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# THE FORT REPORT

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## Changing Needs Lead To Change In Services

### Children's Shelter Transitions To Longer Term, More In-Depth Care And Treatment

By John Speck

From its opening in 1997 through 2019, the Fort Smith Children's Emergency Shelter (CES) was a place where 6 to 17 year old children in the custody of the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) could be placed with short notice and for a short period of time - no more than 45 days in a 6-month period. In other words, in case of an immediate "emergency" need. This arrangement ensured beds would be available whenever DHS needed them for children and youth who had nowhere else to go when they were removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.

However, in February of 2018 Congress passed the Families First Prevention Services Act, which was intended to reduce the number of children placed in similar shelters and place them in foster homes, affecting funding for shelters like the CES.

"We knew that funding for shelter services like ours would be going away, so we had to determine relatively quickly what we could do to meet the needs of children in the Fort Smith area," said CES Executive Director, Jack Moffett. "A new program, called

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Photo by Macy Hamon Photography

# Shelter: Transition To New Model Almost Complete

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a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP), made the most sense for us and the community.”

The new program allows for children aged 10 to 17 that are in the custody of DHS and have experienced higher levels of trauma, abuse or neglect to stay up to 12 months and receive ongoing behavioral health and counseling treatment, while attending school and interacting with the community at large as they are able.

Transitioning to the new care model has taken about a year, as staffing and accreditation is different for the QRTP than for the Emergency Shelter. In the future there will be fewer children served at the Shelter, but those who receive the care and treatment will see their lives altered for the better, according to Development Director, Ashley Forsgren.

“We will probably go from serving around 260 children per year for the short term to now effecting change to the future lives of around 40 per year,” Forsgren said. “The work we are doing is already paying dividends as we have seen some of the children interacting more comfortably with unfamiliar people and situations, as well as improving their school performance and life skills.”

Forsgren told the story of Sara (name changed for security) – a child who came to the Shelter at the age of 12, undersized and unkempt due to childhood neglect and abuse through no fault of her own.

“Her verbal communication skills consisted of growling and inappropriate language. We could barely see her eyes behind her hair, but her eyes would follow us and she hoped her growl would keep everyone at a safe distance. Her hair, her growl, her words—all attempts to protect herself from another set of ‘strangers’ entering her life. These were her defense mechanisms and our job was to help her develop and grow into an emotionally, socially, and physically healthy young lady. But first, we had to teach her that she could trust us,” Forsgren described.

“One day, Sara started head-butting staff members on the shoulder. While this form of expression was a surprise, it is not uncommon for traumatized children or children with sensory issues – they want human touch but it needs to be rough. A light, gentle touch can actually bring pain and make them feel very uncomfortable. As Sara’s head-butts became more common, we embraced them while working towards the goal of transforming her form of affection into a healthy manner of communication. The counselor would tell Sara, ‘Okay, I only like your softer head-butts,’ or ‘Ouch, that one hurt,’ or ‘Okay, only one more head-but for the day.’ Her response was cooperation without growling or cursing,” she continued.

Through more counseling and the Shelter staff communicating with Sara through a “trauma-informed” lens,

her frequency of head-butts began to prolong. Could this potentially lead to a hug? The staff was hopeful.

Shortly after the school year started, Forsgren was sitting in her office. Sara came in from school and rested her chin on her shoulder. There was no head-butt. Forsgren started counting to herself...1-2-3. Ten seconds! She rested her head on Forsgren’s shoulder for 10 seconds. Still, no head-butt!

“Her hair was pulled behind her ears. We began to discuss her day. The abandoned little girl, hardened from pain, melted. I touched her arm and gave it a squeeze,” Forsgren concluded. “She smiled, and I knew we had turned a corner in her treatment.”

Every child who enters the Shelter has a different life story and set of circumstances due to the neglect and abuse they have previously experienced. Through the QRTP a unique plan is established for each child, with achievements celebrated along the way.

The transition has not been without challenges, though. Especially this year, with visitor restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the limitations on fund raising events.

“Our staffing costs have increased, and people may not think of items like food costs, but when schools were shut down in March we had to start supplying an additional meal each weekday to each of our residents,” Forsgren stated. “That

wasn’t in the budget, but fortunately we have been blessed by sponsors and contributors that made up the shortfall.”

Businesses that have sponsored events and supported the Shelter on an ongoing basis for years have also been forced to reduce their contributions due to lower revenues in 2020. Approximately half of the total budget is achieved through DHS reimbursements, but that leaves the other half to be raised through events and contributions.

“Our Havana Nights fundraiser is normally held in June, and this year we were unable to hold the event,” Forsgren added. “However, all of the sponsors that supported it still paid their sponsorships – not a single sponsor asked to be refunded – so other than the visibility we lost by not holding the event, the financial impact was minimal.”

Needs still are greater now than ever before, and Forsgren said the Shelter is prepared to accept recurring or one-time donations through their website – [www.ftschilrensshelter.org](http://www.ftschilrensshelter.org), or by check mailed or delivered to the Shelter at 3014 S. 14th Street, Fort Smith, AR 72901.

“I also love to meet with businesses at the Shelter or at their place of business to discuss ways they can support our programs,” Forsgren concluded. “We also give tours when not restricted by pandemics, so people can see how we invest their donations.”

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