

Alachua County Struggling to Find Local Families for Foster Children

Camille Graham, Contributing Writer, Apr 19, 2018

Alachua County may have to look to neighboring counties to house foster children.

Partnership for Strong Families, a community-based child welfare agency that cares for about 5,000 children in 13 counties, including Alachua, reports there are about 80 children in need of homes in Alachua, said Patty Carroll, director of community relations and recruitment for the agency. There are about 55 licensed foster homes in the county, and many of these homes have a one-to-two child limit.

Carroll said the shortage is due to a rising number of children in need of placement in a foster home in recent years. The shortage could lead to children being placed in neighboring counties like Levy and Bradford based on availability in homes.

“They’re not only leaving their home, they’re leaving their school, their friends, their peer groups, the sports team they’re on or the extracurricular activity they’ve been participating in,” Carroll said. “They’re leaving everything that they knew.”

Valerie Stonerook, a 34-year-old stay-at-home mom in Gainesville, said she and her husband knew there was a need in the community for foster homes, prompting them to get licensed in November despite their hesitations.

After completing necessary background checks, home inspections and a nine-week preparation course, the Stonerooks were approved in November and have since fostered three children.

“We were nervous it would take our time and attention away from our four biological kids,” Stonerook said. “But it’s ultimately helped to bond us as a family.”

Carroll said there is an even higher need for homes for teenagers and groups of siblings. She said if a family is unable to foster a child, they can still help by raising awareness and encouraging others to learn more about it.

“As a community, when we can rally around those families that are taking in our kids, we strengthen that family and child, and we strengthen the whole community too,” Carroll said.