS, POT BELLED PIGS.**

At the door, the family dogs greet – one a tail wagger, the other a barker.

Come in, welcome, set down your bags. Are you hungry? Here's the bedroom where you'll sleep. Do you use a nightlight? Let me give you a quick tour of the house, then the other children will introduce you to the farm animals. Before dinner we clean up; soiled clothes go straight into the laundry. Here are stacks of pajamas, take your pick.

The first night's dinner is familiar, comforting food; perhaps a Hot Pocket or pizza roll. Definitely

ice cream for a treat. Who can be tense while eating ice cream?

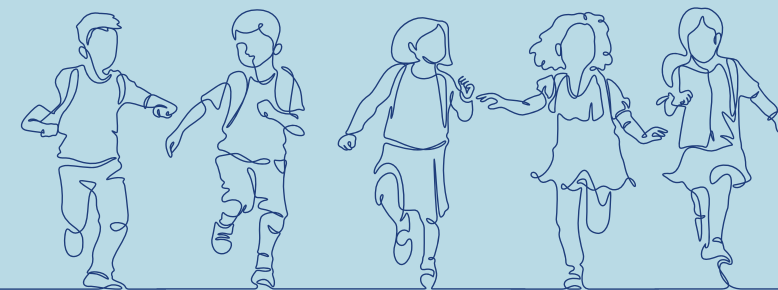
More than 170 children have come to the Berry foster home for a safe place to lay their heads until they can return home again, whether for a night, a week, or months.

The focus for initial hours and days is about softening the childrens' stress, de-escalating fear, and acclimating them to the Berry's busy lifestyle.

Because the Berrys do maintain their active routine. Whatever children are in their household,

**▲ PHOTO:** Dennis and Natalie Berry with their children, Chase and Juliana, and two dogs on their family farm in Garland County.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF FULLER-FREEMAN



## MORE THAN 170 CHILDREN

have come to the Berry foster home for a safe place to lay their heads until they can return home again

they bring them along – to luncheons, dinner parties, Razorback and Travelers games, church functions, the lake. They visit Florida or their Oklahoma farm to ride four-wheelers and motorcycles and chase cows.

The kids are often unaccustomed to the lifestyle. Some are surprised to sit night after night at a dinner table and be served a meal like meatloaf and mashed potatoes, green beans, and a big glass of milk.

Some kids don't understand healthy attachment – an expression of love or support feels uncomfortable. Hygiene habits may be lax.

**“THE IMPACT YOU CAN HAVE ON THE KID, THE HOPE YOU CAN GIVE THEM. THESE KIDS ARE GOING TO BE IN OUR COMMUNITY AND THEY’RE GOING TO BE PART OF OUR FUTURE.”**

**- DENNIS BERRY**

“These kids are not your biological children. They’ve been living in different circumstances and environments. They have a different set of expectations and a different way of accepting rules than our own children,” Dennis says. “It takes them a while to understand. And so we really need to be attentive to what the kids’ needs are and to give them distance. We have to use a lot of grace with the children that come into our home.”

The Berrys went through training to become foster parents in 2007, when a relative was facing tough times and they wanted to care for her children should she lose custody. During the training, they felt stunned by the dire need for foster parents in Arkansas.

“We found out how bad the situation is. There were several thousand children in care and not nearly enough homes. And we said, How can we be so selfish to only take our nephew and nieces into care? So we told the Department of Children Family Services that once we completed training, we would take any children that they needed us to take.”

Fifteen years later, they’re still saying “Yes” to the calls.

Typically the Berrys have one, two, or more siblings placed in their home for six to nine months or the life of the case.

“But there are so few homes and so few beds available, because a lot of foster homes are full already. So when the DCFS worker calls us, we’ll also take kids into care at night or for the weekend while the worker is calling other foster families, trying to find a more long-term placement.”

Dennis wants people to deeply consider opening their homes, particularly those in their 20s and 30s with youthful time and energy.

“The impact you can have on the kid, the hope you can give them. These kids are going to be in our community and they’re going to be part of our future. Do we want these kids to be struggling or do we want them to have the hope and the opportunity to see there’s another way to make their lives better?”

“People need to understand that when DCFS calls you to take a child, they’re going to tell you about the children and the situation, and you’re going to be able to make an educated decision, not rushed, and decide whether you’re going to take that child or children,” he says. “The great part about being a foster parent is you have total control of when you say, ‘Yes, I’ll take the child,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’”

“Don’t feel rushed, don’t feel hurried about it, and do what’s right for you and your family. Unfortunately, so many kids have come into care and there’s not enough homes that those calls to take kids come quite often – while we’re sitting here talking about this need I’ve already had two texts asking if I will take in some kids.”

Dennis wants foster parents to be prepared and informed, so he helps with training and speaks to groups.

“I think for a family to go the distance, for a family to stay engaged in foster care, you have to really step into the role and trust and believe that DCFS will allow you to do everything you need to do as a parent to take care of that child.

“You are the parent. DCFS wants what’s best for the children. And as long as you’re doing what’s best for the children, they want you to do that for the child. They want you to enroll those kids in the Boys and Girls Club. They want you to enroll them in volleyball or baseball. As long as it’s what’s best for the children, we’re going to get the support of DCFS.

“And have a personal relationship with your DCFS workers. Show up at the DCFS office. They’re very appreciative of you. Sometimes they’re too busy to show that, and don’t take that personally. They need you, and they’re going to support you as best they can.” ◀





# A Natural RESPONSE

By Robin Mero

**D**R. PHILLIP GOAD IS A TOXICOLOGIST WHO SPENT HIS CAREER HELPING COMMUNITIES PREPARE FOR, RESPOND TO, AND RECOVER FROM DISASTERS AND ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS, AND HE'S USING THOSE SKILLS NOW TO HELP STRENGTHEN ARKANSAS' SYSTEM OF FOSTER CARE.

Dr. Goad feels he's spent his career preparing for this work, particularly now that Gov. Sarah Sanders has prioritized child welfare. His ability to galvanize others to work together, along with his sense of humor and tendency to pinpoint efficiencies, makes him an ideal chair of the Executive Leadership Council for Every Child Arkansas, a coalition of almost 30 private organizations involved in foster care and adoption in Arkansas.

In 1982, Dr. Goad earned a PhD in interdisciplinary toxicology at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, and in 1997, he co-founded an environmental consulting firm in Little Rock called CTEH. He confronted crisis, desperation and loss in communities experiencing disasters and environmental threats such as disease outbreaks, floods, hurricanes, train derailments and oil spills. There's a correlation between environmental crisis and child welfare, Dr. Goad says, which he depicts by showing a photograph of an oil-filled rail car exploding in a spectacular fireball after a derailment. It was taken during a disaster that CTEH helped manage.

"It is a good picture of what it's like for a child to be removed from his or her family. All of a sudden, everything they know is gone, it's different, it's

# ONSE

changed," Dr. Goad says. "I have a sense of a need for urgency and readiness for us to respond, because 2,500 to over 3,000 times a year, that happens to a child's life in Arkansas."

Since 2012, Dr. Goad and his wife have worked with Lifesong for Orphans to help build schools in Ethiopia and Zambia. He joined the Board of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, formed in Arkansas by national leaders in child welfare who were challenged to "leave logos and egos at the door and start working together on behalf of children and families," he says. He became part of the group's national movement, *More Than Enough*, with a vision of "more than enough for children and families before, during and beyond foster care in every county in the U.S."). In 2011, he trained to be a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA).

After selling his company and retiring, Dr. Goad plunged more deeply into the child welfare arena in 1991, helping to form Every Child Arkansas. The movement advances the goals of *More Than Enough* by establishing broad objectives and facilitating collaboration between organizations in Arkansas to carry them out. Dr. Goad won't be satisfied until every child in every county of our state has a family and more than enough resources and support to prosper.

When Gov. Sanders took office, she quickly issued an executive order for a partnership with Every Child Arkansas and three state agencies – the Departments of Human Services, Education and Public Safety. The public and private entities are sharing data, measurements, and goals to create collective impact.

"When you talk about foster care you're going to hear the words 'not enough,' Dr. Goad says. "We don't have enough resources, we don't have enough families, we don't have enough support. And we believe that we can have more than enough if we come together. It is really exciting to be in a state where the opening line of the executive order from

the governor says, 'Whereas children are a special gift from God.' I was proud and thankful to be in a state where, at the very top level, that's how we feel."

## PULLING TOGETHER

In Dr. Goad's work as a CASA, he is appointed by a judge to follow one child in state custody, to delve into the child's experience at school and within the foster home, and meet the biological parent(s) and follow their progress toward reunification. If the child changes foster homes, Dr. Goad can soften the transition by familiarizing a new foster family and teachers with the child's needs and situation. He provides constancy, a connection, amongst the shifting people and perspectives.

"If an issue comes up in the classroom or home, or with the child's health, I try to find out what's going on and bring that information back to the whole team that is serving the child and say here's what I think. A CASA's role is to speak up for that child."

Dr. Goad noticed that many individuals and groups are working to help children, but they aren't always operating collectively.

"The first time I heard the concept of 'more than enough,' my first thought was, actually, that seems impossible." But he pushed forward, determining that "with God all things are possible. And that's what it's going to take."

## HERE ARE SOME BIG PICTURE CHALLENGES:

- **Almost 60 percent of foster families in Arkansas drop out each year.** Just to maintain the number of homes, already less than what we need, a staggering **900 to 1,000 families must be recruited and trained each year.**
- **About 75 percent of children who aren't placed with relatives end up in foster care in a different county** – forced to leave their schools, friends, neighbors and communities – and compounding their fright.
- With children scattered throughout the state, **case workers must drive long distances to place them** – and then get them to regular medical appointments, visits with parents and other activities.
- After months or years of children being in foster care, **little more than 40 percent reunite with their biological mothers and/or fathers.**

"We feel like we could do better in these areas, so that's what we are targeting initially with our shared vision."  
- Dr. Goad

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACOB ALLINSON

◀ **PHOTO:** Dr. Phillip Goad, the Executive Chairman of Every Child Arkansas, at the Second Chance Youth Ranch.





**“... A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO BE FOSTER FAMILIES; BUT A HUGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE, VIRTUALLY ANYBODY, CAN DO SOMETHING.”**

**- DR. GOAD  
EVERY CHILD  
ARKANSAS**

A key strategy is engaging the faith community, Dr. Goad says, because churches are particularly good at supporting their congregations – and foster parents in these congregations need lots of support to stay in the game.

“We find that, when there is wraparound support from the faith communities, the percentage of families that feel they can stay in it longer increases,” he says. “And then you have more experienced foster families who can do a better job of taking care of kids. They’re stronger and more equipped.”

This has been demonstrated in Arkansas by several private entities that partner with the state to recruit, train and support foster and adoptive families. Most, but not all, are affiliated with communities of faith. These agencies have been successful.

The state’s Division of Child and Family Services has come to increasingly rely on these agencies, and it now aims within five years to focus primarily on kinship care – placing children with relatives or fictive kin (teachers, coaches and others who already know children) – and allowing private agencies to handle the recruiting, training, licensing and supporting of traditional foster families.

“We already know that when foster families are in a private placement agency, they are supported in a robust and full way, and the retention rate is higher. And I think the state believes, and we believe, there are better outcomes through these private agencies who can support the families,” Dr. Goad says.

“We also have the blessing of working alongside the committed and talented leadership and

◀ **PHOTO:** Dr. Phillip Goad and his wife Starla talk to Billy and Rachel Hubbard, operations directors at Second Chance Youth Ranch, and their kids.



▲ **PHOTO:** Dr. Phillip Goad and his wife Starla sit on a porch at the Second Chance Youth Ranch. The ranch is a private placement agency, providing a community of homes for children and teens in foster care.

county-level staff of DCFS to care for children and families in our state.”

Every Child Arkansas has teamed with The Contingent to engage in an “air game” that uses the internet and social media to market, tell stories and help make one-on-one connections to recruit foster parents, using data generated by Acxiom that pinpoints families likely to have higher interest and success in fostering. And daunting as the systemic problems may be, Dr. Goad insists that starting small and local is key to awakening a desire to help in our communities. One doesn’t have to be a foster parent to help – in fact, success hinges on community, household-level support of foster families, children, and workers.

“The reality is that a small percentage of people are going to be foster families; but a huge number of people, virtually anybody, can do something,” Dr. Goad says. “In small ways or big ways, this is where the community can really come together. By doing something as simple as a thank-you note. A dinner. A gift card. An offer to watch the kids. Something as simple as, I’ll get my motor vehicle record and a background check and then I’ll go pick up foster

kids from school and bring them home or bring them to the doctor.”

The website [everychildarkansas.org](http://everychildarkansas.org) connects volunteers with existing organizations and efforts in their community. Enter your zip code, see a list of agencies operating in your area – and ask to connect.

“We believe in the continuum of engagement, that some people will say yes to just one small thing. For example, you could pack a welcome box so that in the middle of the night when a child is pulled out of his or her home, there’s something the case worker could hand them. That is something really simple, all the way up to providing respite care for foster families – watching their children while they take a break, while they get away with their husbands or wives or family. There are a lot of things you can do short of fostering. And what we’ve seen is that as people get further and further into helping, in sometimes very small ways, that engagement grows and that becomes a place where people eventually feel that call and say, ‘I think I could do that. I think I could take a child into my home and be a foster parent.’” ◀

**THE WEBSITE [EVERYCHILDKARKANSAS.ORG](http://EVERYCHILDKARKANSAS.ORG)**

**connects volunteers with existing organizations and efforts in their community.**

**ENTER YOUR ZIP CODE » SEE A LIST OF AGENCIES IN YOUR AREA » ASK TO CONNECT**



# We're Really Changing Mindsets

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD WELFARE ADVOCATE

By Robin Mero

*Restore Hope Arkansas recently sat down with several people working to protect children in Pope County, where a unique collaboration is underway allowing social service agencies and programs to work together to help families in crisis. Here are excerpts from those conversations with three employees of the Arkansas Department of Child and Family Services; a human services worker with the Russellville School District, and Jeff Piker, a pastor and coordinator of the 100 Families office in Pope and Yell counties.*

**S**KYE MITCHELL SPENDS HER WORKDAYS SEARCHING THE RUSSELLVILLE COMMUNITY FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN PLAGUED BY TRANSIENT LIVING SITUATIONS.

Children struggle mentally, socially, physically and academically when their families experience hardship and homelessness, says the 17-year veteran human services worker with the Russellville School District. Her immediate mission is to help families acquire stable living situations so the children can become active learners, flourish, and graduate.

"It's almost impossible to make a child whole without also supporting the family unit," Mitchell says. "Some of these kids are facing serious challenges at home, and it's impacting how they behave and thrive in the classroom."

The situations, mindsets and despair that Mitchell encounters within families make most days on the job heartbreaking.

"Just within the last month, 12 of the students who were identified as being in transition went into foster care. They came from three families, and each student was living with a parent who is battling addiction."

Sometimes homelessness follows a specific hardship or event like an illness, loss of job, death in the family, incarceration or substance abuse. Mitchell uses grant money, community programs such as ARVAC, and donations to help families with basic needs – shelter being a priority.

"If we can address the reasons why the family is struggling with substance abuse and get them the help that they need, they can turn their lives around for not only themselves but their children."

**"WE DON'T LIKE TO TAKE CHILDREN FROM THEIR HOME; IT'S TRAGIC. THEY'RE ALWAYS GOING TO REMEMBER THAT EXPERIENCE FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIFE."**

- LICIA ETHEREDGE  
DCFS INVESTIGATOR

## THE CRISIS

Envision a caseworker with the Arkansas Department of Child and Family Services and foster care springs to mind. But much more often, Arkansas children remain in their homes while caseworkers help and manage their families with a type of case termed "protective services." More than 14,000 children are served in this way each year; protection and prevention are the lion's share of DCFS' efforts.

Licia Etheredge is a DCFS investigator in Pope County, one of those first to respond when the agency receives a concern about a child, which usually comes via the Child Abuse Hotline.

When Etheredge discovers environmental concerns in a home – such as lack of running water or food or unsanitary conditions – she may elect to launch a safety plan; perhaps starting by picking up a box of food from First Baptist Church Russellville, ensuring the water is turned back on, directing the parents, "Let's get this cleaned up within this many hours."

Parents are guided toward improvements. "Maybe they need parenting classes," Etheredge says. "Maybe they need 100 Families because they're about to be homeless. Help with their utilities. We're trying to prevent a removal by keeping a worker in that home and helping that family."

"We don't like to take children from their home; it's tragic. They're always going to remember that experience for the rest of their life," says Etheredge, who is married with young children and has been on the job for three years.

Rather it's the calls received at two or three a.m. from police that are more likely to end with children taken into custody – a toddler unattended in the road, an infant born with controlled substances in its system, children whose parents are arrested and there's no relative or friend to call.

Under these circumstances, a caseworker like Devin Singh takes over. Singh will meet the

child's immediate needs for hunger or clothing and begin a concerted effort to find someone the child knows and feels safe with to serve as temporary custodian – perhaps a grandmother, an aunt, coach or teacher.

If those options are exhausted, Singh searches for a foster home. That can be grueling – today, there simply aren't enough to meet needs.

"Immediately you want to look for somewhere in Pope County, because you want to keep those kids close to what they know, in their same school. We pull up (the list) and it's full of kids that are not even from Pope County. And that's so hard, because you want to be able to work with the families in your area and keep kids in the environment that they know."

"So then we branch out to the other counties. At times we've called foster homes in the entire state three or four days in a row. Some of us have slept at the office before with kids because we don't have placement," Singh says.

"With many of these cases, if there's multiple kids, they have different fathers. If you're able to locate a family member, the family member may be willing to take their blood relative, but not the others, which in turn, you have four families taking four kids that come from the same household and they're spread all over Arkansas."

Singh will also communicate with the biological parent(s), keeping them apprised of where the children are and what to expect with their case. Her relationship with them may continue for years, depending on the case outcome, and sometimes children transition in and out of foster care more than once.

Caseworkers come to know each others' caseloads, the myriad families and histories, reaching out when they learn something impactful.

"We're always checking in on each other, even if it's not work hours," Etheredge says. "I will recognize a name and say, 'Hey, that's on Devin's caseload, let me let her know her client's in jail, even though it's not work hours – we're going to try to figure out what happened because we have kids involved.'"

In dealing with parents, Singh says they can react angrily, defensively, or even apathetically – unaware of how their behaviors are impacting their children.

"A lot of them will immediately start telling you the problems in *their* lives as opposed to the problems in their kids' lives. The process of case management is (gradually) transitioning that frame of mind into, 'Your life isn't just about you, it's about being a parent and putting those kids first,'" says Singh.

"When those parents are able to stop thinking just about themselves, or can get the help that they need for themselves, they can be a parent who thinks in a way that could allow for reunification."

**"SOME OF THESE KIDS ARE FACING SERIOUS CHALLENGES AT HOME, AND IT'S IMPACTING HOW THEY BEHAVE AND THRIVE IN THE CLASSROOM."**

- SKYE MITCHELL  
HUMAN SERVICES  
WORKER, RUSSELLVILLE  
SCHOOL DISTRICT



## THE SHIFT

A while back, a flyer circulated Russellville advertising free training to become a well-compensated truck driver. Singh mentioned it to some of the parents in her caseload.

“Of all the families that I presented it to, not one (was interested). ‘Well, that’s going to mess with my SNAP benefits (for groceries),’ one told me. They don’t always know what their check is going to look like this week versus next week, but as long as they stay on SNAP, they receive the same amount every month and they can base their living off of that.

“Or one said, Fayetteville? It was like I was talking about Greece. They were like, Ooh, I can’t go there. That’s far. It was just too far. It seemed like everyone was living in a bubble. And that breaks my heart.”

Singh, a longtime single parent who worked Child Protective Services in San Diego before moving to Pope County, said parents often don’t comprehend basics such as dressing appropriately and getting a haircut before appearing in court or applying for a job. Modeling success for their children eludes them.

As an example, a teenager in her caseload recently had a birthday, a girl who’s interested in hair and makeup but had never been to a salon.

“So I scheduled her an appointment at Ulta to get her hair and makeup done,” Singh said. “She said it was the best day of her life and that no one would ever believe what she did on that day.

“I had never been able to have a successful plan-the-future talk with her, but that day she said, ‘Miss Devin, when I get older, I’m going to cosmetology school and I’m going to come back and be the manager.’ All of a sudden she’s thinking about her future, because she’s doing real-life kid things and being exposed to things. And I wish we had the time and dollars to do that for every kid.”

## IT’S PERSONAL

Mahogany Smith is a six-year employee of DCFS and regards herself the “meanest caseworker for Pope County.”

“I’m very straight and direct. I think being honest with parents is always the best policy – I tell them what could happen if they don’t do the steps to get the children back. And I’m honest with the children as far as what’s going on.

“I do have a good success rate of getting families put back together. Of course, I’ve had to terminate some, but those are parents who just don’t want to parent,” Smith says.

“And a lot of times I share with my clients, ‘Here’s my story, just so you know that I don’t think that I’m better than you. Both of my parents were drug addicts at one time, so I know exactly what your kids are feeling because I’ve been there. I’ve been in foster care.

“Both of my parents were drug addicts back when crack was out. Luckily I had good grandparents who stepped in and we went to foster care for two weeks until the paperwork was done for me and my sister to be placed with relatives.

“Some caseworkers can’t relate to these situations because they don’t have children or they’ve never been faced with poverty or having to go without food. I think it makes a big difference on being able to share with your clients real life situations so that they understand, ‘Hey, I can change, I can beat this addiction. I can get my children back and make it better for my whole family.’

“So that’s why I do this job.”

Investigator Etheredge also was in foster care, from ages 13 to 18, because her mother had a drug addiction.

“Foster care work is personal for me. I see these girls who are rough teenagers. And that was me. I was that kid you didn’t want on your caseload,” Etheredge says. “I would disrupt; I would end up in group homes and disrupt that. I was rough, but I was angry. That’s why I’m here today.

“Parents tell us, ‘you don’t know what it feels like.’ No, I don’t know what it feels like to have your kids taken, but I know how it feels to get taken. I see these children, and they’re angry. They don’t know how to show love. People are trying to show them love; they don’t know how to accept that.”

## BEYOND, TOGETHER

Both the school district and DCFS have joined a new lifeline for families in Pope County that’s harnessing all the existing goodwill and effort. It’s called 100 Families and is based on collective impact. More than 80 groups/agencies have formed a community alliance and are linked by a software program called Hope Hub.

The software groups all the agencies and organizations that are helping an individual family and lets them communicate about the family’s needs and progress, with privacy concerns addressed. It’s like having an individual Facebook page for each family, with the agencies serving as the “friends” – able to get real-time updates and discuss needs or setbacks.

The 100 Families office assesses a client, sets up the family’s case in Hope Hub, and brings in services to address needs in housing, addiction, education, transportation, finance, health, dental and more – “the whole person,” says Jeff Piker, coordinator for the program in Yell and Pope counties.

Piker is an associate pastor at Journey Church in Russellville, where the focus is to accept, love and serve those in the community. The church decided to open the 100 Families office last year and has already enrolled 80 families.

Referrals again come from the community.

“A DCFS investigator might call us and say, ‘There’s not a case to remove the child, but this

**MORE THAN 80 GROUPS/AGENCIES HAVE FORMED A COMMUNITY ALLIANCE AND ARE LINKED BY A SOFTWARE PROGRAM CALLED HOPE HUB.**

**“IT’S A HOLISTIC APPROACH. IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT PAYING SOMEBODY’S BILL. IT’S, HEY, WHAT IF WE GET YOU IN A POSITION TO ASK, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE? WHAT WOULD YOU LOVE TO DO?”**

**- JEFF PIKER  
100 FAMILIES  
COORDINATOR**



family needs help. Can I send them to you?’ And of course, our answer is always yes. We’ve been able to see some really good things happen that prevent kids from going into the (foster) system,” Piker says.

“It’s a holistic approach. It’s not just about paying somebody’s bill. It’s, hey, what if we get you in a position to ask, what do you want to be? What would you love to do? Would you want to dream again? So many of our families have been going from crisis to crisis so long that taking a minute to dream about what their life could be brings them to tears because they’re so caught up in the moment. The thought of what could be – they’ve lost touch with that.”

The DCFS case workers and Mitchell say the alliance introduces them to options and services they didn’t know about.

“Being able to collaborate and share information has been a huge asset to me and what I do for the district,” Mitchell said.

► **PHOTO:** Jeff Piker, coordinator for 100 Families in Yell and Pope counties and also an associate pastor at Journey Church in Russellville.  
*Photo courtesy of Piker.*

Active since 2017 in Arkansas, 100 Families programs have increased the rate of reunification when children are in foster care from just over 40 percent to about 70 percent.

Piker says this is possible because a 100 Families caseworker stays with the client until the family achieves balance – “from crisis to career.” The various agencies and programs put aside their tendency to operate independently and begin to work cooperatively.

“It’s so easy to get caught up in your own hula hoop that you get good at doing what you do, but you lose sight of what’s happening around you. You’re focused on doing your job well, but once you complete your job, you don’t know what’s next,” Piker says. “So we’re taking advantage of people that are doing their job really well, and when our clients receive the service from them, we lead them to another one of our partners who’s able to help with the next phase of their life.” ◀





◀ **PHOTO:** Allie Graves was abused as a child but was given a new life through foster care. Photography by April Graves

# FOSTER CARE: IT'S DEEPER THAN BEING A *Good Person*

By Robin Mero

**W**HEN ALLIE GRAVES WAS BORN IN GALVESTON IN 2002, HER MOTHER ABANDONED HER IN THE HOSPITAL.

Her father, a drug user with a criminal record, traveled to the hospital to get Allie. He took her on a Greyhound bus back to his hometown of Texarkana, Texas, where he tried to find someone to take her. He asked relatives and knocked on strangers' doors, looking for someone to take his baby. Then he found a church with a Mother's Day Out program.

For a few days, he left baby Allie there with the program director, April Graves. He would pick her up at the end of the day and the Graves family began helping him to become stable. They drove him to rehab and to a job that he found. April and Mark Graves kept this up for three months, but Allie's father drifted back to drugs and criminal activity.

One day, Allie's father didn't show back up. The Graves kept Allie and went through the process of becoming foster parents; she became the sister that their three sons didn't have, and their home was filled with love, play, and affection. When Allie was 17 months old the phone rang, and the Graves were told that Allie's father's relatives wanted custody. Allie was taken from the Graves and went to a home that was "disgusting and smelly and dark," in more ways than one. Her aunt dated a younger man who was a pedophile, and he soon began to prey on little Allie.


At age four, Allie was in the throes of abuse from this man when her uncle walked in the room. He called the police. Allie went through a forensic interview and immediately went back into foster care. Allie's social worker, in crisis and despair, called April Graves to say that Allie was a completely different child from before.

"She told April Graves, 'I don't think anybody is going to want this child,' because of the things that I had seen and the way that she was acting," Allie remembers. But the Graves family wanted her back. "I remember meeting them in the Rainbow Room at Child Protective Services in Texarkana. I had my nails painted and got a new dress. I got to meet all my brothers again; they were in their awkward phase. I'll never forget that, trying to remember their names. But I felt safe. I felt like I could be a child again. And so from there, that's where the happy ending started with the Graves family."

## REWIRING

"Something that's really important for foster parents to know is, whether you have a child for 24 hours, a week, or way longer than you ever signed up for, and whether it's an infant, a toddler, or a teen – you're providing an emotional impact for the brain of that child that will allow them to be psychologically okay as an adult," says Allie, now 21. "Because I had that from age 3 months to 17 months, I was declared able, in the future, to have





*“I’ve already  
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secure attachment and to be psychologically stable. It’s still a process that is chaotic. But there is hope and a future for that child in the mess. If I hadn’t had that, Lord knows where I’d be.”

Allie believes that the affirming, balanced home environment, and the tender, skin-to-skin contact she experienced as a baby with April Graves made a psychological imprint on her brain. “Even after four years of abuse, I remembered April Graves. I remembered Mark Graves, that physical touch that was healthy.”

For a few years her trauma felt remote, in a fargone past. “I was learning how to dance, I was learning how to sing. What it was to have a normal childhood and being rough and tough with my brothers. But trauma always comes back, at weird points, and I was a very angry child from age nine up until right now. This is something that I’m still very much working on.”

When Allie went to college at Ouachita Baptist University, she saw fellow students studying and making friends. She grew isolated and took on unhealthy behaviors. Her issue seemed to be an inability to trust others.

“Being depressed and being a Christian – it didn’t really make sense. I wasn’t poor and had already been adopted; I didn’t think I should be struggling. And so I hit this wall and I realized: I am going to be alone forever and filled with regret if I don’t figure out some way to let people in.

“It’s a difficult concept to talk about, but when you’re constantly fighting for survival, there is no time to trust people. There is no time to thrive.

There’s no time to open up and be vulnerable. What would happen if you were in the wild – you’d get killed. That is the mindset of people with complex childhood trauma.”

Awareness has been key to her opening to nurturing relationships.

“It is a whole rewiring of the way that I see the world. It’s still something that I continue now, especially as someone who wants to be a great wife and a great mother. I don’t want to have all of this unresolved trauma sitting in my children’s lap.”

Allie will finish her bachelor’s degree in December 2023, and is engaged.

“I’ve already been allowed to break one cycle. I want to be able to do the next as well.”

Allie encourages foster parents to listen to seek out others’ experiences to develop resilience.

“It’s always a pot of gold when you listen to someone else’s story. Listen to others’ stories and remember what you’re doing this for. You didn’t just start this because you wanted to be a good person. Good people don’t do this. It’s so much deeper than that.”

Go beyond the fear of growing attached to foster children, she encourages.

“People know that to be a foster parent is an amazing thing, but some are scared to do it because they don’t want to get emotionally attached. But this is one of my pet peeves: This is not a dog. This is a human. And if you *don’t* get emotionally attached, they’re not going to be okay. End of story.

“That is the whole point of being a foster parent: to be the secure attachment that that child does not have. You are stepping in to be what that child needs.”

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**- ALLIE GRAVES**

◀ **PHOTO:** Allie Graves will graduate from Ouachita Baptist University in December 2023 and is engaged. *Photography by April Graves*

**“INVESTIGATORS  
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**- MISCHA MARTIN  
DEPUTY SECRETARY  
OF YOUTH AND  
FAMILIES**

▶ **PHOTO:** Mischa Martin (left), Deputy Secretary of Youth and Families, speaks at the governors conference room alongside Christie Erwin, founder of Project Zero. *Photo courtesy of Department of Human Services*



## PROTECTIVE SERVICES: *On the Front Lines*

The knocks on the door go unanswered, but investigators hear cartoons coming from the apartment. Children are often left unsupervised inside, the apartment manager tells Mischa Martin and her partner, heightening their concern about the hotline caller who warned that mom’s drug use is endangering the children.

It is hot, early July. Mischa had volunteered to work child welfare investigations to help with a backlog. This is her first call. She feels urgent about getting inside to make sure the children are safe; she knows enough of the family’s history. She calls law enforcement for backup.

When police gain entry mom is in bed, and they struggle to wake her. No, the baby hasn’t had milk today, the 6-year-old says; kitchen shelves are empty. Police leave them to execute their plan as it takes shape. Mischa and her partner

call the office and ask for an infant car seat to be brought over. Mom rouses somewhat; they ask, will she take a drug screen? Would she consider going into drug rehab?

Suddenly, a pounding at the window, and the baby’s dad tries to force his way through. There are reports that he’s a lead Fentanyl dealer, and Mischa knows she and her partner may be in danger; they quickly call law enforcement again for support. Under police guard and a beating Arkansas sun, Mischa and her partner load the infant seat, and then the children, into their state car.

What next? Mischa may be the director of the Department of Children and Family Services, but she is thankful her partner is an experienced investigator. They call for approval to use the state credit card; the children are upset and need formula, food, a fresh change of clothes.





*“It really is about having a whole bunch of people who care about you and are investing in you.”*

*Tiffany Wright, Director of DCFS*



“Let’s get this kid some Arby’s and then set up physicals. We call relatives, giving the devastating news and making sure not to disclose too much in front of the kids. I’m getting information about abuse and neglect, because I know I’m going to have to prove the substance abuse case and write an affidavit to prove that these kids are in immediate danger.”

Word reaches Mischa that there’s a third sibling.

“But nobody seems to know where the third sibling is. We’re in the car trying to figure out which office to go to. And the seven-month-old is now fed, but crying and unhappy.”

A foster parent who’d previously known the kids takes the older two for the weekend. The baby goes with a grandma.

“But it’s the 4th of July weekend. There’s no one for me to hand this case off to. I’ve got to get with legal and write my affidavit. That day starts at 8 a.m. and I’m still working that case at 10 p.m.,” Mischa says. “Investigators have the hardest job of anybody because they’ve got multiple things going on. They’re trying to determine whether abuse or neglect happened and whether that child is safe and can remain in the home. And if so, what services need to be offered.”

These are DCFS’ duties, but the agency can’t – and shouldn’t – go it alone. After seven years as director of DCFS, overseeing more than 4,000 children in foster care and 11,000 families receiving services each year, Mischa says only a scale tipped toward prevention can improve conditions for children in Arkansas. And the community’s help is critical.

“Child welfare is never going to be designed to touch every at-risk child in this state,” she says.

Mischa has since been promoted to Deputy Secretary of Youth and Families; DCFS remains under her supervision, now led by Tiffany Wright. Mischa now also oversees the Division of Youth Services (juvenile justice) and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

“I’m super excited about TANF, which gives us opportunities to invest in prevention,” Mischa says. “DCFS can’t do this work alone ... families are struggling with stability around housing, stability around jobs, food insecurity.

“I was raised in church and we took care of our own. We were small enough that people knew the at-risk families. We took food to them, made sure that the kids had clothes. Somewhere along the line, I feel like (society) started to say, ‘That’s the government’s responsibility.’

▲ **PHOTOS:** (From top) Tiffany Wright, on left, director of DCFS and Mischa Martin, Deputy Secretary of Youth and Families at the Child Abuse Prevention Rally at the state capital.

The Child Abuse Prevention Rally on the capitol steps in Little Rock was sponsored by the Arkansas Department of Human Services and the Division of Children and Family Services. Photos courtesy of Department of Human Services

“That’s what I really love about 100 Families ... it’s a perfect partnership of making sure that people get the available government services and also connect to community organizations that help families get stable.” Tiffany adds that 100 Families teams fill gaps that DHS can’t meet.

“It really is about having a whole bunch of people who care about you and are investing in you,” Tiffany says.

Mischa has followed a particular foster family for several years, watching a couple support the biological mother of children formerly in their home.

“Over the years they’ve supported the mom. ‘Oh, we’re in crisis now. There’s a job situation. She has a fine from 10 years ago that she now has to pay. Or her SNAP benefits got kicked off because she didn’t understand the notice.

“Sometimes these families get some stability, but they still need a support system that they can call to help them navigate a small problem so that it doesn’t become a giant problem.”

“Private programs are increasingly handling the recruitment, training, and support of foster families. It’s still a small percentage, but over the next

few years DCFS wants private agencies to handle the bulk of foster care placements so it can focus on kinship placement and prevention.

“Those agencies must over-recruit foster families to correct an imbalance that causes most children to be placed far outside of their own communities and everything that is familiar – not to mention creating huge travel and logistical issues and costs for the agency.

“The move and hope and wish to get kids back in their county is not going to change overnight,” Mischa says.

Tiffany joined DCFS fresh from college, and she emphasizes a need for more staff.

“The job is hard, but it’s worth it. When I started at DCFS, I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but I wouldn’t change it.

“On the bad days I think about the days that I helped a family. I helped a kid. Reunification. That is why I do this,” Tiffany says. “You’ll not always make popular decisions. People won’t like you. They’ll think that you only care about yourself or only care about keeping everybody else happy. But it’s really about doing what’s best for kids.” ◀

**“OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS DCFS WANTS PRIVATE AGENCIES TO HANDLE THE BULK OF FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS SO IT CAN FOCUS ON KINSHIP PLACEMENT AND PREVENTION.”**

**- MISCHA MARTIN**  
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF YOUTH AND FAMILIES

► **PHOTO:** Secretary Kristi Putnam and Mischa Martin tour Johnson County DHS office. Photo courtesy of Department of Human Services







# CHILD WELFARE: *It Belongs to Us All*

By Robin Mero

▲ **PHOTOS:** (From left) Secretary Kristi Putnam (left) tours the Mansfield Juvenile Treatment Facility.

Secretary Kristi Putnam reads to children during the first birthday celebration of the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education's early literacy program.



**WHAT SEEMS TO BE AN IMMENSE, HEART-WRENCHING NUMBER OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN ARKANSAS - 4,200 - FEELS MORE MANAGEABLE WHEN APPROACHED COUNTY BY COUNTY, SAYS KRISTI PUTNAM, SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES.**

"That's a big number when you think about it from a statewide perspective. What I want to see us do is break that down county by county and help communities understand that they are the solution for helping families become stronger, for helping families reunify with those children, for supporting the caseworkers who are part of the foster care system."

"When you break it down to a county number and it's, for instance, 42 kids, it's much more manageable. People feel like there's something they can actually do about improving the services to our families and making families stronger."

And just what can we do?

"Anything, anything small, anything larger," Putnam says. "The first thing I would say is we do need more foster families. The best place for a child who's in our foster care system is with a family. And so you can sign up to be a foster family. It's not for everyone. So if you don't feel like you are led to foster, then you can support a foster family or encourage someone to connect - you might have a next-door neighbor who's

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES





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BUT HOW DO  
WE ACTIVELY  
CONNECT ...”**

**- KRISTI PUTNAM  
SECRETARY OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF  
HUMAN SERVICES**

## *A Message from Kristi Putnam, Secretary of the Department of Human Services*

**“**The first thing you can do to help is **go to the Every Child Arkansas page, [everychildarkansas.org](https://everychildarkansas.org)**. You can like and follow them on Facebook and Instagram and recommend that to a friend. **You can share to your page all the information** that Every Child Arkansas posts and the different resources they have available. **You may be the reason someone starts fostering** or supports birth families, or shares their experience with a birth family who needs them. Make sure you’re out there sharing on social media and **getting engaged with Every Child Arkansas, because child welfare belongs to all of us.** **”**

been thinking about it. Reach out to the Every Child Arkansas website. Everyone who goes on that website to inquire can be connected to a live person who can tell them all about the process of becoming a foster family.”

“You can also support family services workers, the caseworkers who are part of the Department of Human Services. They have a hard job to do, and they deal with the most difficult of circumstances. They’re constantly working with families when sometimes there are no good options for the children,” Kristi says. “Take those workers cookies, write them a note, support and encourage them. Pray for them. These are all ways that we can help with our frontline staff.”

Gov. Sarah Sanders has prioritized prevention services such as intensive in-home supports, working with families before crisis, and providing counseling for substance use and recovery. DHS has been teamed with the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Education toward these efforts.

DHS will work more closely with Arkansas school districts to help families understand the resources available to them and to form a warmer, more proactive relationship, Kristi says.

“Since most kids are in school, or they’re going to be in school at some point, it’s a natural place for us to really make sure that parents know of the resources that are available to them in their communities,” Kristi says.

“We’d like to partner in a more vigorous way with the individual school districts and schools themselves on how we provide not just information, but how do we actively connect and get into the schools and have our folks there to be that warm connection.”

Sanders has directed departments to think holistically about services to support families.

“The answer of, ‘That’s how we’ve always done it’ doesn’t fly anymore,” Kristi says. “So we’re also figuring out new and creative ways that Public Safety and DHS can work together, to

perhaps make the the investigation and removal process, if it has to happen, a more gentle process for the family – to make sure that the families understand we’re there to support them and that this is not intended to be punitive, although

it’s going to feel that way when children do have to leave their homes.”

“The biggest thing that we can do, in my opinion, is connect all of our resources across not just DHS, but across all of our agencies and across all of our community partners. Our children and families don’t come to us in pieces, but we budget and plan for them as if they do. And that’s my biggest thing, to be interconnected as much as we possibly can, so that we are one team serving these families and children.”

DHS has been asked to streamline the process for placing children with relatives, and to improve the process for children to be adopted out of the foster care system. Services are also to be enhanced and expanded for children who turn 18 and “age out” of foster care, to support them in reaching independence. Investing in intervention and prevention promises a significant return, Kristi says. Children who enter foster care are at higher risk for homelessness, teen pregnancy, human trafficking and poverty.

“The risk factors are so much higher when children enter the foster care system that if we are able to intervene sooner, it benefits the whole family. And a family that otherwise would have been disrupted now has the chance to remain whole.”

Gov. Sanders brought in Kristi from Kentucky, where she was Deputy Secretary for Health and Family Services. Kristi also previously served as Child Welfare Services Manager for the state of Florida.

“I do this work because I believe strongly that communities and states and our country as a whole are stronger when we have strong families. And it does really make a difference when just one person, one family, is impacted in a positive way. The other reason I do this work is because I’m both a mother and a grandmother, and I want to have stronger communities and stronger families for their sake as well.”

Every Child Arkansas will be successful when communities have learned to recognize the moment at which a family needs help and is at risk of endangering a child’s welfare, she says.

“There won’t even be a DHS involvement. I’ll work myself out of a job. We won’t need the intervention of the state with these families, because the communities have learned to help before anything reaches our level. The communities will have learned and trained each other to recognize when a family first shows signs of struggle, of not being able to parent, whether it’s due to substance abuse or neglect, or because they don’t have enough means. A community will then go to one of its partners or several partners. They will work together as a team to restore that family’s sense of ‘we can do this’ because they have supported the community. And DHS never enters the picture.” ◀

**IT DOES  
REALLY MAKE  
A DIFFERENCE  
WHEN JUST  
ONE PERSON,  
ONE FAMILY, IS  
IMPACTED IN  
A POSITIVE WAY.**





◀ **PHOTO:** Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders with husband Bryan Sanders and their children (from left) George, Scarlet, and William.

# Reforming, TOGETHER

**GOVERNOR SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS ON A  
PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP FOR FOSTER CARE**

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

**“I DON'T  
THINK THERE'S  
ANYTHING  
HARDER TO SEE  
THAN A KID WHO  
DOESN'T HAVE  
A SAFE PLACE,  
WHO DOESN'T  
HAVE A FAMILY”**

**- GOV. SARAH SANDERS**

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** Governor, thanks so much for sitting down with us to talk about children and families. One of your first acts after being sworn in as governor was to issue an executive order to protect children, support families, and improve the foster care system in Arkansas. Why?

**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** For me, it's simple. Arkansas is one of the most pro-life states in the entire country. I want to keep it that way. But I also want to make sure that we don't end the fight to protect our kids after they're born. Doing a much better job of taking care of the kids across the state of Arkansas is vitally important. We have about 4,100 kids that are in the foster care system here in the state of Arkansas. And we don't have nearly enough families to take care of them.

So we created and started a working group, through the executive order, that will help us recruit more families, train and prepare those families, keep more kids out of the foster care system in the first place, and streamline the process so we can do a better job as a state taking care of kids in Arkansas.

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** Governor, where is your personal passion around this driven from?

**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** I don't think there's anything harder to see than a kid who doesn't have a safe place, who doesn't have a family, who doesn't have someone who loves them and is advocating for them.

As a parent, I can't imagine my kids being in an environment where they don't feel like they are loved and cared for. Yet that, unfortunately, is what happens all too often here in the state of Arkansas. Any opportunity we have to help these kids feel loved and taken care of, we want to do that.

And I want my kids to see our love and care for children. And so when we have volunteered, we have taken our kids with us as much as possible, so that they can see the difference and hopefully be encouraged to help other people, too.

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** Governor, what would success as a result of your executive order look like to you?

**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** Success is those 4,100 kids that are in the system either never ending up there in the first place or having a family that takes them and loves them, cares for them and advocates for them for the long term.

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** Many Arkansans may want to do something but do not know exactly what to do. What message do you have for them?

**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** One of the biggest things is to be willing to step up and volunteer or participate. Even if you're not somebody who can take a kid in as a foster parent, there are still a lot of things you can do and organizations you can volunteer your time with, or you can give financially to those organizations to help out the other families who are able to take those kids in.

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** Governor, you named four organizations, three agencies, and then Every Child Arkansas. That was unusual, in my experience. Why did you include Every Child Arkansas as one of the organizations to develop the plan?

**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** You have to have somebody to lead the effort. One of the things that I think has kept us from doing a better job in the past is not coordinating with all of the different organizations out there. And so bringing everybody to the table, having that collaboration and coordination through Every Child Arkansas will make such a huge difference.

One organization leading and bringing all the players to the table, I think, is going to give us the type of success that we're looking for.

To kind of personalize it, we have an individual who works on our team. His family has four kids; three of them they have fostered and now adopted. And to see the difference that they're making in these kids' lives and how complete their family is with those three kids is unbelievably impactful. To see what is happening for each of those three children who otherwise would not have a loving home, who would not have somebody taking care of them in the way that they are. And to get to be around them and see the happiness and the joy that they bring to each other, but also to each of us, is pretty remarkable – and I think is such a testament not just to the people who are willing to take foster kids in, but ultimately for the impact that those kids will have on our lives as well.

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** The LEARNS Act is going to make available dollars that a child, and possibly children in foster care, could use toward some type of alternative education. And it is my understanding that may be provided first to individuals in an at-risk category. Could you talk about that?



**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** Absolutely. So ultimately our goal is, after three years, for every child in the state of Arkansas to be able to make a decision about where is best for them to be educated. We want to empower parents.

Every kid is different. As a mom of three, I can tell you that all three of my kids are very different. They have different needs. They learn differently. And making sure that they're in an environment where they can best be successful is really important. And

so we want to open that up to every student in the state, and for every family to be able to find the place that best fits their child's needs.

And foster care kids are in the very first group that will have access and be able to make a decision, whether that is a public school, a private school, a charter school or home school. We want those kids to be some of the very first to be opted into that program and be able to decide what area is best for them to be educated.

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS COME – GREETINGS:

EXECUTIVE ORDER TO PROTECT CHILDREN, SUPPORT FAMILIES, AND IMPROVE THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN ARKANSAS

WHEREAS: Children are a special gift from God and every child deserves a loving and nurturing family;

WHEREAS: Substance abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, absent parents, and broken homes put children at risk;

WHEREAS: When parents are temporarily or permanently unable to care for a child, the State of Arkansas has the responsibility to ensure safe, nurturing care for that child in a supportive environment;

WHEREAS: According to the Arkansas Department of Human Services, as of January 2023, approximately 4,100 children in Arkansas were in foster care;

WHEREAS: Arkansas lacks a sufficient number of foster families to adequately serve children in foster care;

WHEREAS: According to the Arkansas Department of Human Services, between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2022, approximately 196 Arkansas children reached the age of majority while in foster care, which is described by the term “aging out” within the foster care system;

WHEREAS: Those that age out of the foster care system in Arkansas are at a significantly higher risk for homelessness, human trafficking, and incarceration; and

WHEREAS: It is the policy of this administration to protect vulnerable children, support foster families, and work with stakeholders to improve the foster care system in Arkansas.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS, acting under the authority vested in me as the Governor of the State of Arkansas, do hereby order the following:

- (1) That there shall be established the Arkansas Strategic Plan for Foster Care Placement (the “Plan”).

a) The Plan shall have a working group composed of:

i. The Secretary of the Department of Human Services;

ii. The Secretary of the Department of Public Safety;

iii. The Secretary of the Department of Education; and

iv. Every Child Arkansas, which is comprised of non-profit, faith-based organizations, private placement agencies, and other organizations.

b) The Plan’s working group shall develop preventative action strategies that:

i. Reduce the number of children entering the foster care system;

ii. Increase the number of available foster families to provide ideal placements for children taken into care; and

iii. Increase the percentage of children reunited with their biological families after placement in foster care.

c) The Plan’s working group shall formulate reforms that:

i. Streamline the delivery of services to foster families and children in foster care;

ii. Connect eligible children and families to prevention services;

iii. Coordinate child safety and risk monitoring;

iv. Support in-home parenting and practices;

v. Deliver mental health and substance abuse treatment and services to foster families and foster children in need;

vi. Educate child-welfare workers, public safety officials, law enforcement officers, and educators on available prevention services;

vii. Develop tools and related metrics to recruit, train, and license foster families to provide ideal placements for children in care;

viii. Improve foster family retention rates across the state;

ix. Support foster family recruitment efforts, which target families that embrace reunification goals; and

x. Incorporate “trauma-informed training” into existing training systems for child welfare workers, public safety officials, law enforcement officers, and educators.

d) Upon developing the Plan, the working group shall provide recommendations to the Governor on any specific actions needed to facilitate this Order’s directive, including additional Executive or Legislative action no later than June 30, 2023.

- (2) The Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, or her designee, shall:

a) Streamline the placement of children in foster care with relatives, as directed in Ark. Code Ann. § 9-28-1003(19) by:

**PAUL CHAPMAN:** Let’s talk about the collaboration and coordination amongst entities involved in Every Child Arkansas.

**GOVERNOR SANDERS:** One thing that has definitely never been missing from the organizations that are part of this working group is the passion that they have for the kids in the state of Arkansas.

What I think they were missing is the partnership between all of those different groups. Taking a passion that is so evident, and matching that with a partnership of all of the different organizations that are working in a similar space, I think gives us a lot more power to be successful. Taking each of the strengths and advantages these different groups have, putting them at one table, is going to help serve the kids of Arkansas in a way that we’ve never seen before. ◀

- i. Reducing processing time to open and license a child’s relatives to 45 days or less;

ii. Accelerating the process for permanent adoption to relatives; and

iii. Reviewing statutory language and department regulation to reduce the mandatory waiting time for children in care where the adoption is to a relative. If statutory change is needed, the Secretary is directed to recommend language to the Office of the Governor to better serve children in foster care.
- b) Streamline the process for adoption from foster care within sixty (60) days of the enactment of this Executive Order. These actions shall include:
- i. Reducing processing time to open and license a family for foster care;

ii. Decreasing the time between the completion of the mandatory six-month placement period and the finalization of the adoption; and

iii. Providing adoptive families with additional transparency as to the adoption process and timeline.
- c) Implement or enhance efforts to support children aging out of foster care, which include:
- i. Conducting a study to evaluate current strategies in Arkansas, which assist children aging out of foster care with housing, education, and other assistance given to those aged 18-21 years old. This study shall compare the outcomes in Arkansas to national and regional outcomes;

ii. Submitting a report on strategies to interrupt generational cycles of abuse and neglect that impact children aging out of foster care; and

iii. Presenting recommendations on measures to avoid homelessness, human trafficking, and incarceration for children aging out of foster care no later than June 30, 2023.

- (3) The Director of the Division of Children and Family Services (“DCFS”) at the Arkansas Department of Human Services shall meet quarterly with organizations, coalitions, officials, relevant stakeholders in the adoption and foster care advocacy community, and representatives from the Office of the Governor, to collaborate on efforts to better serve children and families receiving services through DCFS, including foster families and adoptive families.
- a) These meetings shall continue through at least the end of the calendar year 2025, which the Governor may extend upon request; and

b) An annual report shall be submitted to the Governor detailing the findings, progress, and recommendations that result from these meetings.

- (4) Within one year of the effective date of this Order, DCFS shall create a single-source website location for data related to foster care in Arkansas, which shall include:
- a) County-level foster care data;

b) Annual report card and operational report for DCFS;

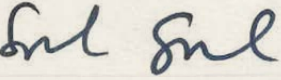
c) Any other material determined by the Director of DCFS as valuable to enhance knowledge and transparency of the State foster care system; and

d) The name and contact information of at least one foster and adoption advocate in each county, who is not employed by the State of Arkansas, to provide guidance, support, and information to Arkansas residents interested in becoming foster parents.

This Executive Order shall become effective upon its signing and shall remain in full force and effect until amended or rescinded by further executive orders.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and cause the Great Seal of the State of Arkansas to be affixed this 28th day of February, in the year of our Lord 2023.



  
Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Governor





# Developing Hope

By Robin Mero

**T**HE CAMERA WHIRRS. THE CHILD HAS FRESHLY-GROOMED HAIR AND A NEW OUTFIT. The questions begin gently about favorite foods and hobbies, then progress to the child's deepest longings.

"If you could dream about your perfect forever family, what would it look like?"

Today there are 300 children in Arkansas who need to be adopted because parental rights were terminated. The children will wait in foster care until someone chooses them.

Forget every preconceived idea you have, and go watch the short films online in the Arkansas Heart Gallery. The beautifully-produced films will stun and haunt and change you. In two to four minutes you'll sense, and won't forget, the essence of each child.

The experiences the children long for are sweet and humble. They want to own pets, have family breakfasts and movie nights with popcorn, take

vacations together, and to be loved no matter what. They don't want to pack up again and move to the next foster home, and especially to keep doing that until they are age 18 and enter an uncertain adult world completely alone.

More than 700 of these short films have been created by Project Zero, a nonprofit with one goal: to have zero Arkansas kids in foster care waiting to be adopted. Over almost 12 years, the organization has helped 1,300 such children find adoptive homes, and these films are a big part of the success.

About 35 films are still needed to represent all waiting children, says founder Christie Erwin.

"It's about finding the right family that meets these children's needs and desires and helps them have the opportunity to heal and grow and thrive," Christie says. "They have lost everything that they have ever known. No matter how bad it could have been, it was their family, their school, it was their

**"IT MOVES YOU, IT STIRS YOU TO SEE THEIR FACES AND HAS LITERALLY LED TO KIDS BEING ADOPTED, JUST FROM SOMEONE SEEING A FACE."**

**- CHRISTIE ERWIN**

**▶ PHOTO:** (From left) Christie Erwin, Morrell, a waiting teen, and Nathan Willis. Photo courtesy Project Zero

**MORE THAN 700 OF THESE SHORT FILMS HAVE BEEN CREATED BY PROJECT ZERO, A NONPROFIT WITH ONE GOAL: TO HAVE ZERO ARKANSAS KIDS IN FOSTER CARE WAITING TO BE ADOPTED.**

**▶ PHOTO:** Christie Erwin, Executive Director of Project Zero. Photography by Meredith Benton

house, and all of those things are gone. They are courageous and brave enough to step out."

While preparing for and making the films, the team is guided by the aim, "What do we need to say, do and create so the light comes back on and this child feels hopeful?"

"We've seen the light go out in the eyes of kids that are waiting. By giving them a voice, hope is built," Christie says.

Christie and her husband fostered newborns for 11 years through a private Christian adoption agency, then fostered for 11 years through the state.

"We added two children to our family through adoption," she says. "I became aware of the hopelessness that comes when kids are waiting in foster care to be adopted, and I began to turn toward advocacy, to stepping up and speaking up and out on behalf of these kids."

Project Zero holds several filming blitzes each year for individual children and sibling groups.

"The experience is gut wrenching. And there's not a week goes by when we're shooting that we don't all fall apart. We know what can happen as a result of the films – but we feel ourselves grieving with our kids for what they've lost," she says.

"We had a child not long ago who, when we asked, 'What do you want in an adoptive family?' said, 'I just want to be hugged. I haven't been hugged in years.' We cut film, and we stood up and did a group hug and then each of us one at a time hugged this teen. It was so powerful that it took our breath away."

Once, a boy was asked how he would feel were he to be adopted.

"He answered, 'I'd probably turn into a rainbow,' Christie says. "What a beautiful depiction of redemption, restoration and beauty."

Another was asked, "What do you want to do when you graduate?" He said, 'I want to go check on my granddad and see if he's still alive.'

"It's like a stab in the heart," she said.

Still photographs are also captured of each child by professional photographers, and three exhibits travel the state to churches, businesses, and events. Project Zero has fielded 50,000 inquiries from the public about specific children during the past four years.

"It moves you, it stirs you to see their faces and has literally led to kids being adopted, just from someone seeing a face," she says. "We work in very close partnership with the Department of Child and Family Services and every single adoption specialist and supervisor in the state."

"People ask if they can start Project Zero in their state. And it's not that we wouldn't be open to sharing our protocol, our practices, our purposes and all of that. But we're not at zero in Arkansas yet."

Project Zero also holds events throughout the year for prospective families (who have already

been approved through the state) to meet waiting children. Two large events are held each year including all children from across the state. Smaller events are planned throughout the year to introduce potential adoptive families to sibling groups and teenagers, and for special occasions such as back-to-school, the Christmas holiday and to watch Razorback games.

Often, families have viewed the videos and are looking to meet a specific child or children.

"The events work. They're very awkward and that's what we tell the families in advance," Christie says. "Foster care and adoption aren't normal. They shouldn't exist. So we want our families just to know that connection events can feel awkward and to own that and have fun, because they're for our kids. Just play with a child or eat with a child and start having a connection in that way."

Volunteers help with transportation and conducting the events. Donations are always welcome; each film costs about \$500 to produce, including new outfits, gift cards for the children and related expenses.

"We try to be creative and innovative and ask God to give us crazy ideas that will help our kids find the right forever families," Christie says. "Any day that passes with a child waiting for a family is a day too long." ◀





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SMALL?”  
- JEROME  
STRICKLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACOB ALLINSON

# Navigating THE HEARTBREAK

By Jerome Strickland

## HOW DOES ONE NAVIGATE A MINEFIELD?

With a fantastic guide! And once that mine field is cleared and safe for return, that traveler can return home. This illustration is the journey that over 4,000 Arkansas children are traversing this very moment. But, in order to help them, Arkansans have needed an organized way to enter the work and participate. They needed to know the lay of the “terrain,” and how their resources and talent were a perfect match for the task at hand.

Every Child Arkansas was formed in February 2023 to answer that need, elevating the needs of the child welfare community: the needs of the child, the biological family and care teams such as foster and adoptive families. EveryChildArkansas.com connects people to almost 30 organizations that are working together to guide people to their appropriate place in a child/family’s journey, and at their desired level of commitment.

What are we all willing to do to heal Arkansans when this topic of child welfare seems to be peripheral? We will start by showing that these children and families are our neighbors and are ready to receive our compassion.

Before the website launched, a group of private citizens started the Every Child Arkansas movement and invited agencies to join; then, Gov. Sarah Sanders directed the Department of Human Services, Department of Public Safety

and Department of Education to participate further, signing an executive order of support. What’s special about this movement is the level of collaboration and the technology used. Every Child Arkansas is a coalition of government, private agencies, faith-based organizations, and citizens who want to transform the state together despite different structures and even philosophies.

I’ve never seen a group of people come together in this massive way, leaving their egos at the door to say, ‘How can we build a better future for children who are in distress and experiencing trauma, and their families?’

The technology used is also a game changer.

The Contingent’s role is in technology, marketing, and digital training. The Contingent studies how people consume information online and uses online platforms to find gifted Arkansans to share information about the needs of families and children, ultimately leading them to everychildarkansas.com.

It’s similar to “influence marketing” as what you see when you choose which movie to watch on Netflix, or which product to purchase from amazon.com or walmart.com. We’re using technology to inform Arkansans about this epic opportunity to impact lives.

We use algorithms to closely identify audiences who possess hidden skills or the right personalities to help kids and families who are navigating

◀ **PHOTO:**  
Jerome Strickland is the  
Executive Director of  
The Contingent Arkansas  
which partners with  
Every Child Arkansas.





heartbreak. These Arkansans may not know yet they could be destined to be someone else's hero. We shine the light on them.

Similarly, this article also is challenging you, the reader, to consider what your life would look like if you were to just raise your hand and do something small? Logging into [everychildarkansas.com](http://everychildarkansas.com) can be the start of your journey which may be one of volunteering or even applying to welcome a child into your home and navigating them through their heartbreak.

This approach has worked before. The Contingent used the strategy with astounding success in Oregon. Over a five-year period, 8,000 families and 32,000 volunteers came forward to improve conditions for children and families.

Partnered with the technology, a highly-trained team of foster parents is available to answer questions and encourage seekers by email and phone conversations. The people on the other end of the line have a broad understanding of the system to say, 'You don't have to fear this journey. I'm an individual in this state who has done the process, myself. I can tell you the impact it has on the child, but even more, the incredible impact it has on you and your family.'

There is a groundswell happening in Arkansas, a watershed moment. Whether you step forward to

become a foster parent, an advocate, cook a meal for a weary foster family, drive a foster child to a dentist appointment, or fill a gift basket for a lonely child on their first night of removal, your role is special, and we Arkansans can support each other.

We've got to help kids traverse their troublesome periods. Getting a child through that period may be all he or she needs to return to a situation that may have improved, or to go onward to what's meant for them next. In fact, six out 10 children removed and placed in foster care are reunified with their original families, placed with a relative, or placed with their other parent. And you can be a vital part in that journey.

**So, healthy foster homes are truly needed. But also,**

- Compassionate helpers are needed.
- Kindhearted Grandparents are needed.
- "Play Aunts" "Play Uncles" are needed.

Arkansas is the first state in the United States that truly has the potential to provide more than enough for every child before, during and after foster care. We've run the statistical projections, and there are enough able-bodied people here in this state to do the job. If everyone does just their part, whatever it may be, there will be enough in Arkansas. And it will make history. And even more important than history, it will change lives.

**▲ PHOTO:** Jerome Strickland (center), Dr. Phillip Goad (second from left), the Executive Chairman of Every Child Arkansas, and Goad's wife Starla talk to a family while at the Second Chance Youth Ranch.

**"[IN OREGON],  
OVER A FIVE-  
YEAR PERIOD,  
8,000 FAMILIES  
AND 32,000  
VOLUNTEERS  
CAME FORWARD  
TO IMPROVE  
CONDITIONS  
FOR CHILDREN  
AND FAMILIES."  
- JEROME STRICKLAND**



My wife and I left our careers and moved to Arkansas (my home state) for this work, because it gives value and meaning to our lives. We both shared a passion for helping kids have a balanced household. We met Dr. Phil Goad and others who had a similar passion, and we've been running after this mission ever since.

My wife and I were fortunate to adopt twice. Prayerfully, we get to do it again. Many of us inherently think that adoption is the most heroic

act you can do for a child. I agree that it has its place. However, helping a child or family navigate their heartbreak is truly noteworthy and what our state needs.

Every Child Arkansas educated me that Arkansas greatly needs wonderful foster families. This is what Every Child Arkansas equips us to do – get close enough to see the true need. And when you see, I don't think you'll ever be the same again. ◀

**► PHOTO:** Jerome Strickland and his wife have adopted a child twice and share a passion for helping kids have a balanced household.

**VISIT [EVERYCHILDARKANSAS.COM](http://EVERYCHILDARKANSAS.COM) FOR MORE INFORMATION**



# Redesigning Support

EARLY. FAST. FREELY.

By Robin Mero

**MUCH OF THE SUPPORT THAT ARKANSAS FAMILIES NEED WHEN FACING A CRISIS ALREADY EXISTS, BUT WE MUST REDESIGN HOW WE DISTRIBUTE IT, PARTICULARLY TO HELP THE YOUNGEST AND MOST AT-RISK POPULATIONS, SAYS DARNESHIA ALLEN OF SAFE BABIES.**

When a parent is overwhelmed by the stresses of life, or lacks parenting capacity and isn't sufficiently attaching with a child, we must intervene and walk alongside the child – before it's too late, building “support scaffolding” for the family, Allen says. Otherwise, a baby suffers the most lasting harm.

Experiences during the first three years of life shape 80 percent of who a baby will become, says Allen. “That’s when a baby learns: am I able to trust my environment? Is it a safe place for me? Am I safe to grow and learn?” she explains. “Everything from your sensory experiences to your visual interpretations of the things you see, to your earlier pieces of your cognitive functions, the whole frontal lobe.”

Without a safe, stable environment and nurturing caregivers, babies shift to survival mode and their development stalls.

“You get a child who is lethargic, you get a child who suffers when it comes to growing their language skills. You get a child with cognitive delays, developmental delays, delays with early care and education, because they didn’t have the foundation in place. The frame wasn’t set. Which reflects the absence of strong brain development from the start.”

In Arkansas today, by the time children are taken into foster care, the situations are grave. Child welfare and the courts are designed to meet the needs of young children and their families, but rely heavily on punitive processes with pass or fail measurements that shame and blame families who are already weakened by trauma and overwhelming stress.

“It can make you feel very powerless,” she says. “Particularly when we have parents who have been in the foster care system themselves and now their

**“EXPERIENCES DURING THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF LIFE SHAPE 80 PERCENT OF WHO A BABY WILL BECOME.”**  
- DARNESHIA ALLEN

**“WE’RE NOT USING THESE PROGRAMS AS WELL AS WE COULD. THEY’RE RIGHT HERE. AND THEY COULD MEAN THE DIFFERENCE FOR A FAMILY...”**  
- DARNESHIA ALLEN

children are entering in that multigenerational pathway, many with pre-existing trauma often compounded by domestic violence or mental health issues that were untreated, or exposure to substance use disorders.”

The Safe Babies program operates in 28 states, including Arkansas. The program is designed to lead parents on a path of resilience and healing, rather than penalize them for deficiencies. There is considerably less recidivism with this collaborative approach. More than two-thirds of families in the Safe Babies program find lasting permanency in reunification, and children exit foster care six to eight months sooner than those in the general child welfare population. Within 12 months, less than one percent of maltreatment reoccurs, compared with nine percent in the general population.

“They are not lingering in care, and more importantly, they are not coming back, because this work is about resiliency,” Allen says.

Particularly when substance use disorders are involved, the timeline of a court case is discordant with a parent’s recovery.

“By federal statute, if a family’s coming into the path of child welfare, the hope is to remediate in 12 to 15 months,” Allen says. “That (doesn’t align with) the neurobiology of substance use disorders, where depending on the substance, recovery may truly begin closer to the end of a six-month space of time. For example, if it’s something like methamphetamine, we know that when they hit that six-month mark, within three months there is a greater likelihood of the peak moment for relapse. And you have to know that, and know that you’re chasing a timeline. It doesn’t even match the need.”



**MORE THAN TWO-THIRDS**  
of families in the Safe Babies  
program find lasting permanency  
in reunification



**Children exit foster care**  
**SIX TO EIGHT**  
**MONTHS SOONER**

The Safe Babies program is part of ZERO TO THREE, and its mission includes partnering with parents experienced in the child welfare system to educate courts, child welfare, early care and education providers, mental health clinicians, public health partners, resource parents and fostering agencies on how to work with the families involved in child welfare. The program also partners with legislators to improve policies and helps community partners develop networks of services to offer families before intervention is needed.

“Safe Babies is constantly considering if there’s something else we could do, or could have done, instead of bringing babies into care? Every seven minutes there is a baby coming into care in the U.S.,” Allen says. “Of the 7.2 million children in foster care, 20 percent are under one year of age.”

► **PHOTO:** Darneshia Allen is manager of Training and Technical Assistance Integration for Safe Babies nationally and works out of Washington, D.C.



Many individual programs offering direct support to families already exist in Arkansas, but funding is often insufficient.

“I think about the Angel Clinic at UAMS supporting young moms with mental health disorders who are also combating substance use recovery. It exists, but in a limited capacity. The folks at Our House, who not only catch families who are homeless but those at risk of being homeless. They give you a place to sleep, they have job training programs on site, educational programs to help folks get their GED, and economic support and education.

“We’re not using these programs as well as we could. They’re right here. And they could mean the difference for a family entering into the foster care system because they were homeless, because they didn’t have access to resources,” she says. And meanwhile, “nobody’s buffering the baby.”

Allen, who is manager of Training and Technical Assistance Integration for Safe Babies nationally, now works out of Washington, D.C. She has worked almost 30 years with young children, beginning as an early care teacher.

She envisions a society where we meet families who are in deep crisis, often with substance abuse disorders, “lost and scared with no idea what they are going to eat tomorrow or where they are going to sleep.”

“And we say, ‘Allow me to walk beside you. I’m here to make you stronger. Join me in believing in you. Nothing is impossible, especially when we do it together.’ It makes me want to get up and do this work every single day. Every day, I get to change somebody’s stars.” ◀



# TAKING THE Time TO HEAR

By Robin Mero

**THE POISED TEENAGE GIRL WAS HARDLY RECOGNIZABLE, STANDING BEFORE THE JUDGE.**

She looked reformed, confident in herself.

Circuit Judge Troy Braswell was struck by her composure. “Until that point she had really been struggling, with little to no parenting. She bounced back and forth between her parents’ homes and had access to drugs and alcohol. She had not been doing well in school.”

The girl was fresh from a rigorous 22-week residential program through the Arkansas National Guard, where her days had been awash in structure. With a focus on personal responsibility and life skills, she earned certificates for mastering fundamentals like waking up on time, making her bed, exercising.

“All the things that are so important. I was proud of her maturity, the hard work that she put in at the Arkansas Youth Challenge,” he remembers.

But back home with lax parenting and haphazard routines, she soon began reverting to former ways.

“I firmly believe that parents should have the resources to parent how they believe. But we’ve got to make sure they *are* parenting,” says the eight-year juvenile judge for Faulkner, Van Buren and Searcy counties. “Immediate consequences and sanctions, and recognition of doing well ... those are lacking in so many of our homes.”

By closely examining how home environments and histories affect the youth in his court, and customizing his responses, Judge Braswell has seen

**“FAMILIES ARE ASKED ABOUT THEIR HOME LIFE AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND, HAVE THEY WITNESSED VIOLENCE IN THE HOME, WHAT IS THE CRIMINAL HISTORY OF THE FAMILY?”**

**- JUDGE TROY BRASWELL**

exceptional success – 53% fewer delinquency cases have been filed in Faulkner County, and the recidivism rate has dropped by at least 33%.

“Every case is different,” Braswell says. “We really miss the boat when we have predetermined outcomes, because kids are all different and come from different homes and different backgrounds and experiences.”

“What’s critical is that kids recognize their behavior as being wrong, are given an opportunity to make the situation right, and are enabled to deal with it the next time that it arises.”

Braswell’s court volunteered to use a pilot risk assessment program. Juvenile probation officers conduct extensive interviews with families so that when a juvenile is charged with a crime, the court gleans as much information as possible before making a disposition or sentencing decision. The process takes two to three hours.

“When a kid completes probation, we want to lower that risk factor of him or her being a violent offender or coming back to court,” Braswell said.

“Families are asked about their home life and social background, have they witnessed violence in the home, what is the criminal history of the family? We take mental health and substance abuse assessments. A report is generated listing areas of need and risk for each kid.

“Forget about why they’re in court. You don’t even talk about that. What do you have going on in your life that’s good? What are areas that we need to work on? Then we come up with what I call an individualized court plan.”

Braswell and his staff have curated a robust curriculum, introducing youth to new concepts and perspectives and rewarding their progress. Youth may show resistance to participating (eye rolling, huffing), but results are enthusiastic.

There is a book club, a Girl Scout program, a class about the justice system and how to interact with law enforcement and courts, and a civil rights class focusing on historical figures who fought for opportunities that youth enjoy today.

“The courthouse isn’t a great place for kids to be, so we get our programs out of this building, partnering with Deliver Hope, the University of Central Arkansas, and local businesses,” Braswell says.

“We have interns and folks from UCA who are interested in juvenile justice and want to see positive change. And that’s where the magic happens. I can’t run a theater class, but there are a lot of smart people over at UCA who love theater.

“I had kids in court that didn’t get a chance to play football because they made some bad decisions. But we saw them on a path to something good. So I reached out to Coach Nathan Brown and said, ‘I’ve got some kids who messed up but are doing better; they want to play football but can’t – could they spend some time with your players?’

◀ **PHOTO:** Circuit Judge Troy Braswell, The eight-year juvenile judge for Faulkner, Van Buren and Searcy counties

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHANIE BITTLE

**53%**  
**FEWER**  
**DELINQUENCY CASES**

**HAVE BEEN FILED**  
**IN FAULKNER COUNTY**

**THE RECIDIVISM RATE**  
**has dropped by at least**

**33%**

“So they watch practices, meet with college athletes they admire, and if they continue to do well at the end of the year, they get to go down on the sidelines and watch a game with their family.

“Coach Nathan Brown said, ‘Troy, I’m excited about it because I have young men who have come through really tough circumstances, and I’ve got others who have come through really good circumstances that appreciate what they had and are eager to give that back.’”

On the judge’s wish list are: in-patient drug treatment for Arkansas kids; an increase in trade schools similar to Job Corps; and shelters to serve kids with mental health issues, to avoid sending them to jail.

“We spend a lot of time as a state rightfully addressing the adult system, right? If you want to make a huge difference in prison overcrowding, the investment should be in juvenile courts. That’s our next generation, that’s our future.

“But even if you give a kid the best services in the world, what’s going on at home,” he asks. “I get asked all the time, what’s the number one thing that makes the biggest difference for a kid in your court? And I would say it’s a parent who decides, ‘I’ve got to parent. I can’t keep doing things the same way that we’ve been doing them. I have accountability and responsibility.’

“Once that happens, get me out of the way. You don’t need me or a court.” ◀





# GROWING OUR COLLECTIVE CAPACITY

By Robin Mero

**S**TRUGGLING FAMILIES NEED HELP FROM THEIR COMMUNITIES IN ORDER TO THRIVE. THESE EFFORTS CAN'T BE LEFT TO THE GOVERNMENT ALONE.

**▲ PHOTO:** (From left) Rena Whittaker, The Contingent Arkansas; Jerome Strickland, The Contingent Arkansas; Mischa Martin, Deputy Secretary of Youth and Families; Dr. Phillip Goad, Every Child Arkansas; Secretary Kristi Putnam, Department of Human Services; Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders; Ben Sand, The Contingent Arkansas; NJ Royer, The Contingent Arkansas; Paul Chapman, Restore Hope Arkansas; and Tiffany Wright, Department of Children and Family Services

“When alliances are formed between communities and governments, outcomes are best,” says Paul Chapman, CEO of Restore Hope Arkansas. Perhaps no other state is as well positioned as Arkansas to improve conditions for children and families who are impacted by foster care by better supporting foster parents, case workers and the affected families. This is due to a coordinated effort called Every Child Arkansas, which has the support of Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders. ECA’s vision is to have more than enough for children and families before, during and beyond foster care. The movement started with the creation of a website, [everychildarkansas.org](http://everychildarkansas.org), which is the single point of contact for becoming a foster parent.

Additional support will be organized within each of Arkansas’ 75 counties. Pilot programs have been launched in both Pope and Green counties. Organizations are already working within each county to help biological, kinship and foster families. They will join providers in the foster care space and create working groups to look at the local reality: How many children are in foster care? What is the bed-to-child ratio? How many of the county’s children are placed in foster homes outside of the county? Who’s already doing what work? What resources are available in the community? What resources and services are missing? “We ask the question: What is your community best equipped to address? Then we provide the

**“WE ASK THE QUESTION: WHAT IS YOUR COMMUNITY BEST EQUIPPED TO ADDRESS? THEN WE PROVIDE THE SUPPORT FOR THAT COMMUNITY.”**  
- PAUL CHAPMAN, CEO, RESTORE HOPE ARKANSAS

support for that community to operationalize their interventions,” Chapman says. “After we get Pope and Green counties going, there are six more counties right behind them – we will help with recruitment and start connecting the different parties. We start with counties where our collaborative 100 Families program already exists. We’ll begin moving as rapidly as possible.” So far, Every Child Arkansas has a membership of 30 member organizations that are currently involved in foster care from across the state. These organizations are partnering with the Arkansas Departments of Education, Child and Family Services, and Public Safety. They’ll collectively engage the community, open more foster homes, provide support for foster families, and develop solutions. “If a family is falling apart, the best thing we can do is to rally around that family to help them get stable again. And if it’s not safe for a child to stay in the home, then the child’s got to be in a family-like setting. Which means the participation of the community is absolutely essential,” Chapman says. Every Child Arkansas works through logistics and synthesis, and is supported by the organization The Contingent, which brings digital solutions and a national perspective. “Collaboration makes the agencies more efficient, it helps them do what they’re already signed up to do,” Chapman says. “With that model and toolset, an environment is created in which problems can be solved.” Much of the work is already being done but must be scaled to meet each community’s needs, he says. “We need to develop efficiencies that allow Arkansas organizations to do more of what they’re currently doing. More capacity, more people to offer skilled services, more families helping care for children who can’t be with their families, more community members doing small things to support the front lines.” Arkansas has much of the money it needs to create solutions, particularly through dollars from the opioid settlement and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Chapman says. Prevention is a priority for Secretary Kristi Putnam of the Department of Human Services and Mischa Martin, Director of the Department of Children and Family Services. “They are focusing the state on prevention. They’re aligning and strengthening programs that provide wraparound services in order to catch issues as early as possible, to prevent cases from

being opened, and keep an opened case from progressing in severity,” Chapman says. “There are all sorts of solutions for reducing the number of kids entering the foster care system: jobs programs and substance abuse treatment and behavioral health. There are wonderful firms that already provide these services in these different regions. What we need for them to do, is to do more of it.” When a family does enter the system, “we need speed out of the system - faster permanency decisions and quick connection to resources when someone has the ‘want-to.’ And if they don’t have the ‘want-to,’ then decisions also can be made quicker, where it doesn’t feel like a case is trailing on and on.” Chapman says more trauma-informed services are needed. “We’ve got a supply problem. The number of people who want to provide those services is diminished, because it’s a very hard thing. We’re talking about some of the toughest situations you’ll ever see.” Post system, families need to continue to be measured even after a court case concludes, to prevent reunified families from falling back into trouble and therefore needing their child welfare case reopened. This means offering services beyond, he says. “These families are falling apart for a multitude of reasons, but substance abuse is usually common. Substance abuse is a bandaid someone throws on to try to deal with pain, but it ends up causing much more pain in the long run,” Chapman says. “If a family is falling apart, the best thing we can do is to rally around that family, to help them get stable again. And if needed, if it’s not safe for the child to stay in the home, then the child’s got to be in a family-like setting. Which means the participation of the community is absolutely essential. And that is one of the issues we are having right now. We’re missing about 40 percent of the needed foster families for the kids currently in care. Those aren’t government employees and never will be. They have to be families from Arkansas.” “We also need to better support foster families to lower their dropout rate. That work is really, really hard. It usually takes 6-12 months for a family to contemplate whether or not they would be a foster family, and then it takes at least 6 months to train them once they raise their hand. So you’re talking about huge lead times and massive investments just to open a foster home. We’ve got to support the families better to decrease the dropout rate.” ◀

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GOVERNOR’S OFFICE

It usually takes **6-12 MONTHS FOR A FAMILY** to contemplate whether or not they would be a foster family, and then it takes at least **6 MONTHS TO TRAIN THEM** once they raise their hand.



# STRONG AS STEEL

By Steve Straessle

## WE HAVEN'T HIDDEN ANYTHING FROM HER.

*We haven't hidden anything though we're careful to account for her age and understanding. She knows what happened because she's smart and asks a lot of questions. Someday, we'll tell her the full story as I'm doing for you right now. For me, the story starts in a courtroom though my wife would tell you it began well before that.*

*It was an odd feeling, sitting in that courtroom. The light wood around the judge's bench contrasted with water stained ceiling tiles. That room had a look that was both sanitary and important, both basic and awe-inspiring.*

*The judge read through a case file in a voice firm but gentle, taking time to read every single word deliberately though lacking inflection. The woman standing before him kept her head down, red and blue streaks of dye evident throughout her neatly combed hair. I shifted in my seat.*

*My wife and I had been foster parents for a few years. Mostly, we provided care for a couple of days at a time: then the kids would go to a relative or to a more permanent setting. We hosted James, who peed under our dinner table. We had Corliss, who asked if he could download a math game to our iPad. Others came and went and, when they left, we silently hoped we had done a good job, that maybe we said or did something those kids would remember. I don't know that we did, but we still hoped as emptiness filled our house when they left.*

*Don't get me wrong; we had a full house before we started fostering, but my wife is a better person than I am, and she insisted we look into it.*

*So, we did.*

*We started training about 25 years ago but decided our family was too young to add more. Then, we picked it up again later after a couple of our children had left for college. The CALL provided a great network to learn and grow.*

*The judge continued reading the case file. I looked to my wife and she was paying rapt attention, trying to digest every word that was said. I remember thinking she looked pretty in her blue dress. I looked to the attorneys, and they scribbled furiously. The woman kept her head bowed and hands clasped in front of her.*

*It was a cold January, a couple of years before that day in court. I do remember that. It was right before the MLK holiday and predictions of snow swirled in the air. My wife's phone rang. After a brief conversation, much of which I couldn't hear, she turned to me and said, "Get the room ready. A three-year-old girl is on the way."*

*A nondescript sedan arrived in front of our house, and a little girl clutching a stuffed animal was pulled from a car seat. She was non-ambulatory so she held tightly to the caseworker. My wife bounded down porch steps to the street and the little girl reached for her. I stood by, a dumb look on my face.*

*Her father had suffered a medical emergency — likely a diabetic seizure — and died in the house. Her mother*

*delayed in calling emergency services because their house was in disarray. There was no electricity and no running water; the child had no medical visits since birth.*

*The judge kept reading and said the words "environmental neglect" with emphasis. The woman standing before him nodded, accepting the term without comment. My wife's eyes softened a bit. She was seeing something that I could not see.*

*The little girl clung to my wife, and we fed her mashed potatoes and a few bites of chicken. She was tiny. She had been breastfed as her primary source of nutrition. She had to be weaned. There were no relatives for her to live with. There was no one to call as the weekend approached. Then, snow began to fall.*

*It feels cliché to say that we thought she'd be with us for only 24 hours, but we really thought that, at first. At least, I did. My wife's eyes had that softened look the moment she held the little girl. She saw something I missed at the time. As usual.*

*Weeks stretched into months. The little girl started walking, then running. Man, she was fast. She grew before our eyes. Before long, she began reading and loved to learn new stories. She had been loved her entire life, there was no doubt.*

*Finally, the judge said it. He closed the large file and took off his glasses, rubbing his face with his free hand. He put his glasses back on and looked to the woman before him. His look was not unkind, but it wasn't pleasant, either. I only remember three words that the judge said but I remember the exact feeling when I heard them. "Parental rights terminated." My fingers tingled for some reason, though I was only a witness, not a participant.*

*The bailiff escorted the woman out of the courtroom, her eyes following a trail on the floor from the lectern to the hallway. The door closed softly behind her.*

*The judge went through several minutes of discussion with the lawyers and then tapped his gavel lightly. Those in the courtroom exited, disappearing quietly like deer in a forest. My wife and I picked up our belongings and left, the last ones to exit.*

*We needed to stretch, so we opted for the stairs. At the bottom, we opened a huge fire door and walked into the*

*courthouse lobby. We were alone. Except for the figure sitting on a window sill, holding her knees to her chest, sobbing quietly.*

*It was the woman, the little girl's mom. I reached for my wife's elbow while searching for an alternative route to the outside, one that would avoid the awkward scene in front of us. My hand grabbed air where it should have grabbed elbow.*

*I turned in time to see my wife walking straight for the woman in the window. I froze, like an idiot. The woman stood, wiping tears. My wife planted her feet in front of her and wiped her own face. They embraced.*

*Shyly, and a bit chastened for being an idiot, I slowly approached the scene. The woman said, "Would you please make sure she's ok — that she's always ok?"*

*My wife responded gently. "Yes. And if she's with us one month or one year or for her lifetime, she'll know about you, she'll know her mother. I promise that, too."*

*The woman cried. My wife cried. I shuffled my feet, swallowing to keep the sudden dryness out of my throat.*

*The woman let go of my wife and hugged me, burying her face on my shoulder. I felt inadequate to the moment. She squeezed, forced a smile, and left to a waiting car.*

*I looked at the wet map of tears on my sports coat. I looked at my wife. We didn't say anything.*

*Sometimes, bonds form in the strangest places. These bonds, small yet strong as steel, connect people through lives that seem so opposite, so distant. These bonds are reminders that the world is complicated, yet it's made better by eyes softened with love and minds opened by truth — and by children, adored beyond measure by those who know them.*

*The little girl knows much of this story, the parts that she could understand. She knows all about her mother because my wife tells her that if she ever misses her mom, she can look in the mirror and she'll see beauty and strength and the vulnerability that allows the right thing to come pouring forth. The little girl understands as much as she can.*

*Like I said, we haven't hidden anything from her, the little girl now our daughter. <*



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### **EPISODE 1** **INTRO TO THE WELFARE SYSTEM**

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Mischa Martin  
Tiffany Wright  
Judge Tjuana Byrd Manning

### **EPISODE 2** **BIO FAMILIES**

#### **SPECIAL GUESTS**

Jeff Piker  
Skye Mitchell  
Licia Etheridge  
Devin Singh  
Mahogany Brown

### **EPISODE 3** **FOSTER FAMILIES**

#### **SPECIAL GUESTS**

Allie Graves  
Christen Butler  
Derek Brown  
Dennis Berry

### **EPISODE 4** **RESOURCES**

#### **SPECIAL GUESTS**

Darneshia Allen  
Christen Butler  
Derek Brown  
Chris Massey  
Dennis Berry

### **EPISODE 5** **JUVENILE ADOPTION**

#### **SPECIAL GUESTS**

Judge Troy Braswell  
Christie Erwin

### **EPISODE 6** **THERE IS A SOLUTION**

#### **SPECIAL GUESTS**

Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders  
Dr. Phil Goad  
Jerome Strickland  
Secretary Kristi Putnam

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