

# A place to help restore families

*Multnomah County's center for traumatized children proves successful on many counts*

By KARA BRIGGS  
THE OREGONIAN

The Multnomah County Children's Receiving Center opened two years ago and has, ever since, quietly been caring for abused and neglected children.

On Northeast 102nd Avenue at Burnside Road, the center aims to temporarily house children who have been removed from their homes for the first time. Children can stay at the center for as long as three days, giving their caseworkers time to find the best possible foster care placements or make arrangements for the children to return home.

The Oregon Department of Human Services recently released the results from its study of the center's first year and the 238 children it served.

The center served slightly more than half of the Multnomah County children between ages 4 and 12 who were taken into state custody between Jan. 31, 2003, and Feb. 1, 2004. The center targets children in that age range, but it takes older and younger children who arrive with their siblings.

During that period, another 205 children who could have gone to the center went directly into the care of foster parents or relatives.

The study compares the two groups.

The biggest difference between the groups involved children from the same families.

Seventy-two percent of siblings who stayed at the center were kept together

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## Children: Center can't afford to run at full capacity

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in foster care — compared with 48 percent of siblings who did not go to the center. The percentage of siblings kept together climbed through 2004 to about 66 percent, said Rob Abrams, the Department of Human Services' Multnomah County community manager.

Chad Westphal, the Christie School program manager for the center, said the importance of the bond between siblings can't be overestimated.

"It can make all the difference when you go through a time like this," Westphal said. "You have your flesh and blood right with you. Someone who understands the trauma you went through. They do a really good job of supporting each other along with our staff."

The study also found that the center's children were returned home sooner than those who went directly into foster care. The center's children also were less likely to be moved among different foster homes than the other children.

"It's amazing to me," Abrams said. "I don't think we were particularly looking for those outcomes."

The center was approved by Multnomah County voters in 1996, as part of a levy to build jails. The levy set aside \$4 million for the \$12 million project. The money sat in the bank for years while state and local officials — led by Dan Saltzman, then a county commissioner and now a Portland city commissioner — hammered out a plan for the center's program.

The common wisdom when the center opened was that it would help keep children from being re-traumatized by the state system. Stories were told at government meetings about children waiting for hours in offices while caseworkers called foster homes looking for placements, or, riding around in police cars for hours while officers waited for instructions about where to take them.

Westphal said. A few feet away from the center's front office, behind soundproof walls, children are living in the heart of the building. The office is a comparatively impersonal place where parents, sometime angry ones, are met by staff.

Staff members greet their young clients with a granola bar, a glass of fruit juice and stuffed animals. Children are invited to pick a toy and take it with them when they leave.

The nonprofit Christie School, near Lake Oswego, provides a wide array of mental health services. The center, unlike Christie's other programs, is a short-term shelter where traumatized children receive immediate care. The children are often sleeping away from home for the first time.

"As soon as they get here, we start telling them things like, 'We have a boy here who is about your age,'" Westphal said. "They start to get excited about meeting the other kids."

The institutional feelings end once children leave the front office. Inside the living area, the rainbow colors of children's artwork cover the walls. On a recent morning, a toddler sat napping with her face nestled in a pillow. An adolescent talked softly to a staff member about her anxiety over an upcoming court hearing. A boy ran to the kitchen, where a turkey sandwich waited for him.

The state contracts with Christie for eight of the 16 beds. The center can accept more than eight children when multiple family groups add up to a higher number. It also takes older and younger children who are part of eligible sibling groups.

Westphal and Saltzman want the center to operate closer to its capacity, but there isn't money to expand.

Last year, the Department of Human Services office in Clackamas County expressed interest in using some of those empty beds, Abrams said, but it ran short of money.

It's not clear, Abrams said, whether a receiving center could

have helped prevent the most troublesome problems in the child protective system, such as the Dec. 17 death of Ashton Paris, a 15-month-old Clackamas County boy in state custody but living with his parents, or the case of Jordan Knapp, a 5-year-old foster child also from Clackamas County who was found bruised and emaciated earlier last month.

"Innately, the center could make a difference," Saltzman said. At least, he said, children at the center would have more staff-supervised interaction with their parents. Caseworkers would have more opportunity to refer parents for treatment programs. The center would give caseworkers time, as the study found, to identify a good foster home.

For most children, Westphal said, the center is a transition between home and foster care. Many children aren't ready to adjust to a new mom and dad in the form of foster parents. But at the center, no one tries to be the parent.

"We are highly professional," Westphal said. "We are nurturing and caring. But we don't cross a line where we become the focal point, the parent of these children."

By the time the children are ready to open up to parental figures again, they're on their way to foster parents or relatives, he said.

The center has an annual budget of about \$500,000, which comes from the levy-financed Children's Investment Fund, state grants and private donors. U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Gordon Smith of Oregon last year obtained \$500,000 in federal money to support the center.

"Initially, we had a pretty short life span because people wanted to know this would be effective," Westphal said. "We had to go out and find additional funding. It was really important that we got the federal funds."

The Christie School also raises money to keep the center open.

The center's early supporters included the local community. The Gateway Business Association donated a minivan the center uses daily to drive children to their regular schools. Mooney from the Gateway Urban Renewal District

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CHAD WESTPHAL,  
THE CHRISTIE SCHOOL PROGRAM  
MANAGER FOR THE CHILDREN'S  
RECEIVING CENTER

the first year were from east Multnomah County.

The numbers of abuse and neglect cases are increasing east of Interstate 205, said Abrams, the Department of Human Services community manager. They are declining in central Portland.

The Department of Human Services plans to open a branch office in Gresham's Rockwood neighborhood. It already has branch offices near downtown Gresham and on Southeast Powell Boulevard at 122nd Avenue.

In 2004, the center's second year of operation, the number of children continued to grow, Westphal said.

So far, the center's strongest supporters are the children who have stayed there.

"We don't go a month without a group of kids coming by to say hi," Westphal said. "They bring their foster parents or their birth parents. They say, 'You've got to see this place.' They are coming to show their appreciation."

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*"If the program works,  
we will be able to*

