

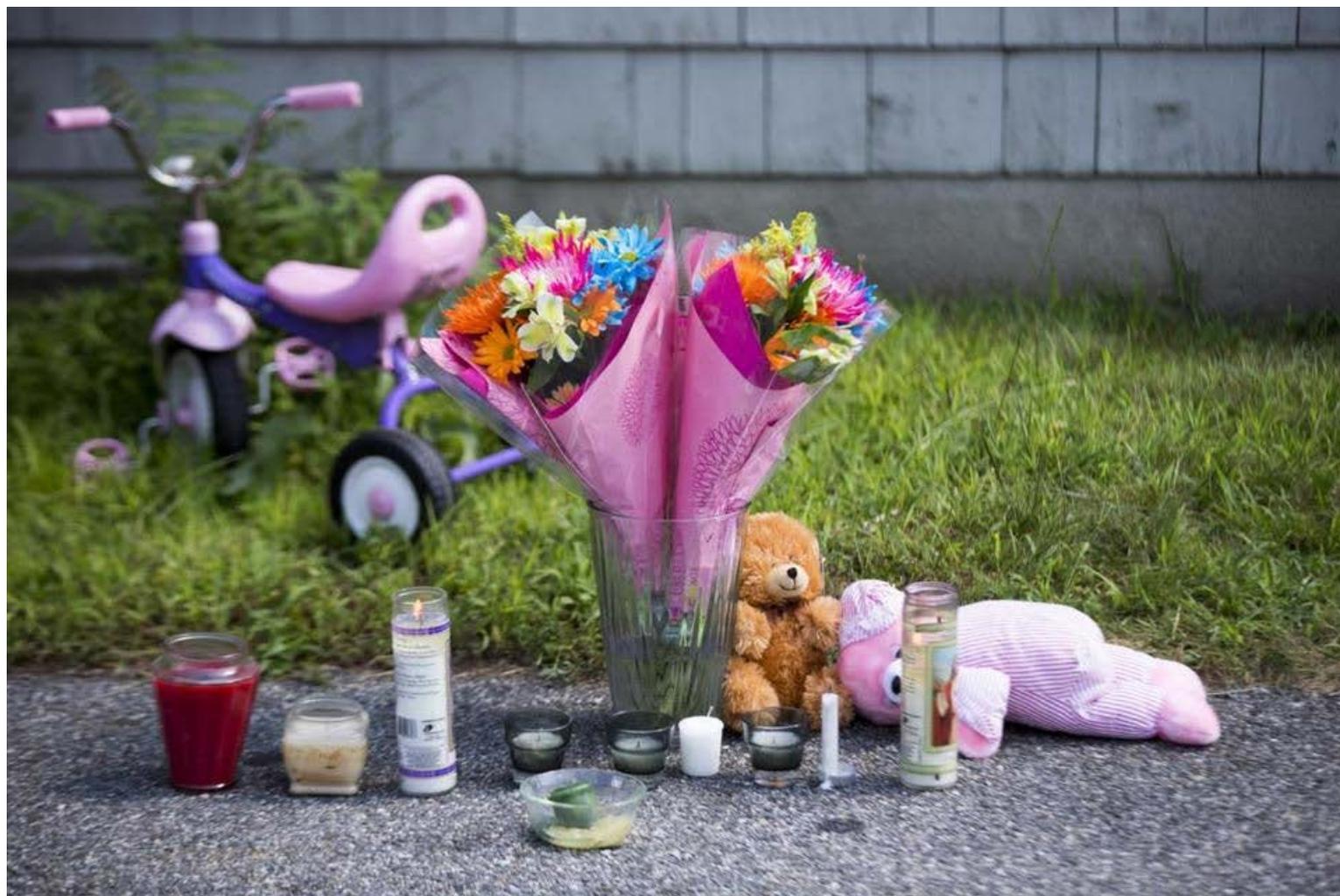
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KEITH BEDFORD/GLOBE STAFF

A memorial sat in front of the home where two children, one of whom died, were removed by paramedics in Auburn.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 17, 2015

The death of a 2-year-old, the hospitalization of a 22-month-old, and the precautionary hospitalization of a 6-month-old, all of whom were in [foster care at an Auburn home](#), have put a spotlight on how the foster care system in Massachusetts works and what it does to protect children.

There are about 8,000 foster children of all ages — from infants to adolescents — in Massachusetts and 400,000 in the United States, according to [AdoptUSKids](#), a program run jointly by the federal government and a national adoption nonprofit.

Children enter the foster care system if the state is unable to find suitable placement within the family.

Here is a quick overview of how the system works in Massachusetts.

What do you need to do to become a foster parent?

In Massachusetts, foster parents must be at least 18 years old and able to provide adequate, safe living arrangements for the child and all other household members. The parents must also have a stable source of income to support themselves and the child, [according to state officials](#).

Dozens of 911 calls made at home where girl died

“I’m not going to be satisfied until we get to the point where this sort of thing doesn’t happen,” the governor said.

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A person's relationship status — whether he or she is single, married, partnered, divorced, or widowed — does not matter.

A prospective foster parent must complete training — a few hours over the course of several weeks — where he or she learns about the difficulties faced by foster children and the challenges of caring for them, in addition to how to communicate with the children, build their self-esteem, and discipline them.

Prospective foster parents must also provide references, and everyone older than 14 in the household must undergo a background record check as part of the application process.

Having a criminal record, a physical disability, or mental health condition does not lead to automatic disqualification.

A prospective foster parent and other household members are interviewed by social workers in their homes before a decision is made on a foster care license for the home.

The state Department of Children and Families, which oversees the approval of foster parents, says on its website it “is looking for people who feel ready to face the challenge of parenting.”

“You need to be a good communicator and problem solver; you must be able to express, accept and understand feelings — both yours and the child's,” the department says. “You need to have the ability to support the physical and emotional needs of a child in crisis. Having a sense of humor will also be helpful to you as a foster parent.”

In addition to longer-term foster parenting, there are shorter-term options, including being an emergency foster parent who commits to caring for a child for between one and three days while arrangements are made to place the child in longer-term care, or being a “respite parent” who cares for children for as few as 10 days each year to give a break to parents who are full-time foster parents.

What happens after foster parents are licensed?

Foster parents are given stipends from the state to help cover daily expenses for each foster child placed with them.

For more than half of families, the stipends amount to between \$20 and \$25 per day per child, in addition to between \$185 and \$282 per quarter to cover clothing costs and a \$150 annual payment for birthday and holiday expenses.

About a quarter of foster parents receive higher daily amounts of about \$50 per day because they are caring for a child who qualifies for intensive foster care services. Another 15 percent of foster parents receive the basic daily rates, plus an additional \$7.50 per hour up to 40 hours per week to care for a child who has a higher level of needs.

The state also covers each foster child's medical and dental insurance coverage.

A social worker, who can provide direct service to the child and visits monthly, is assigned by the state, which also offers parents other resources, including support via a 24-hour help line.

Foster parents must complete a certain amount of training each year to maintain their license.

Children typically stay in foster care for three to 18 months, the department says. The department aims to keep siblings together.

A foster home can have no more than six children — foster or otherwise — living in it.

The Department of Children and Families says that its goal is to return the child to his or her original home, and in most cases that happens. While in the foster care system, children typically remain in touch with their families.

If it is not possible to return a child to his or her original home, the department will seek a family he or she can live with permanently.



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