

Family Finding locates kin of kids in foster care

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By Jess Eagle, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Kevin Campbell, of Seattle, Wash., stood in front of an audience in Venango County earlier this year, talking with a 16-year-old girl about her past. The girl had been in foster care for 10 years, with no relatives to claim her.

Within 20 minutes, Mr. Campbell was able to locate numerous relatives of hers -- including a grandfather -- living in an Eskimo tribe on an Alaskan island. While still in front of the audience, Mr. Campbell reached the grandfather on his cell phone on an ice-fishing boat. The man admitted with horror that he thought his granddaughter had been adopted 10 years ago, and eagerly offered her a home.

Stories like this drew more than 600 people from around the world for the annual American Humane Conference, held this year in Pittsburgh's Westin Convention Center Hotel. Attendees of last week's conference learned about innovations in foster care, including Mr. Campbell's invention, which has helped children across the country. Known as Family Finding, his Internet-based program locates previously unknown relatives of foster children and has become widely used in Pennsylvania.

Attendees came from all over the country, as well as Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, England and Canada.

American Humane chose Pittsburgh because Allegheny County has drawn international attention as a leader in both Family Finding and Family Group Decision Making, another innovative foster care practice.

FGDM is an alternative option to traditional judicial-ruled foster care that allows the family -- rather than the legal system -- to create a plan for a child's future, and often results in their staying with relatives rather than strangers. FGDM is currently used by 63 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

Justice Max Baer, of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, led a panel of Pennsylvania judges who discussed Family Finding and FGDM at the conference Friday morning.

Mr. Baer called foster care in Pennsylvania "a bad system" as a whole, despite dedicated and caring foster parents. But he also pointed out that the state is making great strides compared to others.

For example, in the past few years, Pennsylvania cut the time that it took a child to go through the legal system from 19 months to three. And in September 2008 -- a month before it became federal law to use Family Finding for every foster child -- Allegheny County had Mr. Campbell start training social workers to use it.

The county is also the only one in the state with a separate children's court and a legal electronic filing system, both of which allow a child to move more quickly through the system.

And with Family Finding and FGDM becoming common practices, more Allegheny County children are ending up with relatives, and sooner.

"When children are abused and neglected, they're traumatized, but when children are removed from their homes -- even if there was abuse or neglect -- it's also traumatic for them," said Sandra Moore, administrator of Pennsylvania's Office of Children and Families in the Courts, who led Friday's panel discussion.

Bringing children into relatives' homes alleviates some of that trauma, Ms. Moore said.

As for the Venango County girl, she has been talking with her Alaskan relatives on the phone the past few months, and the county is arranging a trip for her to meet them this summer. For now, Mr. Campbell said, she just wants to meet the family she never knew she had, and will decide if she wants move there later.

"Our hope is that we don't have to have a child in foster care for 10 years before that happens," Ms. Moore said.



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