



FOSTER CARE RATES IN CHARLOTTESVILLE AND ALBEMARLE COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of informational briefs from the Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families (CCF) compiling recent local data, supplemented with national research, about a pressing issue facing children and families in Charlottesville/Albemarle. It is intended to stimulate community dialog and inform local policy.

This brief examines foster care in Charlottesville and Albemarle. Data available to CCF indicates an upward trend in the number of children placed in foster care in Charlottesville and higher than state averages in Charlottesville and Albemarle, as well as a shortage of local foster homes. This research brief will present information about foster care generally, data about local rates, implications for the local community, and an analysis of the availability of local foster care services. An analysis of possible explanations for or ways to improve the foster care rates is beyond the scope of this report.

BACKGROUND

Foster care is a system of services, substitute care, and supervision for children who cannot live with their birth families for a period of time. Children enter into foster care for a variety of reasons, including abuse or neglect by their caretaker, parental illness or absence, court-ordered placement, and parental request.¹ Children in foster care may be placed in foster homes with unrelated foster parents or with relatives, with families who plan to adopt them, in specialized foster homes which provide treatment, in group homes, in residential facilities, or in independent living programs.

Foster care is intended to be a temporary response to family problems.² All children in foster care have a plan for permanency. Most frequently, the goal is to return to the parental home. For some children, however, the plan may be long-term placement with a relative,

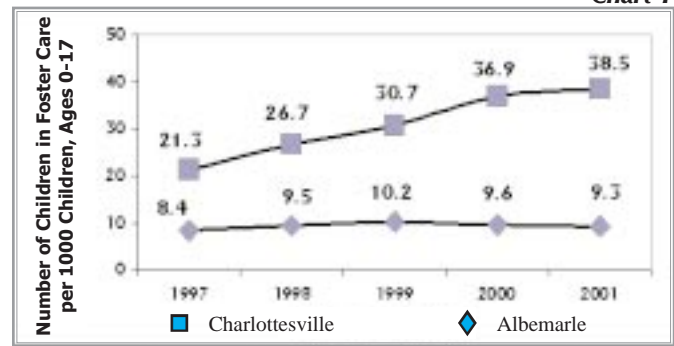
permanent foster care, adoption, or independent living. For all children in foster care, the ultimate goal is that they will have a safe and stable home.³

LOCAL FINDINGS

Charlottesville and Albemarle have higher rates of foster care than other similar localities in Virginia and rates are higher than the state average. Charlottesville's foster care rate is more than triple the national rate.

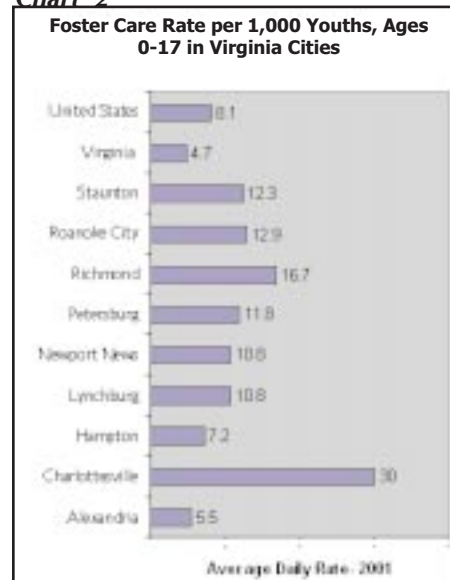
In the City of Charlottesville, foster care rates are increasing rapidly, nearly doubling between 1997 and 2001. Chart 1 shows the annual foster care rate per 1,000 children for the last five years.

Chart 1



Sources: Charlottesville and Albemarle Departments of Social Services

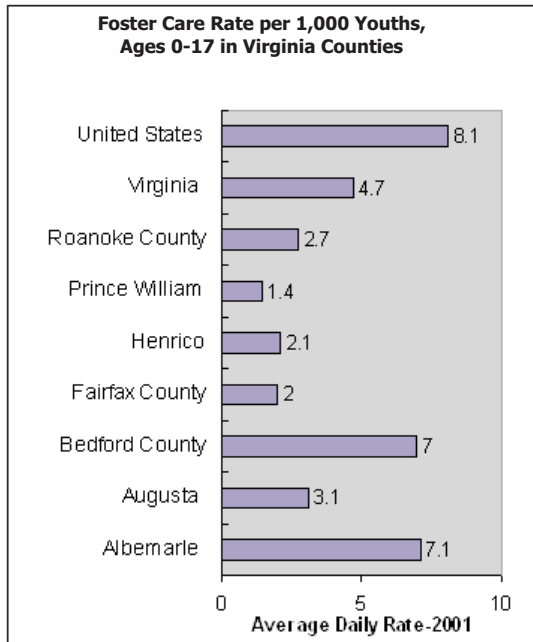
Chart 2



Charts 2 and 3 compare the daily average foster care rates for Charlottesville and Albemarle with state and national averages and other Virginia localities.



Chart 3



Sources for Charts 2 and 3: Virginia Dept. of Social Services; U.S. Census Bureau

SIGNIFICANCE

The high foster care rates in Charlottesville and Albemarle make it difficult to meet the needs of children in foster care locally. Tri-Area Foster Families (TAFF) recruits, trains and supervises foster homes for the Charlottesville, Albemarle and Greene Departments of Social Services. Currently, there are 118 TAFF foster homes (more than one child may be placed in a foster home). In addition, there are 39 specialized or treatment foster homes in Charlottesville and Albemarle, which are operated by Community Attention, People Places of Charlottesville, and DePaul's Children's Services. These foster homes provide a higher level of therapeutic services and serve more troubled and/or difficult to place children. Treatment foster care is more costly than family foster care.

In June, 2002, there were 198 Charlottesville children and 123 Albemarle children in foster care, for a total of 321. About 80 of these children required residential treatment in facilities outside of the community. The other 241 children were placed in family foster care or treatment foster care.

There is an inadequate pool of local foster homes to meet the growing local need. As a result, a situation is created where children who could be served in family foster care must be placed in treatment foster care at a greater cost. Because there is a limited supply of local treatment foster care, some children must be placed outside of the community. Children placed outside of the community have less opportunity to interact with their families or to participate in reunification services. The shortage of local foster homes costs the community financially and in human terms.

The lack of foster homes has a particular impact on children who are considered "hard to place" due to demographic or other characteristics:

- Children older than age six, particularly adolescents. In June 2002, 66% of Charlottesville children in foster care and 58% of Albemarle children in foster care were age 13 or older.
- African-American children
- Sibling groups. It is typically desirable to keep siblings together in foster care, but few foster homes are able to accept them.
- Challenging children, who may have medical, psychological, educational, or behavioral problems.

Local foster care agencies are recruiting foster parents to work with all categories of children, particularly those described above. Adults over the age of 21, single or married, can be a foster parent after successfully completing an application and training process. Foster parents are expected to nurture children in their care and ensure that they receive medical and dental care, attend school, eat nutritious meals, and have safe and secure homes. Those interested in further information should contact Gretchen Ellis at CCF (970-3554) for referrals to foster care agencies.

¹"Foster Care Goals and Philosophy". Virginia Department of Social Services. www.dss.state.va.us/family/fostercare, 2002

²"Foster Care Goals and Philosophy". Virginia Department of Social Services. www.dss.state.va.us/family/fostercare, 2002

³"What is Foster Care?" National Center for Resource Family Support. Casey Family Programs. www.casey.org/cnc, 2002