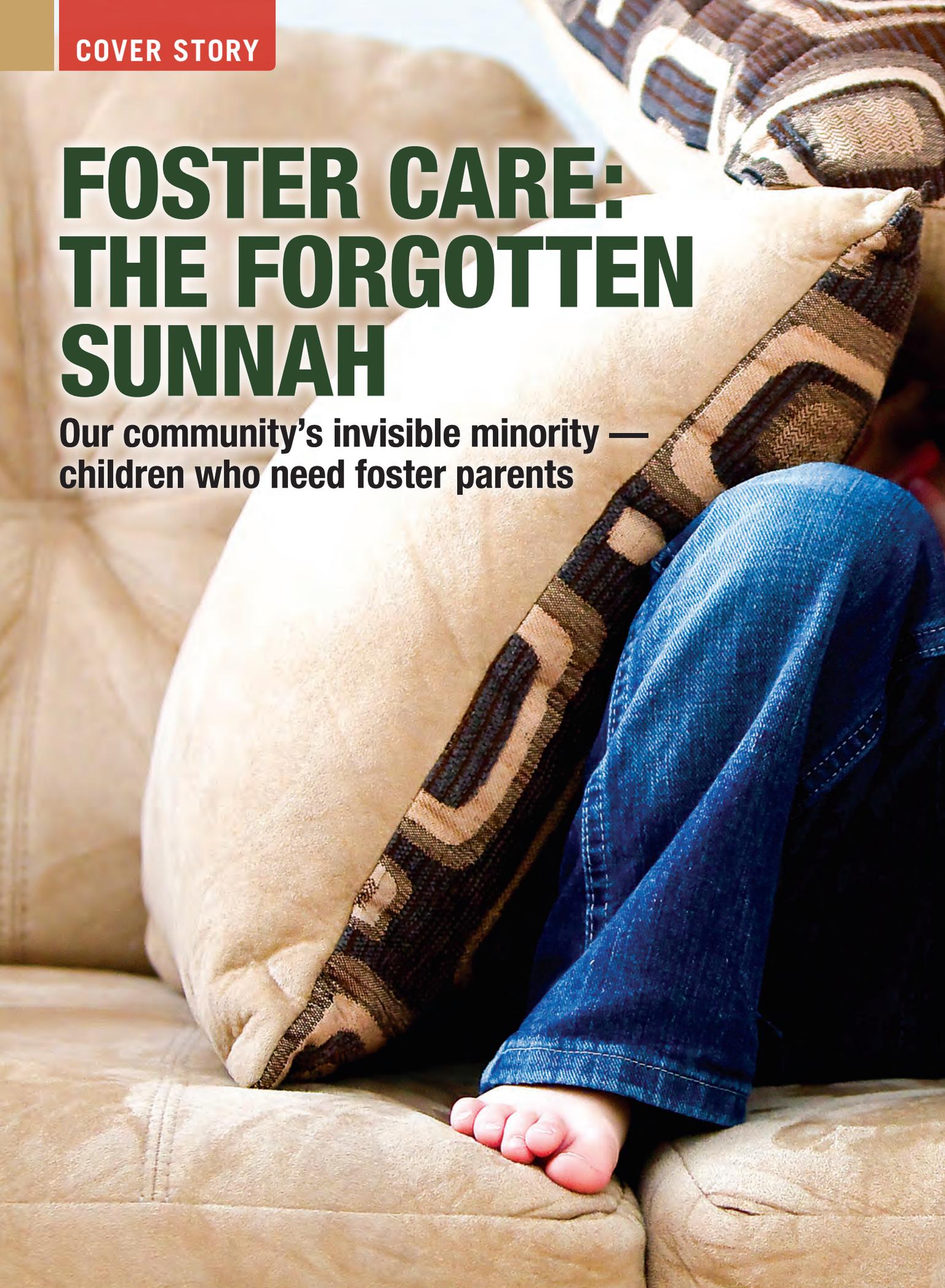


COVER STORY

FOSTER CARE: THE FORGOTTEN SUNNAH

**Our community's invisible minority —
children who need foster parents**





BY OMAMA ALTALEB

DURING FEB. 2012, SAMEENA ZAHOOR RECEIVED THE long-awaited phone call — the foster care agency had located a 5-year-old Muslim boy who needed a Muslim home. Two hours later, he walked into Zahoor's home carrying only a small backpack that contained a pair of pants, a tiny blanket and some toys the agency had given him.

"I remember how scared he looked when he first arrived, and how he refused to eat at first. When it came time for bed, my foster son wanted to go home and cried for his mother for hours," said Zahoor, co-founder of the Muslim Foster Care Association (<https://muslimfostercare.org>), a Michigan-based nonprofit that provides a support network for Muslim foster families.

Although fostering isn't easy, Zahoor and other Muslim foster parents in the U.S. are welcoming the opportunity with open arms. At the end of Fiscal Year 2016, 437,465 children were in foster care in the U.S., a number that has increased every year since 2012, according to a government report (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf>) published by the Administration for Children and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services.

While the exact number of Muslim children within the U.S. foster care system is unknown, those who work closely with the agencies say there aren't enough Muslim foster homes in which to place all of them.

Zillehuma Hasan, former executive director and a founding member of Wafa House Inc., worked with the Division of Child Protection and Permanency in New Jersey to help find temporary homes. She relates that in March 2014, Wafa House Inc. (www.wafahouse.org) heard from a state-level resource specialist that there were only 32 identified Muslim foster parents in New Jersey, only one of which spoke Arabic. The 31 others were African American.

On any given day, several Muslim children become displaced and, because there aren't enough Muslim foster homes, are placed in non-Muslim homes. While the non-Muslim community is extremely nurturing, Hasan says, its members don't have the know-how and cultural competency to raise them as Muslims.

"There are times when these children are being fed pork products, and not because these people are deliberately feeding them, but they don't know that these children are not supposed to eat pork, and sometimes these children are being taken to church," she states. "That's where I think our community really needs to step up to the plate."



which is why many Muslims living in the U.S. feel like they are raising their children alone. The burden falls entirely on the nuclear family.

She presents one possible solution: Create an extended support system in each community, similar to the one that existed during the Prophet's time, one in which each family, foster or not, can lean on each other for help. But our community's perspective and attitude toward foster care also needs to change, for "It's a blessing to have a child to take care of. It softens our hearts and changes our attitudes toward everything."

Saib, who has fostered three children, says that wanting to become a foster parent requires a mind shift. "It's not about the perfect time. It's about fulfilling arguably the most important virtue of our faith — to care for the orphaned child — and foster children fall into that category as they have no stable parents who can care for them."

Ranya Shbeib, who co-founded the Muslim Foster Care Association with Zahoor, has fostered four children consecutively and has three birth children of her own. She reports that it's been a rewarding experience for both her and her family: "It's very eye-opening. Especially I see it in my youngest child, my daughter, who has grown up fostering."

This daughter, who is now 8 years old, was once coloring with some of her friends. When one of them asked her why she was coloring her people dark shades of brown and black, she replied, "Why not? Sometimes I color my brothers brown."

"She's just so welcoming, so loving and doesn't really see the differences of color," Shbeib remarks.

Shbeib does note, however, that fostering has also been a big challenge for her birth children, for it has changed their home atmosphere and their family dynamic. "It's hard for them sometimes to grasp the bigger picture of why we are doing this, and especially when they don't see other families doing it. A lot of times, because I will encourage them with the concept of there being a lot of reward in this and how to be patient, they'll say, 'Well, how come no one else is doing it if there's a lot of reward in it?'"

Through the Muslim Foster Care Association, Shbeib and Zahoor have held many panel presentations about foster care at mosques throughout southern Michigan. Although hundreds of people have attended, the number always drops dramatically when it is time to become licensed. "It's hard because a lot of people reach out and say that they are interested, but very few people will actually go through

OVERCOMING MISCONCEPTIONS

Foster parent Yasemin Saib posits that one reason for this tragedy is that not enough imams and community leaders are addressing the issue. "Many people are made to falsely believe that fostering or adopting is prohibited in Islam, which is sheer insanity," she remarks.

Zainab Alwani, a scholar and vice president of the Fiqh Council of North America who realized that the Muslim community wasn't doing enough to address foster care, created the Orphan Care Project (<https://www.orphanproject.com>) to educate and inspire Muslims to provide care for orphaned and abandoned children through fostering and guardianship. As part of the project, she collaborated with the council and the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America to issue appropriate guidelines (<https://www.orphanproject.com/fcna-amja-guidelines-orphan-care>) to help eliminate such misconceptions.

Alwani says most people get caught up in the issue of *mahram*. According to Q. 4:23 and 24:31, a *mahram* is a blood relative and therefore can't marry the person under their guardianship. This system establishes certain rules to protect the sanctity of the family in society. However, Alwani argues that being a non-*mahram* to a potential foster child should not stop Muslims from fostering. "If you take in a child who is not a *mahram*, your responsibility is to take care of the child and provide them with everything they need. The only difference is that there are boundaries."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A FOSTER CHILD

According to Alwani, Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) created a culture in which almost every family in Madina had a foster child who was treated as one of their own biological children. But, she contends, our community has lost that spirit and compassion,

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the process and then actually foster,” Shbeib related. “It’s very disheartening. We live in big communities — very resourceful and wealthy communities.”

Like Alwani, Shbeib says she wishes people would understand that fostering is a communal obligation. “It’s a forgotten sunnah. It’s not something that just falls on one family and then we say, ‘Oh well, this family is doing it so none of us have to do it.’ You know how they say it takes a village to raise a child? Well, what if that child is a foster child?”

Zahoor’s first foster son had never attended a Friday prayer in a masjid, or the *tarawih* and Eid prayers until he was placed with her family. “These children are the unseen and unheard in our communities. They need to know that there is a large Muslim community that cares about them.”

OTHER WAYS TO HELP

Both Shbeib and Zahoor understand that not everyone is able to foster, which is why they dedicated a section of their website (<https://muslimfostercare.org/other-ways-to-help>) to ways people can help. For example, licensed families can provide the much-needed respite care for a foster family who has to go out of town or just needs a short break. As Shbeib points out, “Even if people aren’t licensed, they can help with transportation, buying things that the child needs, even mentoring or tutoring. There are so many other ways to support foster children.”

Saib, founder of the Live It Up Foundation (<http://liveitupfoundation.org>), has published four children’s books in 2016 and is working on a fifth one as a way to generate funds to support the foster children in the organization’s care.

Another way to contribute is by becoming involved in the foster care system itself. Hasan says that people can serve on their local county’s Child Placement Review Board, whose members help the presiding judge ensure that the parents are doing everything they are supposed to in order to be reunified with their biological children.

MOVING FORWARD

Shbeib is hopeful about the community’s future in this area, but cautious that it’s going to take time. “Fostering is still a relatively new topic that’s just recently coming to the surface again and being talked about again, so inshallah with time, people will start to realize the significance of the need for people to be licensed. And then, hopefully, people will start acting on that.”

Saib agrees. “Slowly but surely, I am hopeful that more Muslim families will go the extra mile to foster children.” *zh*

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Would You Adopt Muhammad?

Unfortunately, there are nowhere near enough Muslim foster families in the U.S. to meet the needs of Muslim children



BY NAAZISH YARKHAN

SOME CHILDREN, THROUGH NO FAULT of their own, find themselves in situations that would emotionally and mentally traumatize even adults. Being removed from the only home one has known is stressful enough, but it may very well be amplified when children are placed in homes that aren't culturally similar or where practicing their faith is a challenge. With families being targeted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other authorities, in today's climate children are at even greater risk of being left without parents. For a community whose very Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) was an orphan raised first by his grandfather and then his uncle, being a foster family would seem to be a most natural way for Muslims to practice their faith.

"Muslim children are not immune from homelessness, and homelessness among Muslims is not restricted to refugees," says Abdullah Mitchell, executive director of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (<https://www.ciogc.org>). "Muslim families, like other families in this country, experience divorce, financial

hardships, mental or physical disabilities or even death. In these situations parents lose the ability to provide for their children, and that inability can be temporary or long term." He elaborates, "When extended family members cannot or will not care for them, these Muslim children become wards of the state, and, as wards of the state, options for care are limited. Unfortunately, there are not enough registered Muslim families to meet the demand the State of Illinois has for Muslim foster families."

The need of the hour in Illinois, as well as across the U.S., could not be stated more clearly.

Foster parenting and the necessary requirements for certification were on many minds as more than 150 community members packed the Islamic Center of Wheaton (Ill.) on a cold February night this year for ICNA Relief's "Learn What it Takes to be a Foster Parent" workshop. Many had heard of the organization's success at helping the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS; <https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/Pages/default.aspx>) find a Muslim foster home for two children of Jordanian descent/origin in January 2018: a 9-year-old boy and his 12-year-old sister.

DCFS's earlier outreach to the Muslim community resulted in ICNA Relief Chicago's first workshop, held in 2016. With ICNA Relief's goal being stronger communities, creating awareness and helping Muslim families learn more about becoming foster parents seemed timely. The "Learn What it Takes to be a Foster Parent" workshop offered a panel featuring DCFS Resource/Recruitment Specialist Chuck Dorothy and Imam Hassan Aly of Mecca Center (<http://meccacenter.org>), Willowbrook, Ill. The latter provided an Islamic perspective on foster care and together they answered almost an hour's worth of questions. Over half of the attendees signed up with DCFS to schedule a follow-up call to learn more. By 2017, that one workshop had resulted in four families becoming foster parents. DCFS representatives were impressed with the Muslim community's interest and the urgency.

START WHERE YOU ARE

While Muslim social service organizations across the U.S. offer several initiatives, help with getting licensed as foster parents often isn't one of them. Two foster mothers, Ranya Shbeib and Sameena Zahoor, initiated the Bloomfield Hills, Mich.-based Muslim Foster Care Association (MFCA; <https://muslimfostercare.org>) in 2016 when they found themselves at a loss for foster parent resources in the local Muslim community. Their organization assists Muslims in the foster care system, helps families who are interested in getting licensed and provides the Muslim community with ways to help foster children even if they aren't interested in becoming foster families.

Like ICNA Relief, their first steps were creating awareness in the community in collaboration with local imams. Their presentation at ISNA in 2015 was very appropriately called "Would You Adopt Muhammad?"

Foster children may have one or both parents, but are often neglected, abused and at-risk should they continue to live under the same roof. MFCA works closely with Samaritas (<https://www.samaritas.org>) to connect with Muslims in the foster care system. Besides Eid drives for them, MFCA also helps Muslim foster families adjust to their new responsibilities.

EVEN ONE PERSON CAN TOUCH MANY LIVES

When children are removed from their homes, it is literally with just the clothes on their backs.

Speaking to the idea that even one person can make a difference, attorney Farrah Qazi of Aurora, Ill., mother of four, raises donations to prepare suitcases filled with clothing, bed sheets, blankets and other essentials.

“One of the driving forces for me to pursue the legal profession was the ability to help children, specifically orphans and foster children,” says Qazi. “The more I read

the need for homes is dire, especially for sibling groups of three or more children, teens and Spanish-speakers. Singles, married individuals and empty nesters, among others, can qualify to be potential foster parents. Besides providing a stipend to the foster parent once they take in a child, the state also pays for the child’s summer camps, therapists and even activities.

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about it, the more convinced I became that there is a void that can be filled by good people stepping up and helping out. Once we recognize that any neglected child is our collective responsibility, we can progress as a society. I do my best ... I advocate, represent and care for needy children because I take their suffering personally. When a child suffers, it means we have failed, in some way, as adults. All of us hold that responsibility. We can be observant neighbors and caring and trusting adults whom children should feel comfortable with. As a lawyer (<https://www.qazilawoffices.com>), I lend my voice to kids lost in the mad shuffle of divorce or those who don’t have anyone to advocate on their behalf for their health and education. I am a firm supporter of CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates; www.casaforchildren.org) and Together We Rise (www.togetherwerise.org). Both organizations allow ordinary citizens to create a direct impact into the lives of children. And as a Muslim, I take this onus even more seriously because our Quran and our beloved Prophet repeatedly state how critical it is that we care for orphans.”

Given that we will be held accountable for our blessings, any and all efforts to make a difference count. Pajama Program (pajamaprogram.org) is another effort to reach kids in shelters. You can contribute books and new pajamas, even read to them.

WHO CAN BE A FOSTER PARENT?

With thousands of children in the system,

Dorothy stresses that potential foster parents can specify the age, race, faith and gender of the child they can best care for. Certified foster parents also have the right to decline to take in a child. He spoke of a foster family that accepted an infant only to be disinclined to adjust their schedules — they returned the infant 10 days later. “Being a foster parent is more than offering food, clothing and shelter,” he said. “It’s in the child’s best interest not to be bounced from home to home, so we want foster parents to be really sure about who they can raise.”

AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

From an Islamic perspective, adopting a child is laudable and being a foster parent even more so, given that it impacts the entire family, notes Imam Hassan. When it comes to opposite gender interaction between adults and adolescent children, Imam Hassan mentions ways to show affection that need not include physical contact: showing interest in a child’s interests or activities, listening to what’s on their mind, reading together, talking gently and sitting close.

Having the child accompany their foster family to a place of worship, especially if he or she can’t be left home alone, is acceptable, Dorothy remarked. That said, “Islamically, we can suggest that our children observe certain religious practices, but we can’t force them to do it. Similarly, while foster children can observe us, we cannot force them to

participate in our religious practices,” added Imam Hassan.

Aliyah Banister, a licensed therapist specializing in the Muslim American population, touches on the psychological repercussions of unstable homes and spoke of Muslim American children in the foster care system. She discusses the importance of them developing a sense of attachment, especially in the early years, and how related neurological wiring atrophies when that bond is absent. “But,” she adds, “the brain is very elastic and even teens and tweens from troubled backgrounds and those facing behavioral problems can flourish when shown love, patience and understanding. That’s why I am not just a counselor for young children, but for teens as well.”

In the Muslim community, there is particular interest in fostering refugee children. So long as a refugee child is in the system, they are available for placement in certified foster homes. However, if a child is overseas, the application process is completely different and independent of DCFS.

WHAT IS FICTIVE KIN?

Rules vary with states. In Illinois, under the Fictive Kin program, families do not have to be currently licensed as foster parents if they have an existing relationship or emotional connection with the child, whether as a neighbor, teacher or community member. The children can be placed with them. However, when DCFS is looking for families with whom to place these children, their names cannot be divulged due to rules governing confidentiality. So how did an organization like ICNA Relief help find a home that may have a relationship with the Jordanian children when they had practically no personal information about them?

“We asked members of our community to please spread the word, to help identify a family who may know these children. If the leaders, imam or anyone in the community knows of a family where there are issues, chances are they are likely to have heard of these children. There are definitely Allah’s blessings involved in making this happen,” said Dr. Saima Azfar, director, ICNA Relief Chicago. 

Naazish YarKhan, an internationally published writer, is director of www.writersstudio.us and a college essay coach.

NOTE: Those interested in becoming foster parents should visit the websites of their state and county social services to download and complete application forms and requirements for foster parenting.