

Local**CUMBERLAND COUNTY****Cumberland County foster parents say each situation is different, and the system seems to be working**

By [Heather Stauffer, Sentinel Reporter](#), November 23, 2008

Last updated: Sunday, November 23, 2008 5:59 PM EST

When it comes to children, Dave Gross believes in taking things on a case-by-case basis.

"I don't know who ever came up with that 15-month thing," said Gross, who has been a foster parent with Cumberland County Children and Youth Services for 13 years now.

The law Gross was referring to requires the foster care system, after children have been in care for 15 out of 22 months, to assess whether a return to their birth family is going to happen. If not, case workers are to petition to terminate parental rights so another permanent family situation can be found for the child.

"It all sounds good on paper," Gross said. But, he said, when it actually comes to deciding what's best for a child and how long the process takes, "it absolutely depends on the situation."

Jeff Bell, who with his wife, Michelle, has for the last three years been a foster parent with Diakon, which works with the county agency, said he agreed that the 15-month guideline is not necessarily a great way to assess how well a program is serving children. "I hate to see a kid be in a system forever," Bell said. But, he said, "The ultimate goal for any child is to see them be reunified with their family. I'd rather see that take a longer period of a time than have the child return to their family and then come back."

Both Gross and Bell said what they've seen here in the county seems to be working. And when they say that, they're speaking not just as foster parents, but as adoptive ones. Gross's youngest daughter was adopted through the system years ago, and the Bells are a month away from finalizing the adoption of an 18-month-old boy who has been primarily in their care since his birth.

"I think Children and Youth does great," Gross said. "I have nothing but good things to say."

He added that he likes that when a child enters the system the county begins both the process of attempting family reunification and exploring other alternatives. When possible, Gross said, he tries to maintain very open communication with the birth family, which can allow an informal mentoring relationship and help children understand the situation.

"They know that Mom or Dad have a little problem, and they need to get it worked out before they can go home again," Gross said. But whether or not the children end up going back to their families, he said, he hears from a lot of them regularly.

"Some people think, OK, because we're adopting that kid, that (family) connection has to end," Bell said. But, he said, he and his wife have been reminded that birth family ties are important, "because everybody needs to know their background."

The boy they are adopting has at least one sibling who has been adopted as well, Bell said, and the county is encouraging them to make sure that they get in communication with that child and his new family.

Both men say foster parenting can be challenging at times, but overall, it has been a rewarding experience, because it gives them a chance to make a difference in other people's lives.

People sometimes ask him if it's hard to see the children go when their time with him is up, Gross said. He always knows exactly what to tell them, he said.

“You don’t have to say goodbye,” he says. “We say, ‘See you later.’”

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