CATHERINE was born into a large family in Acadiana but early on was raised mostly by her grandmother. Her own parents fought all the time and could not provide financially for all their children, she says.

When Cathy was 9 years old, her grandmother passed away and there was no longer care for her. Cathy went to live with relatives for two years. But when the Office of Community Services (OCS), a state child protection agency, learned in 1985 that there were drug-related problems at her relatives' home, the agency placed Cathy in state custody.

There were no foster homes available in Acadiana for Cathy to "temporarily" move into when she was taken from her relatives' home. (By definition foster care is a program in which a child is placed with another family for a temporary period of time.) So the 11-year-old girl was put into a detention center in Baldwin for a few nights.

Cathy lay awake nights with a can of Coke in a sock for a weapon because she feared physical harm from another girl in the detention center. Everything in Cathy's possession was locked up, including her shoes and toothbrush. "If you wanted to brush your teeth, a housekeeper would unlock your cabinet and get your toothbrush," she recalls. "If you wanted an aspirin, they'd put it down your throat themselves."

Within a few days, a foster home was found in Acadia Parish. Cathy stayed there, along with five other foster children, until she was 14 years old. The father was a crawfisherman, and the mother was a homemaker. The foster parents were religious people, and they made Cathy feel welcome. There was hardly ever any fighting.

Things were going pretty well. Then one day the state sent Cathy back to her biological father for a six-month trial period. Big mistake. "He was drinking all the time," recalls Cathy. "He never knew where I was. I was smoking, I was drinking. My birth mother has been a 50-something-year-old man. She told me she'd never be able to give me the life I needed. She said she lived out in the country and couldn't drive. Poor excuse."

Next stop for Cathy on the foster care train was a home in Vermilion Parish. There were two other foster children, and Cathy describes the foster parents as "kinda weird." The mother had an obsession with cleanliness and would make the children take baths three times a day. "She was real clean," says Cathy. "I got a lot of morals when I was there."

But things didn't work out. Once, Cathy ran away. Her foster mother couldn't handle her anymore. And Cathy was tired of all the religion her foster mother was always pushing.

Once again there was no foster home available for Cathy. Once again she was put into a restrictive institution, this time a shelter in Lafayette, for a couple of weeks.

"It was like you were in prison," she reflects, curling up her legs in a chair in the dorm room and lighting a cigarette for Cathy's therapist. Cathy. "There was a gate, and you couldn't unlock it unless someone was with you. The people were nice to you. But it was just the house. And you never knew who you were sleeping next to. The girls would come and go."

Next stop: a small community in St. Landry Parish. Cathy stayed in this foster home until she was 16 years old. It was one of her favorites. The people were nice, and she learned to cook there.

"I was real cold when I moved over there," says Cathy. "I had a kinda black heart. But they took the time with me, and no one's ever taken the time to just sit down. [When I was upset] they'd say, 'You can talk now, or you can talk later. But you're going to talk before you leave this room.'"

Since then, Cathy has lived in three other foster homes. She splits her time between two of them as "rest stops" when she's not at the dorm. Under Louisiana law she can remain in foster care, with its benefits of medical care, health care and college tuition, until she reaches the age of 21 if she is in an educational or vocational program, or, until she marries. With a wedding just months away, days of foster care are numbered.

Cathy was never adopted. At one point when she was 17, OCS brought up the idea. As far as she was concerned, it was too late.

CATHERINE is not alone. Experts in the Louisiana foster care system agree that it is becoming increasingly difficult to place adolescents in foster homes, even though the number of children in foster care (of which adolescents make up about a third) has dropped from 13,000 statewide in 1986 to 7,000 in 1993.

Adolescents are often shuffled from one home to another over the years. According to the OCS, the average length of stay in the foster care system for children in Louisiana is three years. That's taking all ages into account. But adolescents are the hardest to get adopted, so the average length in foster care for them is probably longer than three years, although there are no available statistics.

"A lot of these adolescents go through the system, and they've been in 10 or 15 foster care homes. With kids like adolescent is that person going to be?" asks Don Short, regional director of Gulf Coast Teaching Family Services. They could easily end up on the streets again or in prison.

The average number of placements (homes) for children in foster care is two. So, over an average three-year period in foster care, a child is put into two different homes, not including the more restrictive shelters, state hospitals, institutions and group homes which too often serve as last resorts for troubled children when a foster home is not available.

Workers at the regional Office of Community Services in Lafayette, which covers an eight-parish region, believe it is now rare to find children staying in the foster care system for years and years. But others who work directly or indirectly with the foster care system disagree and are greatly concerned that cases like Cathy's are too often the rule rather than the exception. They see many teenagers in foster care as falling through the cracks of the system and are undesirable for adoption once it has been determined that, for their own safety, they cannot return to their natural parents.

Just how severe the shortage of homes is for adolescents is hard to say. Technically, every child in state custody must be in some kind of care, be it an overcrowded foster home or a detention center. But this is a static picture. But here's an example. Two weeks ago an adolescent staying at the Acadiana Shelter for Girls was taken from a parent's home—"too lucky," was placed in a foster home—after a five-month search by OCS to find one. She has completed the shelter and is considered a model resident when the search for a home began last November.

"On this end, we don't see a lot of kids move out of the system faster," says Anne Keller, assistant director of the shelter. "Most of the girls have been in foster care for years, and it takes months to place the kids once they've finished the program."

At Acadiana Shelter for Girls, which has a capacity for 13, two of the residents who are in their teens have been in state custody since they were less than a year old. One of these girls has officially been in 12 placements but 23, unofficially.

Karen Hale is a single mother of four adopted children. Hale was never a foster parent, but she fostered her own children, ages 7, 8, 15 and 16, through the foster care system.

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Hale is executive vice president of a bank, but her avocation is child care.
is affiliated with the Federation of Families, a parental advocacy group for children with developmental problems, and she is on the State Mental Health Council.

Two of Hail's children were in foster care for more than five years before she adopted them, the other children almost as long. One of her children had been in seven different foster homes. Her oldest child went into foster care at the age of six months but was not eligible for adoption until she was 6 years old, when her natural parents finally surrendered her. During those six years, the child never lived with her parents.

One of the biggest problems Hail sees with foster care is that the system doesn't spend enough of its budget and manpower to get children out of the system earlier. "If you have kids that average five years [her statistics] in foster care in the state of Louisiana, when they get out, you've got a child who's, in the eyes of the public, a child that's unadoptable and undesirable. Instead, the state should spend money on the front end—getting the children adopted. Their whole thrust should be to get the children out of foster care, because it's been proven that foster care is not good for the child, ultimately."

Hail says the problems overall with foster care center around untrained people, people working too many cases and a lot of case workers who don't care. Once, she says, she asked a case worker why the worker had put one of her (case) children in a home where she knew there was abuse. The case worker responded, "Because she was a difficult child, and we didn't have anywhere else to put her."

Hail advocates the state spending less money on the administrative end—the amount of paperwork involved in foster care is mind-boggling—and more money on human resources, like case workers, who by law are supposed to visit the children and foster parents monthly. "How in the world are you going to see 30 kids [a month] and give them the time, plus all the paperwork?" she asks. "So they [case workers] don't see the kids, or just see the ones they feel they have to see."

Hail, who has a degree in finance, believes that there could be a tremendous savings to the state if a permanent placement for the foster child could be sought earlier than it has been in the past. More importantly, she says, terminating parental rights sooner when it is clear the parents are not working toward reunification with their children—for example, if they aren't going through parenting classes or rehabilitation—would help the children by getting them out of the system instead of growing up in it.

"I used to say [the foster care system] made them into where they were unadoptable. If you can get them out in two years, if you can move them out, then you've got so much more of a chance of working with the child."

"A lot of these adolescents go through the system and they've been in 10 or 15 foster care homes," says Don Short. "They're not going to get a permanent home until you're 18, and maybe not even then."

Child protection in Louisiana is also moving more toward intensive home intervention services, in which workers come into the home to try to preserve the family and prevent the children from having to be removed. Perhaps most importantly, case workers can now move more expeditiously to get foster children out of the foster care system, either by working more with the natural parents in home intervention programs or putting the child up for adoption.

"The state would continue to work with the parents as long as the parents showed in some shape or fashion that they were concerned," says Ellen Trahan, case management specialist in the foster care unit at OCS.

Things have changed, says Trahan. "We're on a more intense basis now. We're sticking to the 18-month policy from day one." That policy is a much-needed kick in the rear for the slow move...
Hilda and Andrew Hebert, who have sheltered more than 60 foster children, are considered model parents in the system.

Required by federal law and enacted into the Children’s Code by the Louisiana Legislature in 1991, it mandates OCS to come up with a permanency plan for the foster child within 18 months of the child coming into state custody.

For the first 18 months, the case workers work diligently with the biological parents toward a goal of reuniting them with their child. At 18 months, OCS determines if the parents are unfit and if chances of rehabilitation in the reasonably near future are unlikely, and if it is in the child’s best interest to terminate the rights of the parents. No more half-hearted attempts at rehabilitation are put up with, at least in theory.

The 18-month deadline for a permanency plan is ideal for the younger, more adoptable children in foster care. But that still leaves the problem of adolescents.

For them, there are at least some new programs developed locally in the last few years to teach them real life skills they didn’t get enough of in foster care. One such program is the Independent Living Skills Program offered by Gulf Coast Teaching Family Services. Gulf Coast is a private, non-profit child care agency that has a contract with the state. The agency works with about 50 foster-care adolescents between ages 16 and 21 to help them make the transition to adulthood.

The federally funded program is offered on a semester basis at Gulf Coast’s office.
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on South College, and the adolescents are
trained in everything from how to balance
a checkbook to how to apply for a job.

Gulf Coast also tries to find foster
homes for adolescents referred from
Office of Youth Development (OYD),
the youth unit of the State Department of
Corrections. OYD adolescents aren’t
removed from their homes by the state
for parental abuse or neglect. They are
either status offenders or have already
been in multiple placements. But the
majority of OYD kids come from dys-
functional families. “I’d say anywhere
between 65 and 70 percent of them in
some way have been abused, either emo-
tionally, which is the hardest to prove,”
says Skipper Kelley, the program director
at Gulf Coast.

As an alternative to locking them up in
a place like LTI (Louisiana Training
Institute), “a prison for
teen-agers,” as
Don Short, the regional director of Gulf
Coast, calls it, foster homes are much bet-
ter environments for adolescents. But cur-
rently there are only 10 families working
with the agency.

“We’re trying to expand the number
of foster homes [for OYD kids] for a
number of reasons,” says Short, who is a
foster-parent himself. “There are too few
families with too much of the burden.
Also, there are kids who are being put in
more restrictive environments, like state
hospitals and institutions, in this region or
outside this region because there aren’t
enough foster homes in this region.”

Foster parents, who must be certified
after a 10-week program—receive mini-
mum subsidies for their volunteer work.
Short, among many others in the foster
care system, would like to see that
changed. He is on the Louisiana Foster
Parent Association board, which is cur-
rently working to get a “level of care” sys-
tem funded in the 1993 legislative session.

Level of care is a $4 million proposal
designed
by
OCS for an equitable system
of reimbursement to foster parents for the
expenses they incur and the time they
give to foster children. With a state bud-
get deficit in the hundreds of millions of
dollars, obtaining new funding is going to
be difficult at best.

Currently, a foster parent gets an aver-
age of between $10 and $15 a day, and
most of that money goes toward the
child’s expenses, such as an allowance,
food, clothing, etc.

“It’s hard to keep families for these
difficult kids when you’re only paying
them $10 or $15 a day,” says Short
“If
we
can get this funding, we can pay foster
parents better. They’d be more willing
to take in the kids. We could then place
more expectations on the foster parents,
like coming to training. There is no incen-
tive now for foster parents to get trained
and to take care of kids. With a level of
care system, you reward people who are
trained and have skills and who work with
more difficult kids.”

More money may be a good incentive
for more people to work with foster chil-
dren and, in particular, adolescents. But
foster parents say the main reason they
do it is for personal reward. And surpris-
ingly, many professionals, including fos-
ter parents, say they’d take an adolescent
any day over an infant or elementary
school-aged child.

Andrew Hebert, a model foster parent
in Lafayette who, along with his wife
Hilda has had over 60 foster children,
sums up the desire best: “The idea,” he
says, “is to make him feel that he’s a good
kid. And to make him believe he’s a bet-
ter person than what he’s been taught to
believe.”