



North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services

Caswell Center

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**Foster Grandparent Program Celebrates 35 Years
In Lenoir/Greene Counties**

The Foster Grandparent Program began in 1965 as a national demonstration effort to provide older adults with meaningful ways to volunteer in their communities by serving children with exceptional or special needs. In 1971, the Foster Grandparent Program became part of Action, a domestic volunteer agency that provided matching grants to support state programs. In 1994, all Action programs were transferred to the Corporation for National and Community Service; the Foster Grandparent Program, Senior Companion Program, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programs became known as the National Senior Service Corps.

Senior Corps reported in 2005 that 31,017 foster grandparents spent 30 million hours serving 262,781 young people and 6,255 children of prisoners. Foster grandparents typically work one-on-one mentoring and tutoring in schools, hospitals, drug treatment centers, correctional institutions, and childcare centers. Senior Corps boasts impressive outcomes for the program: 90% of young people reported improvement in their self-image; 66% reported having kept out of trouble, and 58% showed improvement in their school attendance since establishing a relationship with a foster grandparent.

There are currently only 11 foster grandparent programs across North Carolina. Established in 1972, the Lenoir-Greene County Foster Grandparent Program was first sponsored by Greene Lamp, Inc. under the direction of Paul Gillikin. Caswell Center, Dobbs Youth Development Center, and RHA Howell's Bear Creek childcare facility were chosen as the first sites for placing foster grandparents. Under the auspices of Action, various sponsors and program directors continued to fund and manage the Lenoir-Greene Foster Grandparent Program until 1984 when Caswell Center, through the NC Division of Aging, became the program sponsor. During the past 35 years, 438 foster grandparents have served youth in Lenoir and Greene counties.

In addition to being age 60 or older, foster grandparents must meet income eligibility requirements and agree to volunteer at least 20 hours per week. In return, they receive a small stipend and mileage reimbursement to help offset the costs of volunteering. The Foster Grandparent Program Director selects volunteer sites and recruits, assigns, supervises, and pays foster grandparents. Since 2001, Danielle Howell has fulfilled this role for the Lenoir-Greene County program. Howell supervises 81 volunteers who log in more than 76,000 hours each year serving children at 10 diverse locations such as Caswell Center, Dobbs Youth Development Center, Greene Lamp Head Start, RHA/Howell's Bear Creek, Children's Village Academy, Even Start Family Literacy, and Grainger Hill More at Four.

“Our foster grandparents have touched the lives of thousands of children. They have wiped away tears, comforted the sick, mentored the disadvantaged, and helped bring smiles to many faces,” said Howell. Many of Howell’s volunteers have served for 10 years or longer. This spring Mary Moore, who has served for 32 years, was honored as foster grandparent of the year for the Lenoir-Greene program. She is just one veteran of the program.



When Sadie Reece retired from the Glen Raven Cotton Mill in 1984 (the same year her husband passed away), she decided to become more active in her community. For the past 20 years she has served as a foster grandparent at Caswell Center (a program amendment allows foster grandparents who serve children with mental retardation to continue their relationships after the children turn 18).

Loved by staff and residents alike, Reece can be found pushing wheelchairs, reading books, giving hugs, and singing songs to Caswell individuals. She says it has been one of the most rewarding experiences in her life. Calling them “precious people” that she loves to make smile, she adds (with her own smile) “I ask God to bless them every day.” Reece, who doesn’t mind telling you she is 85 years old, has seven children, 28 grandchildren, 30 great-grandchildren, and 10 great-great grandchildren.



“They call me grandma,” Lucille Belcher says of the two teenage boys she mentors at Dobbs Youth Development Center, where she has been a foster grandparent for the past seven years. She routinely walks the grounds with the teens, encouraging them to talk about their lives and future plans. Prior to volunteering at Dobbs, she served five years at Caswell Center. “I still visit those boys,” she says, although those boys are now men.

In 1999, despite a serious illness and subsequent surgery, Belcher returned to her volunteer duties after recovering for five months. She has volunteered for the past 19 years, simultaneously serving as a foster grandparent and as a “pink lady” at Lenoir Memorial Hospital, where she was named “outstanding volunteer” for logging in 5,000 service hours. She also volunteers once a month for the Red Cross. “I like doing things,” she simply explains, when asked how she finds the energy to do so much. This spring the Dobbs Nursing Staff hosted a party to celebrate her 80th birthday. Belcher has seven children, 20 grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandchild.

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