

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June, 2015

LACK OF HOUSING PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE FOR POOR PARENTS IN KEEPING THEIR FAMILIES TOGETHER

EDISON —Latifa (first name only) had just given birth to her third child two years ago when the state’s child welfare agency discovered the East Orange woman’s substance abuse problem and removed the kids from her care. She didn’t know then that even getting off drugs and learning more about parenting still would not be enough to get her children back.

Rather, finding adequate and affordable housing for poverty-stricken Latifa would become the biggest obstacle for the return of the kids.

Much the same problem befell Jacquelyn of Paterson. She was facing prospects of living on the streets with her kids — she had left a hotel where, she says, the bugs were biting the children — when she called the state for help getting the family into safe housing she could afford. Little did she know then it would take some two years before that would happen and her kids would be returned.

Latifa and Jacquelyn are among 11 families from Atlantic, Bergen, Essex, Middlesex, Ocean, Passaic and Somerset counties being honored this month by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) for essentially putting their lives back together by dealing with substance abuse, housing issues and other problems — effectively putting themselves in position to have the

state Division of Child Protection & Permanency (DCP&P) agree to return the once-removed children to their parents' care and custody.

The reunited families are part of LSNJ's annual celebration known as Family Reunification Day. The event, open to the public, will be held June 29 at 2 p.m. in the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick. LSNJ's Family Reunification Day event coincides with the American Bar Association's annual celebration and support for reunification of families.

Every year DCP&P removes several thousand alleged neglected or abused children from their parents' custody and about half eventually are returned to their parents who have completed various self-help programs.

This year's Family Reunification Day event is focusing on how the lack of available and affordable housing too often may be the roadblock to bringing families back together — even after parents have demonstrated to authorities they are able once again of caring for their children.

Child advocates say it is far more important to get families back together as quickly as reasonably possible than to delay the reuniting because of, perhaps, too stringent requirements for what is deemed acceptable housing for the children. Such latitude, they say could, for example, encompass allowing the reunited families to live in homes of their relatives or permitting the children to be in homes with not as many bedrooms as the state prefers.

For people in poverty, removal of children from the home often leads to the loss of public benefits and child support, and that reduced financial support then may result in a family losing its home. The shortage of affordable housing makes finding any home difficult and exceptionally challenging, especially finding a home that satisfies the state's requirements, such as if it is large enough for the children to return.

As in the past such celebrations, this year's event in New Brunswick is expected to produce much the same outpouring of deep emotions — tears, kisses and many hugs — of parents and children elated to once again be together.

Jacquelyn, the woman who insisted on taking her kids out of a bug-ridden hotel, recently offered a gripping glimpse of such scenes as she recalled her reaction when first told she was getting her kids back. “I was happy because you know I had something missing in my heart, and it was my kids. Waking up every morning, not seeing my kids there, not feeding them, not sleeping, worrying if my kids are OK.”

And now that the family is whole? “I like taking my kids to the park, like to the movies, to Chuck E. Cheese, like to go have family days on Sundays.”

And what was her children's reaction when they came home? “They were so excited. As soon as they came back in through the door, they started hugging me, they started giving me kisses. ‘Oh mommy, I'm glad, I'm glad, I came home. I came home.’”

It was much the same for Latifa, the East Orange woman now reunited with her children and determined to put her substance abuse days far behind her.

“It's a beautiful thing to be reunited back with your kids, It's like giving birth again because when you first give birth you see what you created. And to get them back — it's like a whole new world. It's a whole new world.”

In addition to honoring the 11 reunited families, the LSNJ program will recognize several individuals with major roles in the reunification process. Known as “Family Reunification Day Heroes.” they include Rosemarie and Manny Arroyo, resource parents from Bergen County; attorney Michael Wroblewski, attorney for the Office of Parental Representation in Middlesex

County; Alonda Sullivan, attorney in the Office of Parental Representation in Essex County; and Maralyn Soto, relative resource parent in Essex County.

Guest speakers will be DCP&P Assistant Commissioner Lisa von Pier; Dorothy E. Roberts, George A. Weiss University professor of law and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania; Ruth White, executive director of the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare in Maryland; and Hope VanSickle, a former Reunification Day honoree from Brick.

Legal Services of New Jersey, located in Edison, heads a statewide system of non-profit corporations which provide free legal assistance in civil matters to low-income people in all 21 counties of New Jersey.

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