SHREVEPORT (AP) - John and Sharon Hill have seen how Louisiana children linger in foster care. The 11-year-old they plan to adopt came to them as a 15-month-old. Only last year were parental rights terminated, freeing the youngster for adoption.

"We are constantly looking at different ways to recruit, how to train, how to facilitate placement, working closely with the courts. We are happy, but we want to achieve more," said Carmen Weisner, assistant secretary in the state Office of Community Services under the Department of Social Services.

For its efforts, the state recently was awarded a $109,000 federal bonus to recruit more adoptive families.

Weisner cites more aggressive recruiting of families, including foster parents, and termination filings for the Shreveport area. Louisianais accelerating adoptions, double the number since 1996. The majority of Louisiana's foster children are categorized as "special needs," which can also be a stumbling block.

The definition includes minority children, those with siblings, older children and those with medical conditions.

Statewide, 688 children are legally free for adoption, and OCS is actively recruiting homes for 314.

For the rest, relatives or foster parents have been identified as permanent homes for these children. The push to make more foster children free for adoption began in 1997 with the Adoption and Safe Families Act. That legislation was based in part on recommendations of the Clinton administration's Adoption and Safe Families report that set goals of doubling adoptions by 2002 and moving children more quickly from foster care to permanent homes.

The president's goal is 56,000 adoptions, double the number since 1996. In fiscal 1999, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported 46,000 foster children were legally adopted, topping the 1999 goal of 41,000.

Forty-two states won adoption bonuses this year, exceeding the funding set aside for the program. U.S. Sens. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, have requested a $14 million increase to cover fiscal 2000 awards.

Under the act, if a child cannot be returned to the biological parents' home, the state must come up with a plan for a permanent home within a year. Previously, the deadline was 18 months, though often longer because of court and other procedural delays.

"Now the time frame is compressed," Weisner said. "We let biological parents know that earlier on. You may have problems early on, but the children can't wait."

Some parents trying to restore their families face obstacles. Mental health and substance abuse programs often have long waiting lists.

"The difficulty we have is trying to find resources to help them work toward getting their children home," Weisner said.

Before the Adoption and Safe Families Act, children who probably wouldn't be going home faced uncertain futures. In Louisiana in 1998-99, the average length of stay in foster care was two years and three months, according to the Office of Community Services.

Long periods in foster care often mean some children grow beyond the most desirable adoption age.

Research has shown that lengthy foster care can cause more emotional and behavioral problems and learning disabilities as they may be shuffled from home to home.

"There are children, 11, 12, 13, we are still having to recruit for, though the odds of finding a family are limited," said Doug Hubbart, who recruits foster and adoptive homes for the Shreveport area. The Department of Social Services. The difficulty we have is trying to find resources to help them work toward getting their children home," Weisner said.

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Another tool is the Internet. The Department of Social Services has a Web page with photos and information on children, and the federal government is developing a national adoption Internet photo-listing service.

Other incentives in Louisiana include Medicaid cards and subsidies for legal costs and special services.

Hubbart said post-adoptive help such as professional counseling is also offered.

The goal is to provide a stable place for these children, such as John and Sharon Hill's Queensborough home, where John Hill instills in his soon-to-be adopted children the same morals and values his preacher grandfather taught him.

The children in the Hill home, ranging in ages 11 to 15, have learned education is important, surrounded by encyclopedias and with Sharon Hill, a schoolteacher.

They have learned the importance of faith, regularly attending church. They have learned the importance of family, spending time together.

"I try to teach them the values of life," Hill said. "Get a good education. Grow up to be something."