

Nonprofit readies connection kits for March distribution to Illinois schools

iCARE4 Adoptive And Foster Families to provide key resources to support mental health needs of adopted, foster, kinship kids

CHICAGO — This March, in conjunction with National Social Work Month, iCARE4 Adoptive And Foster Families will distribute iCARE Schools Connection Kits to public schools across Illinois.

The initial distribution of 1,000 kits will reach about 25% of Illinois' roughly 4,400 public schools, including Chicago Public and Lake County schools, where many of the state's adopted, foster and kinship students are enrolled, said Laura Adams, president and CEO of iCARE, a nonprofit she founded in February 2024.

"Each kit is packed with more than a dozen resources, from inclusive classroom ideas to mental health support strategies and family support group information," she said. "Some materials also will be available in Spanish."

With over 300,000 adopted, foster and kinship children in Illinois — many of whom struggle with trauma-induced behaviors — the need for specialized training and resources for school professionals is crucial. Children from these backgrounds often face challenges that traditional behavioral and mental health programs may not effectively address, said Adams, who herself is a mother of both adopted and biological daughters.

School social workers who are better equipped to assist this set of students will benefit not only those directly affected, but the overall school climate as well, Adams added.

"Trauma-informed training is critical for educators and school staff," she said. "It strengthens families, improves graduation rates and supports society as a whole."

Research shows that schools that implement trauma-sensitive practices have seen up to a 28% decrease in student dropout rates and a 25% reduction in mental health crises, Adams said. Addressing these mental health needs while students are still in school also can curb future incarceration rates and provide a long-term financial benefit to the state.

Early feedback on the kits has been overwhelmingly positive, said Adams, who met recently with Tonya Edwards, VP, legislation and advocacy chairwoman of the Illinois Association of School Social Workers.

"She was thrilled," Adams said. "School social workers deal with thousands of children every year, from all walks of life and a wide range of experiences. Many schools have only one school social worker for hundreds of students. These resources will absolutely help them to do their jobs more effectively."

Cortney Jordan is an education and implementation specialist for the National Training Institute (NTI) for the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.). She said

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the kits will be a godsend.

“I was a professional school counselor for 17 years and I would have loved to receive this kit,” she said. “The materials address key mental health concerns, including trauma, attachment, identity development and school-related challenges.”

Grant and donor funding is sought to expand the connection kit distribution to all Illinois schools — and perhaps beyond.

“Our goal, ultimately, is to ensure every department in every school — from teachers to counselors — has the tools to support these kids holistically, addressing their mental health and emotional needs in every aspect of their education,” Adams said. “For the cost of two cups of coffee, you can help an entire school access these life-changing resources.”

In addition to the connection kits, iCARE recommends school-based mental health professionals training, available for free online. Developed by the Center for Adoption Support and Education, the training includes eight modules covering topics including attachment, loss and grief, trauma-informed assessment and best practices for mental health support. Seventeen and a half continuing education credits are approved by the National Association of Social Workers and the National Board for Certified Counselors.

For more information about the connection kits or other iCARE programs, or to make a donation, visit icare4aaff.org or contact Laura Adams at laura@icare4aaff.org.

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Photos by Cynthia Wolf | Wolf Wordsmithing
Suggested captions

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Insetoption: Shown is a sampling of materials included in the new iCARE4 Adoptive And Foster Families Connection Kits that will be distributed to Illinois schools beginning this March.

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familytree: Laura Adams, president and CEO of iCARE4 Adoptive and Foster Families, displays a family tree handout as she presents information about the nonprofit's new connection kits to be distributed to Illinois schools beginning in March. The first distribution will include Lake County and Chicago Public Schools.

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iCARE: President and CEO Laura Adams, standing, welcomes attendees to an iCARE4 Adoptive And Foster Families Coffee Connection gathering at Tala Coffee Roasters in Highwood. Adams presented information regarding the nonprofit's new connection kits that will be distributed to Illinois schools starting this March.

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fullgroup: Attending a recent iCARE Coffee Connection in Highwood were (clockwise, from left) adoptive mom Isabel Fiore, Susan Neaman, iCARE board members Beth Shabelman and Claudia Berman, iCARE President/CEO Laura Adams, Dan Vosnos of the National Down Syndrome Society, educational advocate Brie Serdar, Empowering Women of Lake County founder Malinda Leonard, Beth Feeley and adoptive mom Beth McCullough of Second Nurture, a foster family support organization.