

650,000 helps smooth way for foster families

Cash infusion will give 130 more kids legal and other help

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Deloris Dallas is no stranger to foster care.

Raised as a foster child herself in Jamaica, she and her husband, Rupert, became foster parents in California for five years in the 1990s after their own seven children were mostly grown.

“It’s a good feeling to give back something to someone that you never had,” says 56-year-old Dallas in a thick Jamaican accent.

Now in Northeast Portland’s Piedmont neighborhood, the couple are raising four teenage boys who landed in the foster care system with developmental disabilities caused by childhood trauma and fetal alcohol syndrome.

The boys go to local schools, play sports and video games and do everything else other kids do. But their behavioral problems and other issues stemming from their upbringing sometimes make the school experience difficult.

That’s where the Juvenile Rights Project comes in. The Northeast Portland-based nonprofit, founded in 1975, provides legal and social-work help to foster kids and families across the state who can’t afford it.

The organization will be able to provide even more help now, after one of its main programs this month won \$650,000 in new grants from the Portland Children’s Investment Fund and Meyer Memorial Trust.

“The support from two of the most prominent funders of innovative programs for children is an important stamp of approval for JRP,” said Janet Merrell, executive director.

The money will help expand the SchoolWorks program, in which lawyers and social workers act as liaisons between foster families and schools when problems arise. They help expedite the transfer of school records, act as kids’ advocates in cases of suspension or expulsion, ensure students are properly tested for special education and help obtain tutors.

SchoolWorks serves about 230 kids each year but now will be able to serve another 130 with the new grants. The program also will expand the age range of the children it helps, from 8 to 15 to 5 to 18.

Mark McKechnie, a social worker with the program for the past seven

years, says the ability to reach kids at a younger age is critical.

“Once we started looking at the histories and seeing how many times kids in elementary changed schools, we wanted to intervene earlier and not wait until a child is two, three, four years behind in reading or math,” he said. “If we wait until then and they don’t have those basic skills, it’s harder to catch up.”

Many kids in the foster system have been homeless, were abused or neglected, or had parents who abused drugs or alcohol, McKechnie said.

Many of them move several times a year between families and group homes until they find the right fit, switching schools along the way. That’s tough when three-quarters of his clients already exhibit behavioral problems, McKechnie said.

“Sometimes problems at school jeopardize foster placement,” he said. “If they’re sent home regularly, the foster parent gets burned out, especially if they have to leave work to deal with this. We see the snowball effect sometimes between school and home: They move a lot, have behavioral problems, and that leads to them moving more. We try to interrupt that cycle, that downward spiral.”

Dallas and her family work with Brian Baker, a Juvenile Rights Project lawyer whose expertise is education policy. This week he helped Dallas talk with school officials about how one of her younger boys was having problems with his peers. None of Dallas’ foster children can be identified because they are wards of the state.

“I needed someone who knew more about the school system and foster children with disabilities,” Dallas said. “He would make sure whatever the rules are for this child are carried out. . . . Brian doesn’t fool around. These kids don’t have anybody to stand up for them. They have me, Brian and their caseworkers.”

The Children’s Investment Fund was created in 2002 when Portland voters approved Measure 26-33. It provides \$8.5 million a year for five years to support 61 programs in early childhood development, after-school mentoring and child abuse prevention.

The fund and the Meyer Memorial Trust each provided matching grants of \$325,000 to SchoolWorks this month.

Dallas hadn’t heard of the grants but thinks they’re a blessing. “That’s good to hear that,” she said. “Sometimes you fall through the cracks and if you have nobody to speak up for you, you fall by the wayside.”

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