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PHOTO

Photograph of Ms. Schriener is available: <http://dhhs.ne.gov/PublishingImages/CFS-FB.jpg>

CAPTION

Debi Schriener, resource developer with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, has found Facebook a good source to locate relatives interested in foster parenting state wards.

Facebook Useful in Finding Kin for Wards of the State

Lincoln – Once the court orders that a child is a ward of the state, the Department of Health and Human Services can find it difficult to identify relatives willing to serve as foster parents, especially if parents don't offer names. However, an experiment with Facebook has opened the doors of kin for some wards.

Debi Schriener, resource developer in Children and Family Services' Southeast Service Area in Lincoln, was challenged by staff to find new ways to locate relatives. She began working with Facebook where she knew people 'friend' family members and identify family in photos.

"It's an unfortunate fact that wards may be moved from one unfamiliar home to another too often," Schriener said. "If we can find a relative willing to take a child while the parents work through their issues, it can be the best situation for children and provide them a sense of normalcy. That's what we want for them."

She said parents sometimes tell caseworkers they have no other relatives because they are cut off from their family or embarrassed about their situation and don't want relatives to find out about it.

"We have wonderful non-relative foster parents who are the core of our system and they do a great job," she said. "However, known relatives are a good placement for wards. They are happiest living with family. Facebook helps us locate family so we can at least contact them to ask their interest in helping out."

Since establishing a site on Facebook, Schriener said she has looked for relatives of about 80 families. Her success is due to her knowledge about how Facebook works and her growing experience searching the social media site.

She says it rarely occurs that she doesn't find any relatives at all. "I'm usually able to find a large number of relatives for us to contact."

Facebook is particularly good to use in identifying the relations of wards, Schriener said. Some people on Facebook are better family historians and describe how they are related. This information even leads her to relatives whose names have changed through marriage, such as aunts and uncles with different surnames than the youth or parents.

Information about the child is confidential and is not posted on DHHS' Facebook site. Instead, Debi identifies probable relatives, confirms their relationship and sends them a confidential message to update them about the situation and gauge their interest in caring for the child.

She said her main focus is children who have been in the system a long time, and reconnecting them with family, even if parental rights are severed. In some cases, relatives' situations have changed and now they are willing to help years later.

"The idea to use Facebook came to me after our service area resumed case management and I was able to see first-hand the challenges some children faced," Schriener said. "It made me sad to read the referrals of children to new places to live. Some had been placed in several homes. Either their siblings were adopted and they weren't, or adoptive parents would find they weren't able to continue care for them. Each change broke bonds of trust, and they were left with no one."

For these children, reconnecting with any family member is important, she said. She began asking about setting up a Facebook account after reading an article sent her about an extreme recruiting program locating adoptive parents in St. Louis, Mo. for hard-to-place kids.

Occasionally, once the courts or law enforcement deem it unsafe for children to live at home, she looks for relatives of children just entering the system. She begins her search while caseworkers deal with the crisis of children coming into care. Those names are confirmed by the parents or child when the child leaves the home.

Schriener said her most difficult cases are the most rewarding. A 14-year-old ward had been placed in a high number of non-relative homes. After looking on Facebook, she was able to locate family in Louisiana who agreed to take the young woman.

In another case, a youth had been in out-of-home care for a short while and the third set of foster parents notified the caseworker the child needed to be moved. Schriener said she was able to locate the youth's paternal uncle, cousins, and other relatives on Facebook, which eventually led to another uncle for placement.

"We had an address but no current phone numbers, so we sent him a confidential message on Facebook," she said. "He messaged me back and I was able to email him our background check form to fill out and return. The youth was placed there and the plan is for the youth to return home to mother with the aunt and uncle providing informal support."

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She said an even better situation occurred when she intervened at the beginning of a case. She found a girl's non-custodial father and brothers on Facebook, the businesses where they are employed and sent them a message. This led to placing her with an uncle on the same day, and the girl never experienced "stranger care."

She's found that persistent follow-up with relatives yield results. She uses other sites, such as white pages.com, to locate a phone number or current address for family members. Despite the fact many people only use cell phones today, she can usually find a relative to call and begin gathering information.

"It's just my personality to keep digging and digging," she said. "I'm committed to find a family for these kids because I know they'll be better off."

Even if family decides not to care for the child, they may volunteer to support the parents while working to get the child back home, Schriener said.

"We're going the extra mile to find a happy home for children," she said "Anything we can do for that to happen makes all the effort worthwhile."

What would help her most in searches for family? "If everyone on Facebook would just provide their current town, it would make my job a whole lot easier," Schriener said.