

# .....STEP.....BY.....STEP.....

to

## Foster-Family Training

THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION HOSPITAL at American Lake, Washington, since 1947 has placed more than 700 disabled psychotic veterans in foster homes in communities within a 50-mile radius of this 904-bed psychiatric hospital. Our sponsors—over 500 of them—range from a retired doctor of medicine and retired military officers to housewives who barely passed the fourth grade in school, and they include a generous sprinkling of former practical nurses and hospital aides.

In the early years of our foster family care program, sponsor-training was limited to an hour-long annual meeting, followed by a tea, at which sponsors were exhorted to carry out instructions prepared by our clinical social worker. Few members of the hospital staff bothered to attend these meetings. Further sponsor-training took place in the field on an individual basis, and as problems arose. However, as our placement program expanded, it became apparent that both patients' and sponsors' needs called for a more progressive, ongoing program that would unify the sponsors into a group and bring them into closer cooperation with the hospital.

In the spring of 1960 a foster family care committee composed of the chief of the social work service, the supervisor of outpatient social service, and a clinical social worker undertook to study the problem and to plan such a program. Some of our early steps toward a successful training program were faltering, but, step by step, we have improved our tools and techniques for achieving the best possible patient care in foster homes. The purpose of this article is to share with other psychiatric hospitals our experiences in the education and motivation of foster family care sponsors.

The committee planned the next sponsors' meeting as a lakeside picnic, but even in this lovely setting, the group appeared tense and unbending and exhibited open ambivalence. Some of the sponsors objected to the idea of leaving their homes, particularly in the middle of the afternoon, when they ordinarily would be preparing the evening meal. Each appeared to be concerned only with the seriousness of "my problems" and the difficulty of

caring for "my patients." They stared at one another and at the speaker, who had difficulty in holding the group's attention.

But at intermission, a heavy, 5-gallon coffee urn, which the two authors could not lift, saved the day. Seeing their plight, a buxom sponsor lifted the urn to the table with one hand and thereby gave the sponsors an edge over the hospital's professional staff. Friendliness and camaraderie began to pervade the group, and the hospital director, who spoke during the second hour, was received with warmth and attention. The group had cohered, and staff and sponsors were now working together in a common effort to give our patients better care in foster homes.

Tension reappeared at the following meeting, held in the winter of 1960-61, because a recently enacted city ordinance had sharply restricted the number of patients each sponsor could lawfully maintain in her home. However, the hospital staff cleared

*Award for service: Mrs. Velma Gammill, Mrs. Pamela Anderson (representing her grandmother, Mrs. Effie McGee), and Mrs. Mary Carlson, receiving awards for their service as foster-home sponsors on the 10th anniversary of the foster-home program at American Lake Veterans Administration Hospital, Washington. Each sponsor had had patients residing in her home without a break for 10 years or longer.*

