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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

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Media Contact: Carla Harris
(804) 726-7107

Former foster child overcomes hunger, homelessness; now helping others

May is National Foster Care Month; resources available for foster parents

Richmond, Va. – By age 12, Patrick Plourde had experienced the kind of hardship that no child should. He lived in a different place every year, including a vehicle at one point. When he and his siblings did live in a house, they were frequently locked in and left for long periods of time, relying on neighbors for food and water. On some days, his only meal was from the school cafeteria. He was placed in foster care when he was 13. It changed his life.

Governor Bob McDonnell has officially recognized May as [Foster Care Month](#) in Virginia. The need for loving foster parents is ongoing for both short and long-term placements. More than 6,000 children are in foster care throughout the Commonwealth. Approximately 50 percent are 13 and older. Children are in urgent need of foster parents and a “forever family.” VDSS is asking families, couples and individuals to open up their hearts and homes to a foster child.

Plourde, now 30 and married, is a Foster Care [Independent Living Program](#) Specialist with the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). Having triumphed over the abuse and neglect he experienced as a child, he is focused on empowering others. The story of his professional mission to help young people in foster care has a new personal chapter. Plourde has a 16-year-old foster son who has lived with him for a year.

“I felt I needed to provide this young man with a loving, family environment so he can grow and develop into what he wants and needs to be – shape him, guide him, love him,” Plourde said. “That’s what I needed. That’s what I got. And that’s why I am here today.”

Plourde helps 14 – 21-year-olds without a permanent home secure the resources they need to navigate independence, such as paying college tuition, budgeting money, signing a lease for the first time, and interviewing for a job.

He says it is critical skill building; still, it does not take the place of having a place to call home. “What I still wish for all of the young people that I work with is that they’ll have someone to visit during the holidays, someone who will remember their birthday or just call to chat.”

“Children in foster care have usually been thrust into care through no fault of their own. They need a home. They need parents. They need love,” explained Paul McWhinney, VDSS director of the Division of Family Services.

The goal of Virginia’s foster care program is to maintain family unity and ensure that all children grow up in safe, stable homes. “There is no ‘typical’ foster child, but they all desire a permanent, loving home. This is especially true for older children, teens and siblings,” McWhinney said.

[Support, resources](#) and training are offered to foster parents, as well as potential parents who are considering becoming resource families. [Local departments of social services](#) provide excellent guidance and specialized training before, during and after a foster placement. “As a foster parent, you could be saving a child’s life, and we are there to support you,” McWhinney explained.

To learn more about making a positive difference in a child’s life:

- Visit: <http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/fc/index.html>
- Contact: your [local department of social services](#).
- Call: [FACES of Virginia Families](#) at 877-VA FACES (823-2237)

Quick Facts:

- In Virginia, there are nearly 700 children with the goal of adoption that have yet to be placed in an adoptive home.
- Nearly 1,400 children in Virginia are at risk of aging out of foster care without permanent family connections.
- Children have less than a 25% chance of being reunified with their biological families after being in foster care for two years; that percentage decreases to 5% after three years.
- Less than 5% of children in Virginia are placed with kinship foster parents. Children placed with relatives have the highest likelihood of permanency, the highest placement stability rates, and the shortest lengths of stay in foster care.

Improvements

- Virginia’s foster care caseload has decreased by 22% since the beginning of the [Children’s Services System Transformation](#) (2007).
- Virginia has reduced the placement of children in non-family based settings (i.e., residential care, group homes) by over 900 children.
- Virginia has seen sizable increases in both family based placements and discharges to permanent homes in the last two years.

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Interviews are available upon request. For additional story ideas and for information on how your media outlet can help raise awareness of the need for loving homes for foster children, contact Carla Harris, VDSS, (804) 726-7107 or carla.harris@dss.virginia.gov.