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MAGAZINE

The year 2000
looms ever
nearer — what
will Billings
look like in the
21st century?

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BILLINGS FORECAST

**M.O.R.E.
WEATHER**

Brisk and
cold, with
M.O.R.E.
flurries.

▲
30°

22°
▼

For your area forecast,
see back page of section

Children find new lives

Overburdened program provides caring families

By CHRISTINE LYALL
Of The Gazette Staff

Finding room for foster care



SPECIAL REPORT

This is the first of a four-part series on foster care in Billings and Montana.

As national leaders, like Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, discuss alternatives to foster care as part of reform plans for the nation's welfare system, the Department of Family Services is charging ahead with plans of its own.

This report will look at foster care from the points of view of the Department of Family Services, biological and foster parents, and foster children.

Ahead in this series

- **Monday:** What kind of homes do foster children come from?
- **Tuesday:** Who are the foster parents, and why do they do it?
- **Wednesday:** How do the foster children feel about their foster families, their natural parents, and the Department of Family Services?

LATE ONE AFTERNOON on a recent school day, 17-year-old Stacey examined a housefly stuck to a glass slide under the lens of a microscope.

Stacey (not her real name) is one of more than 380 foster children in Yellowstone County and 3,580 in Montana. She hopes soon to cut all ties with her birth mother, legally take on her foster family's name and attend Montana State University-Billings to study biology.

She hopes to put her past, wracked by sexual abuse, behind her and get on with her new life — a life that's been made possible through the Department of Family Services foster care program.

But there are times — especially in the company of her birth mother or outsiders — when Stacey feels somewhat like the fly she studies for her biology class: a small nuisance that can be brushed aside with the wave of a hand.

When people learn more about Stacey's situation, however, her significance magnifies, much as the fly is magnified under the microscope. People are intrigued by her and formulate hypotheses about her. And though some might get close enough to learn the truth, Stacey feels misunderstood.

"When people find out that you are a foster child, they think that something's wrong with you," she said. In reality, the problems are with her birth family, she said.

"It's difficult the way people think of you. They

(More on Families, Page 9A)



Finding homes

Here is a look at the number of children in foster care in Yellowstone County and in Montana over the last five years.

	Yellowstone County	Montana
1990	339	3,125
1991	366	3,417
1992	356	3,493
1993	379	3,442
1994	384	3,580

Gazette graphic by JOHN POTTER



Gazette photo by Bob Zellar

Judy Jones, a Billings foster parent, greets one of her charges with a smile while she feeds another foster baby. Jones specializes in the care of infants and often supervises the birth mothers, as well.

“Kids do best in families. ... The family connection is more important than money.”

—Betty Petek
regional administrator of the Department of Family Services

Continued story

Families

From Page One

throw sympathy on you," she said. "But I'm just as good — or better — at whatever we're doing (in school) than anybody else. Maybe I wasn't up to par last year, but now I am."

Overburdened system

Stacey said she has the state foster care system to thank for the good things in her life, even though statistics show the foster care system in Yellowstone County and Montana is overburdened.

According to the state Department of Family Services, the number of children admitted into foster care in Billings and Montana has steadily increased in the past five years, with a nearly 4 percent annual increase since 1992. Betty Petek, regional administrator of the DFS, said that increase has gone hand-in-hand with an increase in the abuse of alcohol and drugs, particularly methamphetamine.

Child abuse is another reason for an increasing number of foster children, Petek said.

"There is an increase in actual families experiencing child abuse and neglect, as well as an increase in the rate of reporting those incidents," she said. "The public is more aware."

The Billings area has only 118 DFS licensed foster homes to serve almost 400 children, and there are only two emergency foster homes in operation, she said. DFS has only 21 case workers on staff to investigate more than 1,500 referrals a year.

"We need more foster homes," Petek said. Yet "there is no magic number" of homes to aim for, because children's needs for accommodation vary, she said.

A little more money wouldn't

hurt, either, Petek said, noting that her office's annual foster care budget for 11 counties, about \$3 million, is not enough.

Funding lags

The state government — Montana's taxpayers — pay for foster care, doling out to each foster family \$11.01 a day for children under the age of 13 and \$13.88 a day for children aged 13 to 18.

But that rate of reimbursement does not keep pace with inflation, Petek said, and will most likely not be increased this year. A legislative subcommittee has killed a proposal to increase the subsidy rate by 1½ percent, or 17 cents for younger children and 21 cents for older children.

"Foster parents are grossly undercompensated," Petek said. In fact, she said, funding has been inadequate across the spectrum of foster care, which includes regular foster care; more intense, therapeutic foster care; group homes; and psychiatric group homes.

Nonetheless, foster children, foster parents and even biological parents seem to favor foster care over orphanages, which Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has pitched as part of his proposals for welfare reform.

"You couldn't run an orphanage on \$11 (per child) a day," Petek argued. "Kids do best in families. If it can't be their family of origin, then the next best thing is a family that will make a lifetime commitment to them. The family connection is more important than money."

Foster care applauded

Despite a growing number of children in foster care, a shortage of foster homes, escalating costs and shortfalls in financing, local officials and foster families for the most part applaud the foster care system in Billings and Montana.

Part of that positive attitude is the result of DFS' most recent efforts to change its image from one

Finding room for foster care



SPECIAL REPORT

of a reactive to a proactive body, Petek said.

Petek said efforts are under way to develop the Family Support Network, which will work in tandem with the DFS to train foster parents and provide in-home counseling for birth families. The nonprofit network will also work to create respite homes where children can stay temporarily while the foster family takes a short break.

Another new DFS program is the Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting, or MAPP, Petek said. In MAPP, foster and adoptive parents meet in groups to discuss the disparities between their expectations and the realities of fostering and adopting children.

The first series of MAPP training classes will begin at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday in the Mary Alice Fortin Center at Deaconess Hospital.

Yet another new initiative at the DFS is the Partnership to Strengthen Families Project, which provides support groups and parenting classes, Petek said.

"We are changing our focus to help families strengthen, so we don't have to remove children from their homes," she said.