

Sharing the love

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A shortage of foster parents in Bozeman is leaving troubled kids in need of a place to recover from unstable family lives.



KRISTA MILLER-LARSON/CHRONICLE Foster parents Tom and Heidi Mills stand with their foster son Mihai Wiens, 14, and adopted son Anthony Mills, 10, counter clock-wise from right, in their home Thursday afternoon. The Mills' began foster care about six years ago when a kid Heidi worked with in Livingston encouraged her to become licensed so he could have a place to stay. All children need a safe place to live. But kids who are victims of violence, mental illness and neglect desperately need a stable home, said Shaina Chepulis, Area Manager for the nonprofit organization Youth Dynamics, Inc.

On average, Youth Dynamics places between four and six children per month, Chepulis said.

"I need foster parents desperately," she said.

There are 40 percent fewer foster homes in Bozeman than there were in 2003, Chepulis said. And with Bozeman group homes tight on space, kids are placed with extended family, which isn't always the best option, or sent to homes in Helena, Butte and Billings.

Children placed by Youth Dynamics have been diagnosed with emotional difficulties, so being sent away from school and friends challenges kids who are already having a tough time, Chepulis said.

"It plays havoc in the worst way," she said. "My kids are the kids who don't make friends fast. So you throw them into a new situation with new rules and new structure, and they fumble."

Girls have an especially hard time.

AWARE, a nonprofit corporation that provides community-based services to youth with mental, emotional and physical challenges has two group homes for boys in town, but none for girls. Big Sky Youth Center, also run by Youth Dynamics, takes girls, but the eight beds fill up fast,

especially during winter, Chepulis said.

In the past, there was a perception that boys needed more services, but that's changing.

"The girls are having the same behaviors as the boys, but sometimes it's much worse," said Donna Marchington, associate clinical director for Youth Dynamics.

And with foster care drying up, troubled girls have few options, Marchington said.

"When they are separated from family they need that consistency and stability," she said.

At-risk kids are more successful when they stay in their community, Marchington said. Providing a safe and stable environment is necessary for them to learn the life skills they need to grow into healthy adults. Without stability, kids act out.

"When there's no place for them to go, they bounce around from family member to family member," she said. "And their behavior escalates.

"All it takes is a loving, caring, nurturing home. And patience," Marchington said.

Heidi Mills and her husband, Tom, have fostered eight children over the past five and a half years.

"We have most of them still," she said. "They're cool kids."

The best part of taking kids in is, she said, "just being able to watch the kids grow and become awesome individuals if they have the chance."

Mills said she was scared at first. Many of the kids have been abused and expect the worst from adults, so they sometimes test her, she said. It takes time to build trust.

"There are challenges, but when you break through those and get the rewards, it's worth every minute," she said. "I don't think there's anything more rewarding than doing this."