

NEW BRAUNFELS Herald-Zeitung

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Family Coalition

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Casidhe Meriwether remembers adopting her daughter who was in her late teens and had moved 54 times since her family was hiding her from child protective services.

“Her whole life was traumatic, and any kind of abuse and neglect that you can think of in your head, this kid has been through,” Meriwether said. “And today she’s one of the nicest and sweetest people, she wants to help everybody in the world. I’m so glad we met her and were able to adopt her.”

April is Child Abuse Awareness Month, and so local churches and organizations are strategizing how to involve parishes in supporting foster care youth and families.

The Family Coalition, formed in 2018, is a network of local churches and nonprofits in New Braunfels and Comal County which help search for families to foster youth, support foster families and provide other services such as therapy for traumatized youth.

On Thursday morning, nonprofits made a call to action after inviting about 70 churches to the meeting to be involved in finding foster and adoptive families and or providing support for them and abused youth.

Meriwether, a trainer for Empowered to Connect which provides support and trains caregivers, told her story to encourage churches to continue helping families taking care of children in the system.

The state is transitioning case work from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to local organizations. Churches are continuing to offer their support as nonprofits take on bigger tasks to help more children than before.

The coalition has a five year goal, which it met, to have 10% of churches called on actively engaged and on multiple fronts. It now has a long-term goal of getting 20% of churches directly involved.

According to Texas Department of Family and Protective Services data, more Texas children died during 2020 of child abuse and neglect than in the previous two years.

There is a lack of families to provide capacity for these youth and a myriad of other issues in the state’s foster care system.

Youth will often be transferred from one home to another. Due to overworked case workers, these youth are often neglected and are abused and never checked in on.

They also end up sleeping in caseworkers’ offices since there are not enough foster families available to take them in.

New Braunfels’ nonprofit Chosen Care helps adoptive and foster families as well as birth parents and caregivers navigate raising a traumatized and abused child.

Chosen Care CEO Jenni Lord said the nonprofit is helping about 200 families, but needs more local support and more families to take in abused youth.

She also said 46% of kids in Comal County and

the surrounding community are reentering foster care within five years of being in the system.

“What we invite [churches] to do is to be a part of the work already happening here,” Lord said. “That could look like a recruitment event for foster families, offering foster adoption support groups after church, landscaping at a residential facility or helping with projects for nonprofits in our community.”

Springs Community Church lead pastor and trustee John Almquist said during the meeting that helping youth and families was a difficult but rewarding undertaking.

The church has partnered with Chosen Care, Court Appointed Special Advocates of Central Texas, and other organizations to provide family therapy and donate items such as diapers and doing food drop-offs.

“The people by God are doing their best, it is an up and down valley,” Almquist said. “We’re not trying to take on more than we can, we’re trying to do a little well and add on more the best as we can as we go.”

Several families have used the church’s help. Almquist said he remembers the first phone call he made to IHope for Kids, a Christian foster care and adoption agency in San Antonio, for help.

“If we can’t do this there’s no hope, and with Christ there is hope,” Almquist said. “We were able to bring a sense of clarity as well as care and had two families move forward in that process.” Texas Department of Family and Protective Services faith-based specialist, Hope Shelton, said during the meeting there is a great need for communities to coordinate efforts to find foster homes and provide healing services for foster youth.

“We need to have opportunities for mentorship and connection,” Shelton said. “The faith community can be a part of it. We need to make sure they have what they need and not to just meet the basic needs of kids but go beyond.”

These services could look like counseling for abused youth, guidance for foster families unfamiliar with the process or helping families who are about to lose their children to child protective services.

Shelton told the nonprofits and churches that not just younger foster youth, but older foster teens need help — especially when they are close to aging out of the system.

“We have to help these young people become prepared to tackle the real world,” Shelton said. “We need to love them. These are kids from Comal County, they’re in your backyard, it’s important we support them and meet them where they are.”

The coalition also planned for Blue Sunday Child Abuse Prevention Initiative on April 25. The event is a day of prayer for abused children and encourages religious congregations to help abused children and find them permanent homes.

To register for the upcoming National Day of Prayer on April 25, visit www.BlueSunday.org



JENNI LORD

Jenni Lord is the founder and CEO of Chosen Care.

Chosen supports families touched by the child welfare system by offering parenting education, therapeutic resources, and more.

HEALING STARTS NOW

