



Courtesy NRCYS

Providing a LIFE L

Teenagers in the child welfare system—and those who care about them—benefit from the training and research studies of OU-Tulsa's National Resource Center for Youth Services.

Adolescence can be difficult under even the best of circumstances. For teenagers in the child welfare system, circumstances are rarely the best.

Often shuffled from one foster home to another with little if any of the family support teens need to negotiate the rapid physical, emotional and social changes of adolescence, these “forgotten” youngsters are particularly susceptible to risky and even destructive behavior.

For three decades, however, adolescents in care and the people who care about them have turned to the University of Oklahoma National Resource Center for Youth Services. Part of the College of Continuing Education at the Schusterman Center in Tulsa, the NRC provides training and guidance to social service agencies throughout the United States. Founded in 1973 as a three-year program to train employees of Oklahoma agencies dealing with juvenile crime prevention, the center is today the nation's foremost authority on dealing with youth in out-of-home care. Of the federally funded national resource centers, OU-Tulsa's is one of the largest and the only one specializing in adolescents.

The center is not well known to the general public, not even in Tulsa, where it has been located since 1975. But, with 68,000 agencies on its mailing list, the center trains more than 25,000 adults and youth a year at 2,000 seminars and other events held in cities from coast to coast.

“We train adults who work with adolescents,” says director Peter R. Correia III, giving the simplest explanation of the

center's mission. Included are foster parents and all manner of social services and juvenile justice workers.

However, the NRC does more than that—such as presenting seminars for adolescent “veterans” of the child welfare system, conducting research and reviewing the research of others. The center also monitors programs and best practices nationwide in order to remain current on what is working and what is not.

Correia estimates that a half million young people are touched by the NRC's work—a half million young people that society sometimes seems to ignore. According to a 1999 report, for instance, the number of teens needing substitute care has increased while the number of foster homes has decreased. The situation in Oklahoma is similar. The number of children entering foster care has increased about 20 percent in the last five years while the number of homes has decreased 15 percent. Approximately one foster child in five is a teenager.

“Adolescents are not usually the priority in the child welfare system, especially if they are in foster homes,” says Pamela Johnson, national program officer for independent living with the U.S. Department of Human Services. “People are more interested in younger kids. People think teenagers can take care of themselves. But in the general population, children don't really leave home until they are 26 or 27. In the child welfare system, they are turned out at 18 to 21.”

“Working with adolescents is very difficult,” says Correia. “It's rough. Some people just don't like adolescents. If you're looking for adoption, people don't want teenagers.”

James Walker, who retired in 2000 after 25 years as director of the center, agrees. “The child welfare system is focused on babies. As they grow up, they become more difficult, and people just don't want to deal with them.”

The result is often young adults not only unprepared to deal with life, but also without the family support most people depend on well into their 20s. In answer to that deficiency, the NRC pioneered

BY RANDY KREHBIEL

I N E

programs and services to help former foster children and other graduates of the child welfare system cope with the outside world.

"It's the concept of independent living," says Correia. "Most of these young people leave the system at 18 or 20 with the idea that now they are on their own. It's not true. They do leave the system, but they're not independent."

Correia echoes Johnson's national statistics for children not leaving their family homes until their mid-20s. "They may leave for college, but they tend to come back—and come back bringing somebody with them. People leave the child welfare system without any kind of safety net."

The NRC developed programs and materials to help agencies and individuals weave their own safety nets, among them, a sibling retreat for former foster children conducted by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS). The retreat brought together about 75 brothers and sisters, some of whom had not seen each other for years.

The center maintains close ties with DHS, this year even placing staff members in the department's field offices. The NRC trains Oklahoma's foster parents and all new child welfare workers. This relationship with its home state makes OU's program unique among the national resource centers, Walker says.

"They know everything that's going on," says recently retired DHS Independent Living Coordinator Claudia Hunter of the NRC staff. "They know what's been tried, and what has worked. We feel like we won the lottery by having them here."

Putting NRC staff members in DHS' six area offices, Hunter says, has worked very well. "They really pick us up. They work with every piece of the system. They're full of energy."

Others depend almost as heavily on the NRC's expertise. More than 600 social workers from every state and Puerto Rico attended a recent NRC conference in Chicago. Even the largest states like Texas and California are contracting with the center.



Miller Photography Inc.

Peter R. Correia III

"When we go to the conferences," says Correia, "we talk to people about what they are doing. Any of our people can talk to you about programming from experience, not just from theory."

"I can't say enough good about the organization," says Sue Cherney, executive director of Southern Christian Services for Children of Jackson, Mississippi, which trains foster parents and provides other youth services for the state of Mississippi. "When you're in a state like Mississippi without many supports, they've served as sort of a support agency."

Some might say Oklahoma falls into that same category. Certainly its social services agencies continue to work closely with the NRC. "One of the things that is unique about the center is that it has retained its relationship with its host state," says Walker.

The NRC continues to provide about 90 Juvenile Personnel Training Program (JPTP) workshops a year, serving 2,500 public and private non-profit human services personnel. It also provides support for the Oklahoma Independent Living program, DHS child welfare training to approximately 5,000 people a year and foster parent training to another 6,000 annually.

Amazingly this important national center never would have existed if Walker had done what he was sent to Tulsa to do.

The director of youth services in Stephens County in the mid-'70s was hired by the OU College of Continuing Education to close the JPTP. Its three-year grant was in its final year, and the



Miller Photography Inc.

Dorothy I. Ansell

federal program funding the grant had been eliminated. Most of the staff had found jobs elsewhere. Walker and his secretary—the only remaining staff members—were sent to Tulsa because the OCCE had some underutilized office space there.

It soon developed, however, that some of the agencies had come to rely so heavily on the JPTP that they were willing to pay for its services. "The crime commission liked what we were doing and continued to fund us," explains Walker.

Walker and the slowly growing staff began writing some of its own curriculum. Through professional organizations, the center earned a national reputation and clientele. Finally, in 1985, the center truly became "the center," winning its federal designation as the National Resource Center for Youth Services.

Now the center is completely self-supporting, with 70 staff, annual sales of books and material totaling \$500,000 and paid services netting a similar amount. The NRC has an annual budget of approximately \$7.5 million, and during its existence has attracted more than \$50 million in grants and contracts.

"Often the feds have said when they fund a new center, that the people running it need to go to Tulsa to see how it's done," Correia says. "They said, 'They've figured it out.'"

One process the center has had to figure out is marketing and what amounts to product development. Its initial 1985 federal grant, says Correia, was "seed

money.” Since then, the center has been on its own. “The (federal government) wanted us to take that money and market what we did.”

That was a little scary for a bunch of academics and social workers. No one knew what to expect.

“We kept asking ourselves if anybody would pay for it,” said Correia. “They did. Once we started selling our services and materials, we were amazed at the response.”

NRC had discovered a niche. Today, Correia says, the center relishes the freedom and challenge of entrepreneurship.

Over the years, the NRC’s claim on its niche only has become stronger. Recently, for instance, it hired independent living authority Dorothy Ansell and moved her from Tampa, Florida, to Tulsa. With Ansell came her respected quarterly newsletter *Daily Living*.

A recent issue of *Daily Living* included recommendations for those considering foster care of adolescents from the British Columbia Ministry for Children and Families; a column on “hard” and “soft” living skills; suggestions from the Child Welfare League of America on how foster parents can help adolescents academically; information from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services on the role foster parents can play in promoting safety and a sense of permanence and well-being among adolescents; and other notes and reviews designed to assist foster parents and child welfare professionals who deal with adolescents.

The NRC does not work with adults only. Its seminars and other events for youth are offered throughout the country. The largest is Destination Future, an annual conference for ages 16 to 21 that is the only one of its kind in the nation.

In even-numbered years, the conference is held in Washington, D.C. At these “leadership conferences,” participants hear from the nation’s leaders, who in turn hear from the young people.

“The issues are those that adults are struggling with; we ask the young people, ‘You tell us what you think,’” says Correia. “Some of the suggestions the kids come up

with are used. I’ve seen changes in policy and legislation based on things that have been said at these conferences. The adults go home at five o’clock, but the kids will be going at it until eight or nine o’clock at night, still struggling with issues.”

In odd-numbered years, Destination Future conferences are held in various locations and focus on trends in substitute care for adolescents. Social workers and

made a difference in Oklahoma. Through DHS, some 350 former foster children ages 18 to 21 are receiving assistance on everything from résumé writing to finding a friendly place to go for holidays.

Recently, the Oklahoma Legislature approved tuition waivers for former students, making it easier for them to further their education. From 100 to 140 former foster children are in postsecondary educa-

“Often the feds have said when they fund a new center, that the people running it need to go to Tulsa to see how it’s done.”



Miller Photography Inc.

When independent living authority Dorothy I. Ansell, second from left, joined NRCYS as assistant director, she brought with her a nationally respected quarterly newsletter, *Daily Living*, being discussed here with, from left, art director Wayne R. Kruse, support staff supervisor Lori Cronander and trainer/consultant Edi Winkle.

youth are invited to make presentations. Destination Future 2003 was presented in August at Muir College in La Jolla, California.

“One thing about adolescents,” Correia says, “they tend to tell it like it is.”

In the past, little attention was paid to adolescents in the child welfare system. The NRC has been instrumental in changing that at the national and state level.

The NRC definitely seems to have

tion at any one time, says Hunter. But many lack the moral and financial support most other college students take for granted. Correia stresses that is why it is important they receive extra doses of positive re-enforcement.

“All kids have strengths,” he says, “but when they have been neglected, battered and abused, it’s difficult for them to utilize those strengths. What we try to do is tap into those strengths.”