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Opening hearts, homes to hard-to-place kids

Posted by [Susan Harrison Wolffis](#) December 01, 2007 22:49PM

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Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-Mills

Marcus Seidell, 5, is teased by Judge Gregory Pittman on the day he and two of his brothers were adopted by the Seidell family.

In Muskegon County, 366 children are in foster care, most of them removed from their biological homes because of abuse or neglect.

Of that number, 62 are eligible for adoption.

Since 2006, Stephanie and Tim Seidell of Twin Lake have opened their home to four of them -- Benjamin, 9; Jason, 8; Marcus, 5; and Gabriel, 2 1/2 -- first as foster parents, then as adoptive parents.

All four children were considered "hard to place," said Rosemary Stellino, child welfare supervisor for Muskegon County's Department of Human Services.

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"Not to us," Tim Seidell said.

But there is a "huge need" for foster homes -- and adoptive parents -- for "multiple siblings, belligerent teenagers and children with disabilities," said Cheryl Nebedum, Muskegon County Department of Human Services' program manager.

The Seidells were undeterred by such challenges when the three boys, who are brothers, and Gabrielle -- who has several developmental and physical disabilities -- were placed in their licensed foster home.

"It's a challenge," Seidell said, "but if you can't handle the hard stuff, you shouldn't be doing it."

The Seidells, who are both 38, also have two biological daughters: Taylor, 12, and Madison, 10. A few years ago, Tim Seidell, who is a plumber, said he and his wife "started talking about how nice it would be to have more kids in the family."

The couple decided to apply for a foster-home license to care for children in need and contemplated adopting. A year ago, the Seidells adopted Gabrielle. Then Benjamin, Jason and Marcus came into their fold after being removed from their biological home by protective service workers.

"We got the deluxe package," Stephanie Seidell said.

They didn't have to go through the foster care or adoption process alone.

The Department of Human Services' adoption services program provides services to children whose parental rights have been terminated due to child abuse or neglect, as well as to families who want to adopt.

In their case, a DHS adoption worker was assigned to help them. But caseworkers from private agencies like Bethany Christian Services, Catholic Charities West Michigan Lakeshore (former Catholic Social Services) or Pathways of Michigan (former Child and Family Services/Children's Resource of Holland) are also assigned to cases.

Many children who are available for adoption qualify for financial assistance, medical subsidies and counseling. That assistance continues until the child turns 18 years old.

Although the amount varies from family to family, the total amount of support paid to adoptive families in Michigan is \$208 million annually. The subsidies range from \$14.24 per day for young children with no physical, emotional or mental problems, Stellino said, to as much as \$35.59 per day for medically fragile teenagers who need extraordinary care.

Often, the children receiving adoption assistance have "special circumstances," officials said, that make finding appropriate homes more challenging. They may be teenagers, members of a racial or ethnic minority, part of a sibling group or have physical, mental or emotional impairments.

Although the Department of Human Services is involved in the cases of children whose parental rights have been terminated because of abuse or neglect, it is everyone's responsibility, Nebedum said.

"This is not just a DHS problem," she said. "We can't do it alone. This has to be a

community issue."

Sometimes it's strangers like the Seidells or Twin Lake's Bill and Joy Oleen, or Muskegon's Debra Oliver who reach out -- adopting three groups of siblings on Nov. 20, which is designated as Michigan Adoption Day.

Other times, relatives step forward.

Angela Acre of Muskegon has adopted four grandchildren, including 2-year-old Lukas, "to help keep these kids together. I'm just grateful I can."

Whatever their circumstance, Muskegon County Family Court Judge Gregory Pittman commended the nine area families who stepped forward on Adoption Day to adopt 16 children.

"Thank you for opening your hearts and your homes," he said. "Thank you for giving these children an opportunity."

Stephanie and Tim Seidell reached toward the three boys who now bear their last name, wrapping them in a big hug.

"We're the ones who've been blessed," she told the judge. "We get to watch them grow."

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