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To grow a Rainbow: Started as mobile education unit in 1972, Fleet goes the distance for child care

By: David Page The Journal Record October 1, 2014 0



Taffy Henderson, child care resource and referral manager at Rainbow Fleet in Oklahoma City. Photo by Brent Fuchs

OKLAHOMA CITY – In 1972, Margaret Loeffler founded Rainbow Fleet to promote early childhood development by providing child care providers with resources and materials.

The Montessori teacher started the Oklahoma City nonprofit by using a mobile education unit – similar to a bookmobile – to deliver learning materials, books, toys and art projects to area child care providers.

“She believed learning should be interactive,” said Carrie Bullard, who has been executive director of Rainbow Fleet since March.

Over the years, the mobile education unit was replaced with a Child Care Resource and Referral Center and services provided by Rainbow Fleet expanded.

In July, Rainbow Fleet started helping parents statewide find child care providers through a contract with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

“It is a free service for parents statewide,” Bullard said. “Any parent can call us.”

Selecting a child care provider can be difficult for parents.

“It is kind of overwhelming for people if you do not know,” she said. “You do not want to leave your baby with someone you do not know.”

A Rainbow Fleet staff member will usually spend 25 to 30 minutes on the telephone with the parents assessing their needs.

“We will usually do some research and call them back to help them find a qualified child care provider,” she said. “We try to give them at least three options.”

The child care providers are licensed through the state Department of Human Services. There are a lot of choices for parents. In Oklahoma and Cleveland counties alone, there are about 1,250 licensed child care providers, she said.

“Some provide services in their home and some are day care centers,” Bullard said.

Information is also available online. Parents can get lists of qualified child care providers in their areas.

Before July when Rainbow Fleet got the statewide contract, each of the eight DHS regions handled its own child care referrals. Rainbow Fleet was the referral agency for the region that included Oklahoma and Cleveland counties.

Since getting the statewide contract in July, Rainbow Fleet has handled more than 600 referrals, Bullard said.

Rainbow Fleet has 10 full-time employees, with five assigned to the DHS contract.

The child care providers as well as parents can use the Rainbow Fleet Child Care Resource and Referral Center at

3024 Paseo in Oklahoma City. The lending center is available to parents for an annual fee of \$40.

"We usually let them check out items for up to a month," Bullard said. "We sanitize everything every time."

The Rainbow Fleet staff can work with parents to help find the proper resources for their child.

"If they are having problems with motor skills we can help them find the proper toys and games that are appropriate," she said.

The center's resources are replenished regularly.

"In May and June we purchased about \$10,000 worth of toys to replenish our stock," Bullard said.

Rainbow Fleet also is the administrator for a child care food program.

Home day cares that agree to serve meals that follow U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines can apply to Rainbow fleet to cover the cost of the meals, she said. Money for the program comes from a federal grant.

"We have 165 different providers participating in the program," she said.

For operating funds, Rainbow Fleet relies on private donors, grants and government contracts.

The nonprofit agency has an annual funding campaign for donors that will start in October.

"We set a goal of \$10,000 through that campaign but we would like to far exceed that," Bullard said.

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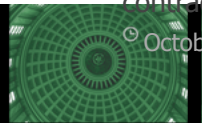
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