

Foster parents sought in Armstrong County

By [Tom Mitchell](#)

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KITTANNING -- If there's one thing Susan McKinnis has no shortage of it's children -- she has virtually dozens and each one is close to her heart.

Unlike the "...woman who lived in a shoe..." McKinnis does know what to do with her children -- she intends to give them what they most need -- a good, loving foster home. The problem is there aren't enough homes to go around, so McKinnis, coordinator of the foster care program of Community Alternatives, is on an earnest quest to find them, and she's looking in Armstrong County.

The children in question are referrals from Children, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) agencies in their respective counties.

"Community Alternatives is a private, nonprofit organization based in New Castle," McKinnis said. "We span a seven-county area and we are dedicated to finding homes for children who cannot stay with their biological parents for a variety of reasons. The children we place were either neglected, abused or in domestic violence situations. Often there are serious problems in their homes such as alcohol or drug abuse.

"The goal of any foster care agency is always to re-unify families if possible. Sometimes, however, that's not possible and for the safety and welfare of the children, parental rights must be terminated."

McKinnis said referrals of abused or neglected children are on the rise in virtually every county in Pennsylvania including Armstrong.

"The tragic truth is," she said, 'we have more children than we have foster homes. We need people who are willing to open their homes and hearts to these children.

Dave Shoop, supervisor of Armstrong County CYFS Foster Care Unit, confirmed McKinnis' assessment regarding the number of children needing foster care.

"We currently have 70 children in foster care or group homes in Armstrong County," Shoop said. "For this county that's a big number. About 30 to 40 of the children are in group homes, the rest are in foster care homes. We have 35 foster care families in the county."

Children needing foster care come from all walks of life and social strata. County agencies such as CYFS and private agencies such as Community Alternatives find homes for children from birth through age 18.

"The average age of the children we place," McKinnis said, "is from 10 through 18, but we have placed infants and also teenage mothers with infants. We have boys and girls and some children with special needs or disabilities.

"We're looking for people who are willing to open their hearts and homes to children who need both." McKinnis said. "Becoming a foster parent is not difficult. You must be over 21, in good health, of good moral character and pass a police background check. Foster parents must complete a preliminary training period which includes CPR and first aid, a Safe Control Management course, and a review of foster care policies and procedures. Foster parents who go through our agency have a say in the type of children they will take, as far as age, gender, ethnicity, race, or whether they will take special needs children or siblings.

"We do try to keep siblings together as much as possible so we also need people who are willing to take more than one child. Our agency provides 100 percent of the child's medical care and our staff is available to transport the children to medical appointments or court appearances. Staff is also on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We do a basic clothing inventory and clothing funds are provided by the respective county."

McKinnis said the foster parent program is not meant to be an "income" to the foster family, but a tax-free cash supplement paid directly to foster parents once every 10 days.

McKinnis said foster families receive a basic maintenance payment. The payment is calculated on a daily basis.

"As with most private agencies, we are able to pay more than a county agency would pay," she said.

Not all children who need foster care are suitable for foster care program.

"Some children have behavior problems that do not make them good candidates for a foster home. That's why some of our children are placed in group homes," said Shoop. "Presently we have two group homes in the county, one is operated by the Ministries of Eden in Rural Valley and the other is Adelphi village in Apollo.

McKinnis offered some advice for anyone thinking of becoming a foster parent.

"Check out the agency," she said. "Know exactly what the staff will do and how accessible they are. Support from any agency is very important to a successful

relation between the child and the foster parents. Our staff covers all of the seven-county area we serve."

Shoop said CYFS will hold an 18-hour foster parents training course beginning June 16 taught by Carol Pontious. For more information about the class, call CYFS at 724-548-3466.

Information about Community Alternatives' foster parent program is available by calling McKinnis at 1-800-332-1208.

"We're not looking for people to make a lifetime commitment to a child," McKinnis said. "We're just looking for people to make a commitment to the life of a child."

Tom Mitchell can be reached at tmitchell@tribweb.com or 724-543-1303, ext. 220.