

12-28-12 Special Committee in the Kenosha News

Friday, December 28, 2012

9:35 AM

Path to forever

Group works to
expedite stability
for foster children

BY JOE POTENTE
jpotente@kenoshanews.com

A Kenosha County lawmaker, a local social services administrator and a city resident are at the heart of an effort to shorten the path to permanent placements for foster children.

Rep. Samantha Kerkman, R-Randall, has chaired the Special Committee on Permanency for Young Children in the Child Welfare System since its formation in June.



**Samantha
Kerkman**

and adoption.

"We're just trying to get kids to permanency quicker," Kerkman said.

For foster parent Robin Neeson, a Kenosha foster parent whom Kerkman appointed to the committee, the issue of permanency hit home when she and her husband, Mark, housed a foster

child for 18 months, before making an unsuccessful attempt to adopt the girl.

"This girl was moved six times in three years, and that just seemed incredibly wrong to us," Neeson said.

Neeson said the girl ultimately ended up in a good home, but the timing and the workings of the system were cause for frustration.

"That just prompted us, these things can't continue to go on," Neeson said.

Neeson said she hopes to see changes that will provide for more permanent placements, and faster.

And while Neeson and her husband have adopted three of the foster children they have taken in in recent years — adding a now-7-year-old boy and 5- and 3-year-old girls to a family that already included a birth son and

daughter, now ages 19 and 14 — Neeson said adoption is by no means always the end game for permanency.

Often, she said, the question is whether there are ways to get children home faster. That, she said, often involves getting services to parents, and dealing with mental health issues.

"I think there's a myth that all of the parents (of foster children) must be either in jail or on drugs," Neeson said. "But there's a huge mental health issue."

Much of the panel's discussion has centered on strengthening the relationship between human services departments and courts, codifying the differing practices counties use and putting them into state statute.

Ron Rogers, director of the Kenosha County Division of Children and Family Services, is another member of the 16-person committee. Other members of the Legislative Council study committee include legislators, administrators and foster parents from elsewhere in the state.

Like Neeson, Kerkman said she has a personal connection to the foster child system.

When she was in high school, Kerkman said her parents went through the process of taking in one of her friends who had a troublesome home life.

"I don't want to go into specifics, but I just want to say that experience has always been with me," Kerkman said. "So I have a really different perspective on it, especially with adolescents."



KENOSHA NEWS PHOTO BY BRIAN PASSINO

Mark and Robin Neeson with their children, from left, Haileigh, 5; Aliana, 3; Tyler, 19; Anthony, 7; and Ken-nedy, 14. Haileigh, Aliana and Anthony were foster children whom the Neesons adopted; Tyler and Anthony are their birth children. Robin Neeson is a member of a special state study committee on foster care that Rep. Samantha Kerkman, R-Randall, is chairing.