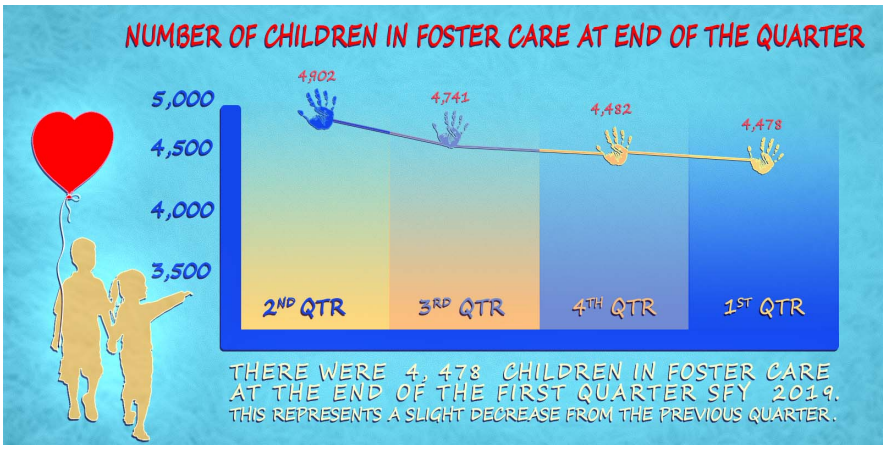
STATE OF ARKANSAS
House of Representatives

Arkansas House Newsletter

December 21, 2018

Providing a Home for the Holidays for our Foster Care Children.



Christmas is a special time at the Capitol. The halls are decorated with trees and garland. School choirs from across the state come to carol in the rotunda. And we host a party every year that creates lasting memories for our state's most vulnerable. At that party, many of us in the Capitol bring gifts for the boys and girls in Arkansas's foster care program.

But addressing the needs of our foster care children is not isolated to just the holidays. We are charged with ensuring case workers are properly funded and that our laws create an environment that assures each child has a safe and loving home.

Members were given an update this week into the progress of our foster care system and needs that still to be addressed.

The quarterly report from the Department of Human Services Division of Children and Family Services shows the number of children in foster care has decreased from 4,902 this time last year to 4,478 today.

There are more positive numbers in this report. We learned Arkansas exceeds the national average when it comes to the number of children who either return home or are discharged to relatives or an adoptive home. Our state's average is 93%. The national average is 81%.

And less than 8% of children who reunited with their families re-entered the foster care system this quarter. That is also below the national standard.

Of the children who left foster care this quarter, 46% were reunified with their family, 25% were adopted. 20% were discharged to a relative.

Progress in our system did not happen overnight. Arkansans in conjunction with their churches and non-profit organizations answered the call when the Governor declared it a crises in 2017. And in the 2017 Regular Session, the General Assembly passed several laws aimed at improving our foster care system.

The state budget that year included a $26 million increase to DHS for foster care support.

We passed legislation allowing for special circumstances in which DHS can petition a court to re-instate parental rights. We also broadened the definition of "fictive kin" so individuals with a close relationship with a child could provide a home if needed. And we passed legislation to create ways for non-profits and community providers to provide more assistance.

We still have work to do.

The average caseload statewide stood at just over 22 cases per worker at the end of the quarter. We will evaluate the need for more case workers this session.

Substance abuse and neglect are the two top reasons cited for a child entering foster care. Preventing the need for another home will require work from all of Arkansans, not just those at the Capitol.

Visit www.humanservices.arkansas.gov to learn how you can help.