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# Philly puts out 'urgent' call - 300 families needed for fostering

by Julia Terruso, Posted: March 8, 2018



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The 2-year-old boy dropped off at Shakia Rembert’s house wouldn’t look at her as she welcomed him with a warm “hello.” And after the social worker left, he ignored everything she said.

As a first-time foster mom, Rembert wondered what she was doing wrong. What trauma may Alvin have experienced before arriving at her West Oak Lane home? After a few weeks of trying to connect with him, she realized it wasn’t just her. He didn’t answer anyone, nor startle when she dropped things. He was deaf.



**COURTESY OF SHAKIA REMBERT**  
Shakia Rembert was a first-time foster mom when then 2-year-old Alvin came to her home. The Department of Human Services has put out an urgent call for more foster families.

The boy, who'd been removed from his mother's care as an infant, was living in a crisis nursery before going to stay with Rembert. A doctor would later tell Rembert that at least a year earlier she'd advised the boy's mother to have his hearing checked.

"It was alarming to to me," Rembert recalled. "Everyone missed this. No one was spending one-on-one time with him. No one was talking to him the way you're supposed to talk to babies."

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Experts agree that children do much better living in family settings than group homes because of the extra level of care and attention they receive.

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But the city needs more families — about 300 more — to meet the need. The Department of Human Services put out an urgent call for parents this month, using phone banks and public service announcements. It's the first major recruitment in a decade.

They've changed the name of what they're seeking, too — from "foster parent" to "resource parent," reflecting a nationwide trend.

"We're asking people to ask themselves, 'Can I do this?' " said DHS Commissioner Cynthia Figueroa. "If the answer is 'yes,' that's awesome. If, it's 'no,' give us the name of other folks who you think would be excellent resource parents. The system alone can't be the only resource. We need families who want to provide the best opportunity while families are having to deal with challenges."



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Shakia Rembert shares a tender moment with her adopted son Alvin Sahr Rembert, 5, at their home in North Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia about 700 children are in group home placements. Of those, Figueroa said, about 250 could be living with families, while 450 more need to stay in a staffed facility due to physical or emotional needs.

Figueroa hopes the campaign can dispel misconceptions about fostering: You don't need to be married, own a house, or have a car, and there's no expectation of adoption. Foster parents must be 21 but there's no age cutoff. Retirees, often with more time to spare, make great foster parents, Figueroa said.



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In addition to fostering, which can last anywhere from a few weeks to two years, the agency needs emergency placements — with families that can take children for just a few days. DHS also uses licensed families as “respite” placement, to give long-term foster parents a break or provide housing for kids older than 18, but might need somewhere to go temporarily, such as during a college break.

“We have a full menu of options,” Figueroa said.

If DHS determines that a child is in danger from abuse or neglect and must be taken from a family, the system looks first to relatives or close friends, then foster placements. As of March, 6,034 kids in Philadelphia were living in foster care, group homes, or with relatives or close friends (known as kinship care). That is 34 fewer than a year ago.

The application process for foster parents involves questions about the family background, employment, income, medical history, education, and community involvement. All adults in the home get criminal and child-abuse background checks.

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For Rembert, the first few months caring for Alvin were tough. He drank out of the faucet, feared climbing into the bathtub, and became frustrated easily.

"It was understandable," Rembert said. "He hadn't really communicated with anyone" in the first years of his life.

She downloaded an American Sign Language app and started teaching him (and learning herself). She bought him Capri Suns and tiny bottles of water shaped like basketballs, which she handed him when he headed to the faucet. She experimented with colorful bath dyes to make tub-time more fun. When he got agitated, she'd settle him down by putting on one of her favorite movies, *The Little Rascals*.

Rembert provided Alvin with what he needed outside of her home, too. When she believed that a hospital wasn't giving him proper care, she made sure he was transferred to another institution, where he was fitted for a cochlear implant.

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"They come in with absolutely nothing but the clothes on their back, no books, no school books," Rembert said. "Whatever resources you need, you have to fight for. But if your life is stable, and you make the decision to do this, it's the most rewarding experience in the world."

The city pays \$20 to \$36 a day depending on the age of the child. "Some people live off of the stipend," Rembert said. "That's going to be a frustrating situation for the parent and the children."

In the three years she fostered Alvin, Rembert also fostered a boy his age for a few months and later, four sisters. Siblings can be hard to place for space reasons, as can older children because most families request younger kids. There's also a great need for people who will welcome LGBT children and mothers with babies.

Sheina Martinez, 32, works as a foster parent recruiter for Bethany Christian Services. She saw firsthand how badly the system needed caring homes.

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"We'll get 200 requests a month from DHS and we'll be able to place maybe 10 of them," she said. "The need over-exceeds what we have the ability to place. ... We're sending infants sometimes to infant shelters." (DHS works with several providers in addition to Bethany to place children).



**JAMES BLOCKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**  
Frequent foster parents Sheina Martinez, a social worker, and Andy Martinez, a firefighter, gather in front of a wall of photographs with their two children, Jada, 13, and Andre, 10. As of now, they are not looking after any children, but Sheina says she could get the call at any moment.

Martinez and her husband Andy, along with their two children, now 13 and 10, added their home to the list of certified foster family options four years ago. They have cared for eight children. All have since been reunited with their families or relatives.

"A lot of people foster in hopes they will adopt," Martinez said. "They fall in love, naturally, of course. But I always tell people ... this child has been with their family 10 years so multiply that love you feel tenfold. If my kids were to go into foster care, I would really appreciate their resource parents supporting me, cheering me on."

Rembert didn't have adoption in mind when she started caring for Alvin, but when it became clear his family could not provide a safe, long-term home for him, she jumped at the chance to be his mom. They had spent close to three years together at that point. He was a happy little boy who loved basketball, baseball, swimming, and chicken wings. He was doing well in pre-K and hearing well enough to almost speak in full sentences.

Alvin Rembert's adoption day. Video by Sulayman Tahir



In January, shortly after his fifth birthday, Alvin became Rembert's son in a family court hearing. He wore a blue Sixers jersey and a gold plastic crown. She wore mini pom-poms in her hair and carried a pendant that read "Go Rembert." An elated crew of family members and friends took turns high-fiving the little guy, lifting him for hugs.

Once the commotion had died down, as the two headed to the elevator to leave, Rembert made sure to steal her moment, nuzzling her son close to tell him how much she loved him.

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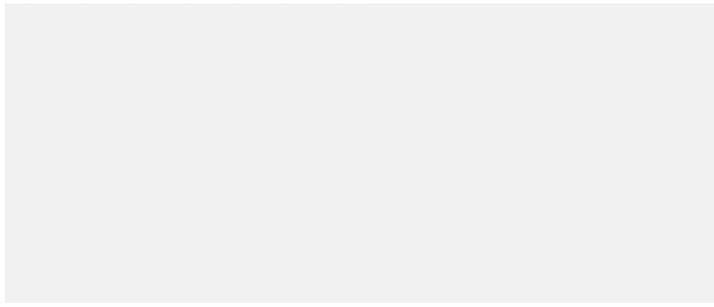
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