

SC Heart Gallery Foundation History of Foster Care 5/21.

May is National Foster Care Month 2014! As we celebrate the people and services that care for the children in the foster care system today, we thought it would be a good time to also look back at the history of foster care in the United States.

The concept behind foster care—as in caring for orphans—can be found in ancient texts like the Old Testament. Even as recently as a few hundred years ago, the responsibility to provide temporary homes to children in need fell informally to families, neighbors and the church.

Then, in 1838, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that the government should play a more active role in ensuring that children receive the protection, care and education they need. This included establishing that the state has a right and an obligation to remove children from improperly supervised households.

The “father” of the U.S. foster care system is Charles Brace. In the early 1800s, orphanages and private homes were the primary options for orphaned children—but the need was beginning to exceed the capacity. Upon seeing thousands of homeless and neglected children living in the streets and slums of New York, Brace founded the New York Children’s Aid Society in 1853, which placed these children with families in more rural locations around the country. The children were sent to their new homes by train, so the movement became known as The Orphan Train Movement. It lasted from 1853 to the early 1890s and was responsible for placing more than 120,000 children with new families.

Around 1875, states began taking a more active role in foster care, and social agencies began to supervise foster parents in the early 1900’s. Over the next several decades, processes and systems were further established, records were kept and children’s needs were considered in their placements. The federal government began supporting state inspections of foster homes, and foster parents came to be seen as part of the professional team working to find permanency for dependent children.

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act passed into law in the 1980’s and pushed the adoption movement over foster care. With this shift away from foster care as a long-term solution, the federal government unburdened itself of much of its role in foster care funding and burdened individual states with the responsibility.

Sources:

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