For Handicapped—
More Foster Care Homes Needed

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Handicapped children in rural Alaska are often unable to obtain special education or training in their village so the Bureau of Indian Affairs has turned to families in Alaskan urban areas for help.

Under what is known as the Foster Care Program, the handicapped child leaves his village for nine months and lives with foster parents in a place such as Fairbanks where he can receive the special training that he needs.

About 40 children from the Fairbanks BIA district are currently participating in the program, but the Bureau would like to see the number climb to 100.

The Fairbanks office covers a 35,000 square-mile area or roughly the northern half of Alaska.

According to Mrs. Jean Beyrer, the BIA child welfare worker for the Fairbanks area, the agency would like to build up the program in order to meet the needs of all handicapped children.

Handicapped in this instance might mean that the child is partially or completely deaf, a slow learner, retarded, or has family problems.

"We discourage taking a normal child away from his home just for a better education," she stressed.

Ordinarily a child in the program stays with his foster parents for an entire school year and returns to his native home in the summer. In some cases, the child will stick with the same foster parents until he graduates.

A handicapped child of any age is eligible for the program as long as he is still in school.

The BIA locates the handicapped children through teachers, public health nurses or welfare social workers in the villages.

In the past, the main problem has been an inability to find enough foster parents, Mrs. Beyrer said.

To qualify, the parents must have definite interest in children and a desire to work with a handicapped child.

"We like for the foster parents to care for the child as if he were their own," the child welfare worker stressed.

She noted that the BIA would prefer native foster parents but that such is not necessary.

In fact, she added, most of the foster parents have been Caucasian.

Residents from any area in interior or northern Alaska, not only Fairbanks, are eligible to apply.

However, Mrs. Beyrer explained that the handicapped child can be sent only where the special education or training that he needs is available.

Before making any placements, she visits both the foster parents and the home of the child in an attempt to match the child with a particular home.

Sometimes, when a Caucasian adopts an Eskimo or Indian child problems tend to arise from cultural differences.

Many native children do not speak much English and have not been around very many white people.

For many of them, the man's role in the family is one of a hunter and fisherman, the diet frequently consists of caribou, whale, and fish, and ties within the family are very strong. In the Caucasian family customs are usually quite different, and the BIA tries to explain these differences to both the foster parents and the native child, Mrs. Beyrer said.

To further help the child adjust, his parents are encouraged to accompany him to his new home and to remain with them for a few days.

After placement, Mrs. Beyrer said that she is available to either the foster parents, the child, or the native parents for counseling.

She noted that she is supposed to travel 40 per cent of the time but that with 35,000 square miles to cover, it is difficult to visit the native parents as often as she would like.

One problem, she said, is that the parents frequently do not answer letters of the children.

There are no financial requirements for the foster parents although the BIA would prefer that the parents not depend too heavily on the monthly check for support in case the payment is late in arriving.

Foster parents receive $174 per month for a child 13 years of age or older and $121 per month for a child 12 years old or younger. Of these amounts, the child gets $15 a month for allowance, $15 a month for clothing upkeep and with the rest the parents are to provide food, shelter, etc.