



## SOCIAL SERVICES NEWS

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P.O. BOX 669    Newton, North Carolina    28658-0669    (828) 695-5600    [www.catawbacountync.gov/dss](http://www.catawbacountync.gov/dss)

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**CONTACT:** Margaret Allen, Catawba County Social Services Public Information Officer,  
[mallen@catawbacountync.gov](mailto:mallen@catawbacountync.gov), 828-695-6583

or

Sid Daniels, Catawba County Family Finder, 828-695-6500

### **FAMILY FINDERS HELPS FOSTER KIDS CONNECT WITH EXTENDED FAMILY**

HICKORY — “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” wrote poet Robert Frost.

But many foster children and youths have lost that type of family support system. Sid Daniels, who works with the Family Finding Program in Catawba County, will tell you that foster children are often very lonely because they have lost contact with their extended family. The longer they are in foster care, the more likely this is to happen. It’s his job to change that reality.

“We don’t want a kid feeling lonely — where the only people in their life are the ones that get paid to be there,” he said. Staff members go home at the end of their shift. Family members can form a lifelong bond. The Family Finding Program in Catawba County is a partnership between the Children's Home Society of North Carolina and Catawba County Social Services. Family Finders is a national program, developed by Kevin Campbell, that has shown strong results in many states.

Daniels' job as a Family Finder is part detective, part negotiator and part counselor. He first has to identify and contact family members who have lost their connection to the foster child. These could include grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins, as well as parents and step-parents.

After he identifies these relatives, he tries to gauge their interest in reconnecting with the child in foster care. If they express an interest, he invites them to a couple of meetings. At the first one, he shows them a “video journal” of the young person talking about themselves and what they want in life. They discuss how the relatives may play a role in the child’s future.

In some cases, the relatives want to resume the relationship they had before, such as talking with the child on the phone, writing them letters, or visiting with them. In other cases, they might be willing to adopt the child if they cannot be reunited with their parents.

Then the process moves to planning how the relationship might be resumed. If a relative wishes to adopt or become the guardian of the child, he or she must undergo an evaluation process.

It is important to wrap the child in a network of family supporters who are willing to assist them, Daniels said. The goal is to find as many relatives as possible who are willing to participate in the process. Catawba County was one of the first counties in North Carolina to pilot Family Finding, beginning in 2008. Now it has fully embraced the model.

Daniels joined the team last fall. The process can be time consuming, but it is usually completed in three to five months, he said. “The ownership is on the family,” he said. “What do they want to do?”

Catawba County Social Services hopes that reuniting foster children with their relatives can produce a brighter future. Foster children usually age out of care at 18, although they can remain voluntarily until they are 21.

National statistics show that former foster care youths face some daunting prospects if they don’t have a support system in place. Some 49 percent are homeless within three years. Forty-three percent are high school drop outs. Fifty-six percent become unemployed within two years. Forty-two percent, of whom 60 percent are women, become parents within 2.5 years of exiting foster care.

Former foster youth are found to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at two times the level of U.S. war veterans. Fifty percent have used illegal drugs. One in four will be incarcerated within 2.5 years of leaving foster care.

Daniels believes his work can help change those statistics for local youths. That’s why he keeps on calling, emailing, sending Facebook messages, knocking on doors and meeting with family members of children and youths in foster care. He sees his job as finding “who’s going to love this kid no matter what.”



*Sid Daniels is a Family Finder at Catawba County Social Services. He works to reunite children and youth in foster care with their extended families. The local program is a collaboration between Catawba County Social Services and the Children's Home Society of North Carolina. Family Finding is a nationally recognized program that has shown strong results in other states.*

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