

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Rhode Island Foster Parents Association Honors Foster Parents
For Contributions and Dedication**

500 Foster Parents Honored, and Individual Awards Presented to R.I. State Representative Mary Ann Shallcross Smith, Jim and Robin Vallese, Trisha Molloy and Michael and Patricia Lill

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**West Warwick, R.I., MAY 8, 2009** - Tonight, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and the Rhode Island Foster Parents Association host the 23rd Annual Appreciation Dinner to honor more than 500 foster parents, child welfare professionals and others for their service and dedication to Rhode Island's foster care programs.

"In honor of National Foster Care month and the 1,253 foster families in Rhode Island, we are so thrilled to gather and celebrate the volunteer families that step forward to provide safe, loving and stable homes to the vulnerable children and youth of Rhode Island," said Patricia Martinez, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families. "There are more than 1,345 children currently in foster homes in RI, and tonight we celebrate the important role foster parents have in providing safe, stable, nurturing and loving environments for these children. "We not only celebrate all foster parents, but also to recognize and award the dedication and service of four champions for children," Martinez added.

Lisa Guillette, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Foster Parents Association, stated, "While National Foster Care Month shines a light on the tireless efforts of foster families to provide temporary shelter and security to children in the custody of DCYF, tonight is also a time to reflect on the tremendous need for more families like those being honored to ensure that every child in Rhode Island has a loving, supportive family." The Annual Appreciation Dinner provides foster parents the opportunity to socialize and network. Door prize raffles were generously donated by DCYF, CVS Caremark, Copy World Printing and the Rhode Island State Grange .

The program starts at 6 p.m. at the West Valley Inn, 4 Blossom Street, West Warwick. Tickets are invitation only. Credentialed and working media are invited to attend.

**Award Recipients**

*John H. Chafee Award for Excellence in Foster Care*

Jim and Robin Vallese of Narragansett will be honored with the *John H. Chafee Award for Excellence in Foster Care*. Nominated by DCYF worker Tamara Martone, the Vallese family is being recognized for their excellence in supporting teens in care, particularly those youth with complex medical needs. Foster parents since 1993, the Vallese family have three biological children, have adopted two sons from foster care – both with severe special needs and both dependent on wheelchairs, and continue to open their hearts, home and family to new foster children who have significant special medical and related disabilities. Jim and Robin Vallese provide loving, nurturing, and safe homes to children and youth with special needs who otherwise would live in medical and residential institutions. As a result, these children have the opportunity to not only experience the joy of being a part of a family, but also get to enjoy the everyday experiences of life that they would otherwise never know, such as swimming in a pool, going to the beach, and enjoying family backyard activities.

The Vallese family has experienced the joy of seeing the successes and achievements of the children in their care, as well as the sorrows that can occur as a parent. In 2002, their adopted son passed away from medical complications. This devastating loss was compounded by the loss of a foster child in 2008 for whom they had cared for since 2005. The foster child suffered from a rare, congenital, terminal illness that required care 24 hours a day 7 days of week. While the child's illness progressed, the Vallese family opened their hearts to his biological mother and sisters to provide them with comfort and support.

The Vallese family continually sacrifices and considers the needs of others to provide compassionate and committed care to children and youth in the custody of DCYF.

*Leslie Vargas Lifetime Achievement Award*

Michael and Patricia Lill of Warwick will receive the *Leslie Vargas Lifetime Achievement Award* for their continued and sustained dedication to providing loving and nurturing homes to children in the custody of DCYF and for their willingness to provide permanent families to these children. Michael and Patricia Lill became foster parents over a decade ago and today have 4 adult biological children. In 2004, the Lills adopted a sibling group of 4 children, and in 2005, they adopted another child into their family. The Lill's continue to foster pre-school children and currently care for three foster children in their home.

The Lills are long-term friends and supporters of the Rhode Island Foster Parents Association, and helped establish the Association's first website, and refurbished and donated computers to the Association for foster families who need them.

*RIFPA Award of Excellence*

Also honored will be The Honorable Mary Ann Shallcross Smith, the newly elected Representative for District 26. Representative Shallcross Smith will receive the

*Rhode Island Foster Parents Association Award of Excellence* for over thirty years of service to improving the lives of children. Representative Shallcross Smith began her child care career in 1973 as a young mother and as a home day care provider . Her home day care has grown into a company comprised of seventeen early learning centers, five school-age-after school programs and a summer camp program. Her love and commitment continues to drive her to work to ensure that children, youth, and families have quality child care and education available.

In addition to an impressive professional and educational career, Representative Shallcross Smith has a long and continued history of voluntary community service ranging from school committees to serving on the board of various organizations – including a decade of service with Rhode Island Foster Parents Association Board of Directors, serving in the roles of member, vice president and president.

*RIFPA's DCYF Worker of the Year Award*

Trisha Molloy of Cranston is a worker in the Department's Providence office. Ms. Molloy is being recognized for her passion for social work and for successfully achieving permanency for vulnerable children and infants. Molloy has three years prior experience working in the mental health field. Since joining DCYF in 2006, she has developed and presented department-wide training programs about engagement techniques, family-centered practices and strength-based work with families. Ms. Molloy graduated from St. Mary Academy Bay View in 1999 and then obtained a degree in Psychology, with a minor in Sociology from the University of Rhode Island in 2003.

About the Rhode Island Foster Parents Association

The Rhode Island Foster Parents Association is a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to provide education and other forms of support to families that provide substitute care and to the community at large, in order to further the cause of children who cannot live with their parents.