

EveryChild wants children to grow up with families, not institutions

BY SRUTHI KUNNEL - SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE

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No child should grow up in an institution instead of a home, a mental health program official said.

That is the mission of EveryChild Inc., a nonprofit organization that helps children with disabilities living in institutions across Texas. The organization pairs the children with support families who either take care of the children by themselves, or together with the birth family.

"A support family is a family that is recruited, trained, equipped and paid to provide full or part-time care for a child with developmental disabilities that resides either in a residential facility or a nursing home," Jessica Grutzmacher, marketing and outreach coordinator at the Gulf Bend Center said.

"The support families have to go through a screening process before they can be a part of the program," she said. The families are usually people who already have children with disabilities or experience working with people with disabilities.

There are 1,253 children under the age of 21 with disabilities living in institutions across the state, according to the Texas State Health and Human Services Commissioner's Web site.

The Gulf Bend Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center in Victoria, has teamed up with EveryChild, Inc., to find support families locally. The center is looking for a Victoria support family for a girl with disabilities in a Corpus Christi institution, but her family is in Victoria.

"Institutions serve their purpose but they are very generic. There is no privacy. No one gets any one-on-one time, there is not enough staff," said Helena Crawford, of San Antonio who has been a part of the program for six years.

The biggest reward for the families in the program is to see the children grow and learn. "To see them be in a loving environment where they can reach their full potential where they are not being held back," Grutzmacher said.

To be a part of the program, contact Gulf Bend MHMR Center at 1-800-421-8825.