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Some Oppose Foster Placement With Gay Couple
Kenneth J. Cooper, Globe Staff

The state's approval of two gay men as foster parents to two young boys has caused some of their neighbors in Roxbury's Highland Park section to express objections and ask wrenching questions about social and legal issues.

Spokesmen for the Department of Social Services, which monitors 6300 foster children, said state regulations do not bar homosexuals from becoming foster parents but described such placements as rare. "We can't discriminate based on anything," Social Services Comr. Marie A. Matava said. Rev. Thomas Payne, Unitarian pastor of the First Church in Roxbury, yesterday said the couple had received foster custody of two brothers, about ages 2 and 3, two weeks ago. Payne said he wrote a recommendation for one of the men, a parishioner, and a Catholic priest at St. Joseph's Church in Roxbury had recommended the other.

"What we're dealing with is a very stable family in the community who is interested, concerned and willing to provide a foster home for children," Payne said. "I don't think there's really anything to fear."

However, some neighbors disagreed. "I'm completely opposed to it," Ben Haith, a Highland Park activist, said of the foster placement. "I see it ultimately as a breakdown of the society and its values and morals."

Fletcher H. Wiley, a prominent lawyer who lives atop Fort Hill, was taken aback when informed of the placement. "They did what? That's crazy. You got to be kidding me," he said. "I never heard of the state doing it before," said Edna Langley, who has operated a day-care center in lower Roxbury for three decades. "They make such issues with me about minor things that make no difference - why would they do that? They pass these children around like they're nothing."

Haith and Wiley expressed tolerance toward others' sexual preference while criticizing the placement. Highland Park has had a noticeable number of gay residents for some years. "I would say this situation falls below what is normal and healthy," Wiley said. "And I am by no means disparaging the lifestyle of someone who has a sexual preference different from my own." The Department of Social Services, citing privacy laws, would not confirm the placement. Both men declined to comment when reached by telephone yesterday.

Matava said the department bases foster-care decisions on "parenting ability to nurture and provide basic needs of a child. We don't have any arbitrary definitions of what does or does not include families in this sense. A family does not have a particular definition, it includes single people - we have a considerable number of single grandmothers."

Wiley branded Matava's explanation "nonsense. To not make any judgment is in fact making a judgment. Is there any place where a line can be drawn, below which it would not be considered healthy for the development of young children?"

Wiley said he was unsure about the legalities of screening homosexuals out.

Rev. Graylan Ellis-Hagler, Unitarian pastor of The Church of the United Community in Highland Park, said his church council planned to discuss the foster placement at its meeting last night. "My concern, quite frankly, is that the issue is being made more explosive than it really is," Ellis-Hagler said.

Spokesmen for the Department of Social Services said the placement was probably made by the area office at the Solomon Carter Fuller Center in the South End. Margaret Cruise, a DSS spokeswoman, said social workers ordinarily do not question foster-parent applicants about their sexual preference. However, she said, if the sexual-preference issue comes up during the screening process, the case is referred to and reviewed by the central office.

Cruise said she did not know how many foster placements had been made with gay couples. "There is no mechanism to monitor that," she said. "We don't delve into a person's sexuality."