



SOLUTIONS

Summer Newsletter | 2021

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A Note *from us*

In this issue you will get an important glimpse at the quality of services provided by CYFS and how our commitment to always learning and improving is embedded throughout our services. This key characteristic helps us deliver better outcomes and lasting results for the children and families we serve and the communities we call home.



AGENCY *happenings*

CYFS Adoption Team Collaborates with State and National Community Partners

This past year, our Adoption program helped 181 children find forever families. We recently joined the **National Council for Adoption** as part of our commitment to stay updated on and influence national trends. As a leader in the field, we are weighing in on national adoption legislation and advocating for new practice models. Through this connection with other leading agencies, we provide Illinois families with linkage to national resources and give a greater voice to the children and families we serve.

At the state level, Adoption Director Mary Kay Collins was selected to join the **Illinois Adoption Advisory Council**. This council serves to advise DCFS on matters involving adoption and guardianship in Illinois. Mary Kay lends her vast experience and expertise to help ensure the needs of children and adoptive families are kept at the forefront of adoption practice in our state.

Four CYFS Team Members Earn NMT Training Certification

This past year, four CYFS staff completed intensive training and certification in the **Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT)**. “It’s a long name! But simply put, this approach looks at how trauma impacts brain development and enhances our clinical assessments as we determine the strengths and vulnerabilities of children who have experienced trauma. We then use this knowledge and our clinical skills to help us create unique intervention, enrichment, and educational plans for each youth and their caregivers,” – Director of Therapeutic Services, Stephanie Barisch.

At CYFS, we are always strengthening our knowledge and expertise to better serve children and families and we congratulate Carrie Drake, Michelle Gaede, Erika Parks, and Betty Porter on this accomplishment!

Listening to Our Youth: CYFS Youth Advisory Board at the Table to Propose Improvements

Guess who we learn from all the time at CYFS? Those we serve! Our **Youth Advisory Board** is an impressive group of youth age 14 and older. As true experts on the foster care experience, they offer a critical perspective and incredibly valuable advice. This group of young people set their own goals and they decided their purpose was to elicit meaningful change within the child welfare system, to develop mentorships between youth in care, and to provide guidance and hope to one another. They have since held constructive conversations with CYFS staff and provided critical insight into ways CYFS can better serve and advocate with them. It is so important to respect their voice and to never underestimate what they can do and how they can influence change.



Here is just one example of how their experience and feedback helps us do better. We asked the youth for their input and advice regarding the opportunities they had to develop independent living skills while in foster care. They suggested these conversations begin much earlier in a youth's life – they emphasized that with all that goes on in the life of a youth in foster care this needs to be a continuous thread. They also said that while learning concrete skills like budgeting or applying for jobs was important, providing more resources on how to assess their mental health and emotional wellbeing and continued coaching on healing from trauma was also essential. This feedback is being shared with program leaders and plans to implement changes are being developed with input from these remarkable teens. Our staff truly listen to what the youth have to say and as a result they help bring about meaningful change!

Guardian Angel Home: *Leaders in Trauma Informed Care and Healing*



While all of our programs at CYFS address the trauma a client has experienced, our team at our Guardian Angel residential program for youth knows especially how the impact of significant trauma can impact the development of a young child. The program is designed to serve boys between the ages of 6-18 who have experienced significant trauma in their short lives. As Program Coordinator Scott Hassett stated, “the boys at Guardian Angel have experienced significant abuse and/or neglect in their lives- so much so that they have a hard time self-regulating in a home environment. Our goal then, is to provide a safe, therapeutic environment to facilitate their healing, help them learn to cope, and eventually thrive.”

One Boy’s Journey

Jayden, at 10 years old, had not been able to successfully thrive in a foster home setting. Jayden’s biological parents were addicted to methamphetamines and eventually lost their parental rights due to severe chronic neglect.

Because of the trauma of what he witnessed at such a young age and being severely neglected for days at a time during critical developmental stages in his young life, Jayden did not develop healthy coping strategies. Jayden began making makeshift weapons to protect himself, rationalizing this was the only way to survive. Realizing Jayden’s behaviors were far too complex for them to handle his foster parents sought help. Jayden was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for further evaluation and then referred to our program at Guardian Angel. Says Clinical Director Duane McKillip, “no child can learn to self-regulate unless they feel safe. In Jayden’s case- his brain was preoccupied with the primal sense of survival. Making weapons was the only thing he could control that would allow him to feel some semblance of safety. Once Jayden came to Guardian Angel, using a trauma informed approach, we first needed to learn and understand what had happened to Jayden, identify triggers that caused him to have erratic behavior, and then provide the intervention to work on more positive and productive ways to help him self-manage, cope, and thrive.”



Our Guardian Angel leadership — including Unit Manager Phyllis Ziegler pictured left — have over 65 years’ experience supporting children who have experienced significant trauma.

A Day in the Life at Guardian Angel

On average, boys at Guardian Angel stay in residence for about 16 months. During that time, the goal is to address the life history of trauma the child has endured, to understand what contributes to each individual child's erratic behavior or emotional outbursts, and to help each child learn how to cope and better self-manage so that they can successfully and safely return to family, relatives, or a foster home or independent living. Each child is given an individualized treatment plan which addresses their specific emotional, behavioral, mental health, and trauma recovery needs.

The facility was intentionally designed to simulate a home-like environment to facilitate a sense of safety. Each child has their own room and a structured routine. Meals are eaten together, another way to create patterns of positive behaviors and practice successfully interacting with others. The children attend public school on-site through a highly creative partnership with the Morton school district. As a child progresses, they can also attend one of Morton's other schools offsite and participate in developmentally appropriate extracurricular activities. This past year, we had five youth progress to attending school off grounds in regular Morton Schools. There are plans to expand classroom space at Guardian Angel to provide even

more individualized instruction to each youth. Currently, Guardian Angel Home provides a safe therapeutic home for sixteen boys, eight live on the hall for younger boys and eight live on the hall for older boys.

The Guardian Angel team is proud to report that in the last six months 8 young men were able to achieve their goal of stepping down back to the community with their family, a relative placement, or a foster home as a critical step toward healing and development and thriving in their lives.

How You Can Help

As a multi-faceted and complex 24-hour a-day program, Guardian Angel requires significant financial, staff, volunteer, and material resources for the boys' treatment program and daily living. Here is a list of basic living, recreational materials and supplies we can always use as an in-kind donation:

- Sheets and comforters (Cartoon characters welcomed) for twin size beds
- Hygiene items (shampoo, deodorant, soap, toothpaste, etc.)
- Gift cards to Walmart (to help support purchasing birthday and Christmas presents for each child)
- Passes to the movies, bowling, skating, swimming
- Tickets to sporting events (Peoria Chiefs, Rivermen, Bradley basketball)

Interested in donating one of these items to Guardian Angel? Call **(309) 636-7500** to make arrangements! Your ongoing support is genuinely appreciated!



Staff *spotlight:*

Desiree Silva, CYFS Executive Director of Child Welfare, Shines Light on What “Permanency” is and Why it Matters



The role of family in a child’s life is so important. Loving, supportive, and nurturing relationships within families are critical to the healthy development of a child. Family relationships have an impact on a child’s psychological and emotional wellbeing. Simply stated, family shapes the way a child views the world and their place in it, their sense of security, and their values and behaviors. Children with loving and stable home environments navigate life’s challenges with greater success.

CYFS delivers a continuum of child welfare programs that includes Intact Family Services, Foster Care, and Adoption. The agency is responsible for keeping children safe from subsequent abuse or neglect and achieving outcomes that focus on keeping families together, reuniting children in foster care with their families, and facilitating permanency through guardianship and adoption when children are unable to return home. The front-line workers and supervisors who do this important work, commit themselves to doing so with a keen awareness that each child deserves to grow up in a family.

It is our fundamental belief that each child deserves to grow up in their own family when safe to do so, and that keeps child welfare staff focused on reunification as the hallmark to achieving permanency for our children.

Families have faced unprecedented challenges since the COVID-19 health crisis impacted child welfare in Illinois in March of 2020. Children who remained home with their parents, as well as children in foster care, their parents, and foster parents experienced disruptions to their daily lives. Doors closed for in-person community services, social settings were shut down, and court proceedings came to a halt in many counties. Community and statewide COVID-related concerns rendered much needed social contacts and supportive networks outside the margin of possibility for many families. With these challenges before us, CYFS committed to supporting children, families, and our partners through collaborative efforts to find solutions that still made permanency for children an option.

Unprecedented times calls for unprecedented performance. What we know about successful reunification between parents and children is that it is more likely to occur when frequent and consistent visits occurs between them. Given this, CYFS ensured that child welfare staff took precautions for their safety and the safety of all involved while still facilitating opportunities for families to visit, bond, and practice new skills.

This year CYFS achieved permanency for children at **7% above the state average** for other agencies.

Of profound importance is that under statewide COVID guidelines for in-person contact, CYFS set its performance apart with greater success than ever in accomplishing permanency through reunification of children with their parents.

Staffspotlight(cont.)

To date over **60% of achieved permanencies** are children who were reunited with their parents.

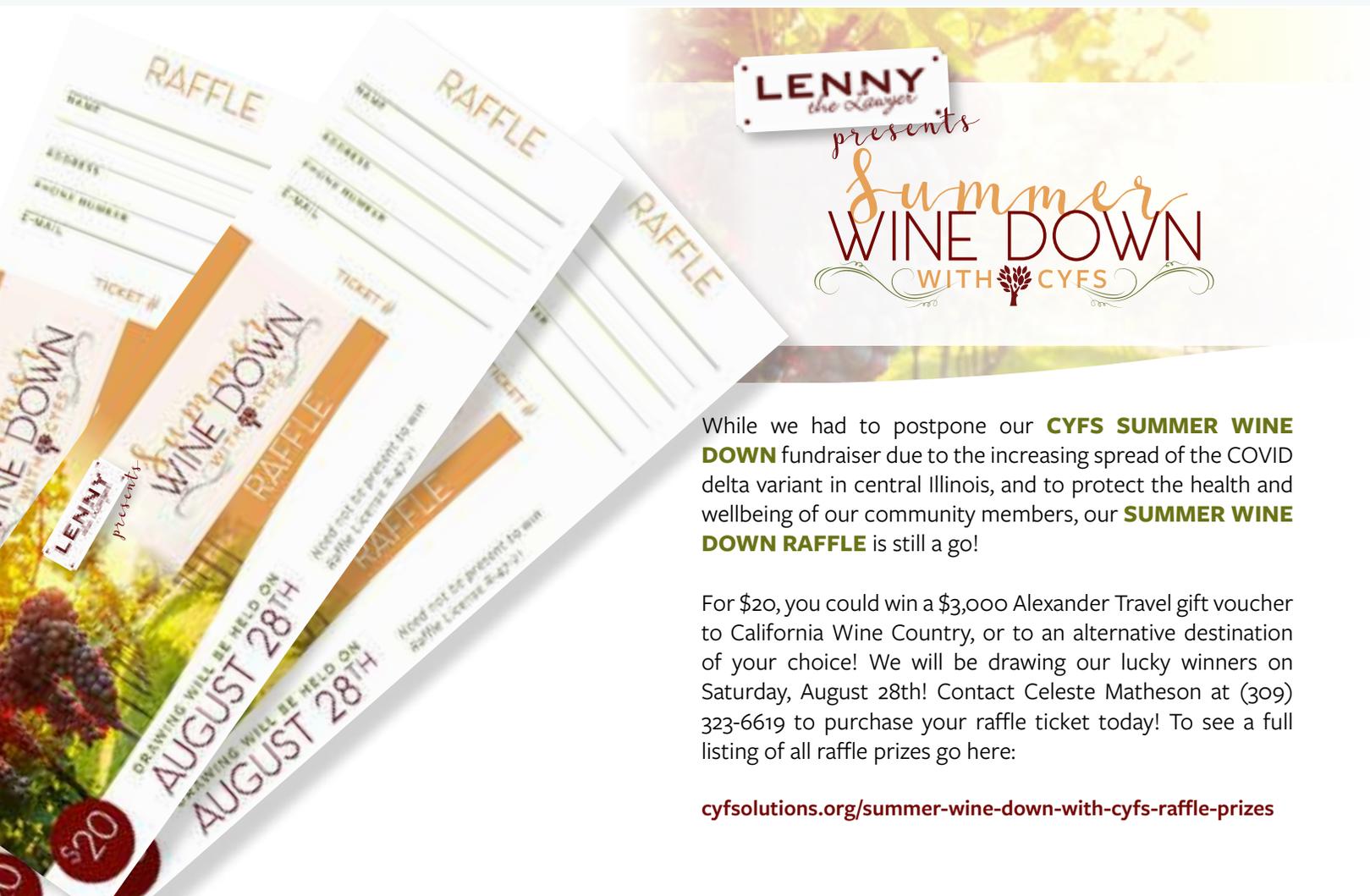
One only needs to read parent surveys to understand how remarkable this accomplishment is for families, and to underscore how committed CYFS staff are to setting CYFS' mission in motion.

"My caseworker always had my best interest and treated me with dignity. I never felt like she was judging me. She helped me become a better parent."

"My caseworker helped me get my family back together. I will never forget her for that."

"My caseworker made me feel like I could make the changes I needed to in order to be a better parent. No one has ever believed in me like that."

As we move into another year, be assured that on behalf of the children and families we serve, the bar to achieve even greater outcomes for families remains high. We remain unwavering in our commitment to reunifying children with their parents when possible, and we remain nimble in our response to COVID-related issues that arise and challenge us to be innovative in finding solutions to better serve our families. I joined CYFS in January of 2021 and it has been my pleasure to be part of the CYFS family, which exemplifies how important family is in achieving success.



LENNY
the Lawyer
presents
Summer WINE DOWN
WITH CYFS

While we had to postpone our **CYFS SUMMER WINE DOWN** fundraiser due to the increasing spread of the COVID delta variant in central Illinois, and to protect the health and wellbeing of our community members, our **SUMMER WINE DOWN RAFFLE** is still a go!

For \$20, you could win a \$3,000 Alexander Travel gift voucher to California Wine Country, or to an alternative destination of your choice! We will be drawing our lucky winners on Saturday, August 28th! Contact Celeste Matheson at (309) 323-6619 to purchase your raffle ticket today! To see a full listing of all raffle prizes go here:

cypsolutions.org/summer-wine-down-with-cyfs-raffle-prizes

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