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Blogs
Foster-care expert sizes up local landscape

By **MATT PILON**
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HOLYOKE - Massachusetts is faring better than most of the country when it comes to providing education to foster children, according to a national foster-care advocate, but more reform is needed.

Daniel Heimpel, founder of the nonprofit Fostering Media Connections, speaking at a regional foster-care conference Monday, said government is not providing enough funding for education-related programs for children in foster care, and that in general, more collaboration between agencies administering care is needed.

"We are expecting miracles while paying for less than one quarter of what that miracle costs," Heimpel said. "If you put the resources in the right place, everywhere we have gone, we have seen incredible change."

Heimpel said Massachusetts is ahead of the curve because it has provided funding that allows people to choose to stay in the foster-care system until age 22 and has waived fees and tuition at its 29 state-subsidized colleges and universities.

"That creates an educational pipeline I have not seen in other places to this extent," he said. "Some states are way behind."

On the other hand, Heimpel said, he's visited states that have created programs to ensure that foster children do not get bounced from school to school and others that increase the likelihood of a foster child ending up in the care of an extended family member.

While Heimpel said reforms are needed, he believes that the current foster-care model is worth keeping.

"It's not a system that's broken by any means," he said. "It's a system that's working to get better and better and better with cuts to the bone."

Heimpel, 31, who formerly worked as a reporter covering foster care for several publications, made his remarks at the conference "Re-Envision Foster Care" held at the Delaney House and attended by more than 50 child welfare administrators, educators and community members.

The conference was organized by Easthampton's Treehouse Foundation, Friends of Children, of Northampton, and the Rudd Adoption Research Program at UMass.

Heimpel, who has been visiting foster-care providers around the country since March with funding help from several foundations, said he hopes to spark a grassroots movement fueled by media coverage of successes and problems in the foster-care system. He is calling for a nationwide study on the educational progress of foster children that he hopes would serve as the impetus to reforms.

Locally, he praised the work of the Treehouse foster community in Easthampton, which he visited recently and where he filmed a short documentary with his cameraman, Eytan Eiterman. He showed the film Monday, which features the stories of several Treehouse residents and their families.

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"It's very heartening," Heimpel said of the Treehouse, which is a community of foster families who live among honorary elders. "It's brilliant in its simplicity. But it's not the only amazing thing going on around the country and I think that's the real message here."

Following Heimpel's 30-minute remarks, Treehouse founder Judy Cockerton recounted a sentiment she has often heard since she began her quest to establish the Treehouse community a decade ago.

"I'm so glad you're doing this, but I never would," Cockerton said people told her. "It's simply too much to ask of most people."

So the question becomes, she said, how to engage the general public in providing some form of support for the approximately 500,000 foster children nationwide.

Friends of Children Executive Director Jane Lyons echoed that sentiment.

"The idea is to help people understand that these are children who are everywhere," Lyons said. "A day like this makes me feel hopeful we can be rid of the silos we all operate in."

Department of Children and Families Western Regional Director Paul Fitzsimons said the 29 offices he oversees have made efforts to make it easier for foster children moving to a different home to stay in the same schools so their lives are less interrupted.

He said social workers sometimes end up driving foster children to school, and the state should focus more on transportation so that it does not become an impediment to stability.

"You don't have to adopt a kid to contribute to their success," Fitzsimons said.

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