

New state project aims to keep children out of foster care

CHAMPAIGN (AP) — Many cases that end with children in foster care begin with a call to a child welfare agency hot line.

Now, if the children are in no immediate danger, the Department of Children and Family Services has another alternative.

A group called Best Interest of Children has been picked to administer a DCFS pilot program called the Family Conference Project. The program is designed to reduce the number of children entering foster care by helping parents take better care of them.

"This is an alternative to foster care. You empower the family to take care of that child instead of bringing them into the system," Best Interest President Linda Abernathy said.

Best Interest of Children has been a harsh critic of Illinois' child welfare agency. It was founded in May 1994 to examine Champaign County's child welfare system.

"At the time that Best Interest of Children was formed, Champaign County was flagged as having the highest rate of children going into foster care (of any) county in the state," Abernathy said.

Under the pilot project, DCFS will refer to Best Interest first-time cases reported to its hot line, mostly involving lack of supervision, environmental neglect and verbal abuse.

If the family agrees to participate, Best Interest will help parents create a detailed plan of how to provide their children with food, shelter, clothing and supervision. That plan also may involve getting relatives, friends or neighbors to sign a pledge to help.

The plan is then sent to DCFS, where officials may suggest changes.

Vikki Rhodes, Best Interest's family conference coordinator, and a pair of case assistants, will watch to make sure families follow the plan. Families may complete the program in six months to a year. If problems persist or get worse, they will be immediately referred back to DCFS.

Since families in the project would remain together, Rhodes believes it will be more effective in bringing about change. "If somebody feels like they're being pushed into something, and it's not their idea, they're less likely to do it," she said.

DCFS picked Champaign and Chicago to host the pilot project.

Best Interest of Children will not take its first case until Dec. 2. The group hopes to add two families to the project

each week, reaching 104 in a throughout Champaign County. Initially the cases will come from the Champaign-Urbana area, but families accepted its first case in April. Parents there are very excited about changing their lives, said Nicole Anderson, a program coordinator.

ing the dreams they once had and forgot about," like earning their GED or finding a better job, she said.

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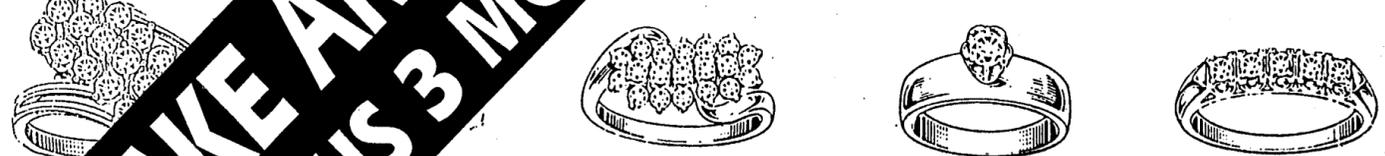
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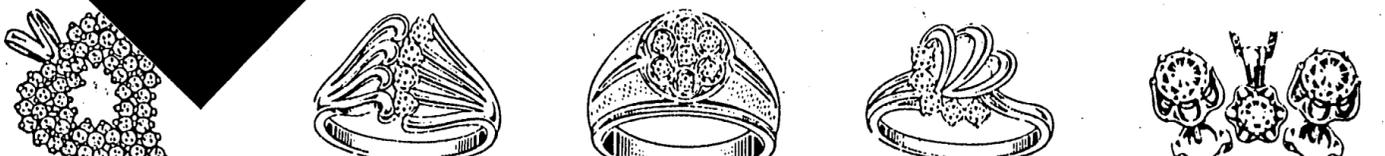
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