

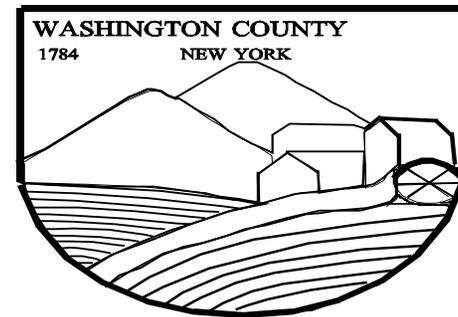
To Relatives And Friends:

The Washington County Department of Social Services encourages qualified relatives and friends to consider caring for a child when the child's family cannot provide a safe and stable environment. We wrote this handbook for relatives and friends of children who need placement outside their own home for a period of time. We hope you will find it helpful as a starting point in learning about the different options available to you.

Tammy DeLorme
Commissioner
Washington County
Department of Social Services

When a Child Needs a Home

*A Handbook
for Relatives and Friends*



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Do you mean that a relative who wants to adopt might not be allowed to? Don't blood ties count?

The law is that Foster Parents who have cared for a child for more than a year have priority even over relatives. It is important that relatives be aware of this when children go into Foster Care.



What should I do now?

Talk to the child's family and/or the Caseworker involved in the case about the pros and cons of all the options mentioned in this booklet. Remember that although some out-of-home placements are short, others are longer, and still others may develop into permanent situations for the child. The goal is to help the child grow up in a stable, positive, and safe environment. Washington County DSS needs and wants relatives and close family friends to help us help children and their families.

NOTES

1 Relatives, Friends, and Placement

This handbook was written primarily for relatives of children who need to be placed outside their own home for a period of time. Close friends may also provide temporary care for a child in need of a safe, nurturing home. Most of the information in this handbook applies to relatives as well as close friends.



What can I do if a child who is related to me might be placed outside his or her home?

You may be able to provide a temporary home when the parents are not able or willing to care for the child. Relatives can be a significant source of support for a child during difficult family situations.



Will I qualify as a relative Foster Parent?

To qualify, you must be over the age of 21, but your race, religion, and sexual preference are not relevant. You can be male or female, single or married. You do not have to be employed, but you must have a legal source of income for yourself, such as Temporary Assistance or Social Security. You do not need to own your home, but you do have to have a suitable place for the child to live. There will be a criminal history check, but having a criminal history may not prevent you from providing temporary care. Ask the Caseworker involved in the child's care for more details about qualifications if you want to be considered.



What if I am not actually related by blood or marriage to a child who might be (or is already) placed in Foster Care? Can I still help?

Yes. People who are not directly related to a child may still be able to provide temporary care. For information about placement, visitation, or other options, contact the caseworker responsible for the child's case.



What happens if there is no relative or friend who can take the child?

If the child needs to be placed, and no relative or friend is available and qualified to provide a temporary home for the child, DSS will find a non-relative certified Foster Home for the child that best meets the child's needs.



What if I can't take care of a child who is related to me, and that child goes into Foster Care?

Talk to the Caseworker to see if you can come up with a plan to help resolve whatever is preventing you from caring for the child. Tell the Caseworker about any other relatives or family friends who may be able to safely care for the child. You could also talk to the Caseworker about being helpful in other ways—perhaps by visiting or communicating regularly with the child.

Because of the policy on confidentiality, the Caseworker may not be able to tell you everything that is happening with the children related to you, who are not in your care.



What if I want to get custody or guardianship of a child and raise him or her without DSS being involved?

You would need to file legal papers in court to seek an ongoing order of custody. This could be difficult if the parent is opposed but fairly easy if the parent agrees. If DSS is involved, and/or the parent wants the child to stay with you on a long-term basis, ask the Caseworker about this option. If DSS is not involved, contact Washington County Family Court Clerk's office.



Can I adopt a child who has been placed with me?

You can only adopt the child if the parent agrees to this or if the court "terminates" the rights of the parent. Parents can agree at any time to the adoption of a child by "surrendering" their parental rights. Sometimes they do so with the specific understanding that a particular friend or relative will adopt the child. Courts can terminate the rights of parents when it appears that the child will not be able to return home safely. Usually the child has been out of the home for a year or more before the court is allowed to consider terminating a parent's rights and "freezing" the child to be adopted.



Can I adopt a child who has not been living with me but is freed for adoption?

The law states that Foster Parents who have had a child placed in their home for more than a year must be given first consideration to adopt if the child is freed. If the foster parents have not had the child in their home for more than a year or if they can't adopt, relatives may be considered.

4 The Future

★ What if a child can't return home or has to live with me for a longer time than I expected?

Legally, parents have the primary right to raise their children, but sometimes parents are not able to safely care for their children for a long time, if ever. Most parents are able to receive help and improve the situation so that their children can be returned to them.

Sometimes it may take as long as a year for that to happen. If the parent has not been able to improve the situation enough after time and help, the law requires that DSS and the court find a permanent arrangement for the child.

★ What happens if the child can't go home?

Although most children do go home, a few are not able to, and other options may be considered at that time.

All of these options require the involvement of the court. They include:

- Ongoing legal custody to a relative resource
 - Legal guardianship to a relative or friend
- Termination of the parents' rights and adoption of the child by foster parents or other adoptive parents

Also, some youth in foster care who are older than 14 years of age may receive services to learn to live independently after leaving foster care.

2 Types of Placement

★ How do children get placed with relatives or friends?

Placements with relatives or friends can range from informal arrangements made by the parents themselves to formal arrangements made by Child Protective Services (CPS) staff and ordered by a Family Court Judge.

Generally, children are placed with relatives or friends in three different ways:

1. Informal Placement Arrangement

An informal placement arrangement is when a child goes to live with a relative (or friend) with the consent of the parent and the parent keeps legal custody. This can happen when a parent feels unable to parent the child at that time and asks you to help. Or a parent is going through a crisis, and you convince the parent to let you care for the child while she or he seeks help.

In this type of placement, you may be able to receive Temporary Assistance, Medicaid, and Food Stamps for the child, child support payments from a parent or through DSS, or Preventive Services.

Social Services would view this as a temporary arrangement as it does not achieve permanency for the child(ren).



What if I am taking care of a child informally but I want some extra Foster Care money to help me?

Foster Care payments are only available when a child has been placed in Foster Care, and a person, relative or not, has qualified to become a Foster Parent. If you have questions about becoming a Foster Parent, ask the child's Caseworker.



Are there other services that I might be able to receive if I am taking care of a child placed in my home?

You may be eligible for certain services depending on the problems that arise in caring for the child. The child's Caseworker may be able to help you with day care, Caseworker services, community services, parenting training, and special counseling for the child. Ask the Caseworker who is working with you or the child about these programs.

NOTES

Children who are in Foster Care with relatives are in the legal custody of the Washington County Department of Social Services (DSS). You will have to meet the Caseworker on a regular basis. The Caseworker will guide you in working with the child, the child's family, and the family's service providers. DSS will respect your special ties with the child and will seek your input in developing a plan for the child's safe return home or other permanent situation. The court will continue to monitor decisions about the child's future.

As a relative Foster Parent, you will have to work with the parents, cooperate with visitation arrangements with the parents, go to casework conferences and some court appearances, and take the child to necessary medical, school, and counseling appointments. These things are important in helping with the plan to return the child to his or her parents. You will also help the Caseworker maintain the child's ties to the community through the child's involvement with religious organizations, extracurricular activities, and extended family.

You will receive payments to help care for the child based on the child's age. The amount may be greater than payments from Temporary Assistance. (Foster Parents themselves can be on Temporary Assistance, but they cannot receive Temporary Assistance or Food Stamps for the child.) You will also receive money to help buy clothes for the child. You may be able to receive money for the child's support for things like transportation costs or special items and activities.

