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## Sect Children Face Another World, but Still No TV

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#) and DAN FROSCH

SAN ANTONIO — Workers at the Children’s Shelter on this city’s gritty west side began this week to remove anything and everything colored red from the walls, the floors, even from their clothes.

The shelter’s president, Jack Downey, said he was not sure, exactly, what was wrong with red, only that state officials had told him to get rid of it in preparing for the children of a fundamentalist [polygamy](#) sect who would be coming his way as their odyssey through the [Texas](#) child welfare system began.

But getting the red out is only the beginning. Forget bologna and white bread for lunch, too. Because the children, from the [Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#), or F.L.D.S., have never eaten processed foods, the new shelter mantra is whole grains and fresh vegetables. Because they have never been to public school, the equivalent of [home schooling](#) will be established in shelters. Because they have never watched television, televisions will remain off.

Then there is the issue of prairie dresses for the girls.

“Wal-Mart doesn’t sell them,” Mr. Downey said.

Good intentions toward the 462 children seized by the state this month in the raid on the [Yearning for Zion ranch](#) in Eldorado, a small town three hours northwest of here, are being expressed everywhere these days.

State officials say that their long-term goal is reunification of the families torn asunder in an investigation into the possibility that under-age girls at the ranch were forced to marry, and that extraordinary steps are being taken to minimize the shock of foster care and shelter life as the case continues to unfold. Families across Texas have raised their hands to adopt the children or to volunteer as foster parents.

“We’re not going to throw them in the middle of the pond in an alien world,” said Mr. Downey at the Children’s Shelter, where 22 children arrived on Friday, none of them over age 6. “We’re going to stick our toe in the water and walk together — we’re going to be very, very careful.”

But the hard reality, child advocacy experts and foster parents say, is that the children — deeply isolated from much of modern culture all their lives — are being flung headlong into places like this from here to Amarillo that they cannot begin to understand.

And the Texas child welfare system, those experts and insiders say — underfinanced and understaffed in the best of times, dysfunctional in the worst — can do only so much to make the road easier.

A damning 2004 state report found that the system was overwhelmed with caseloads and staff turnover, that children with violent criminal records were being mixed in the general foster-care population, and that medically fragile children were often under served.

A study in 2006 by the Texas Department of Health Services said that more than half of all foster children ages 13 to 17 were being given psychotropic drugs to control behavior. And a dire shortage of foster home beds means that at least 500 foster children were forced to sleep one night or more in a state office building in 2007, according to a report last fall by a nonprofit legal group, Texas Appleseed, which advocates what it calls social and economic justice.

Some child welfare experts say the risks are great that Texas could fail the children of the sect, compounding and exacerbating whatever damage, if any, that they suffered in their lives before the raid. The state seized the children after officials said they had received a call from inside the Zion ranch from a girl who called herself Sarah and who said she was 16 and being abused by her middle-aged husband. The girl has still not been found.

“We could have a situation where the cure is worse than the original problem,” said Richard LaVallo, a lawyer in Austin who has represented children for 25 years. “I think that really categorizes what could happen if we don’t do this right.”

Mr. LaVallo, among other experts, is critical of the state’s decision to use large group shelters across Texas for the children, who range in age from infancy to 17. Traditional foster homes with real parental figures instead of shift workers and regimented institutional rules would be a better choice, those critics say.

State officials and some other child welfare experts say Texas was right to throw out the old best-practice playbook in this instance. Group shelters, they say, will allow the children to support and reinforce one another through the inevitable trauma of separation and transition. A traditional middle-class foster home, they say, would be even more of a shock to an F.L.D.S. child, especially because many such homes in Texas are run by religiously minded Baptists and Presbyterians.

The sect members, who call themselves Mormons, broke off from the mainstream Mormon Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based in Salt Lake City, more than a century ago after the Mormons disavowed polygamy.

As for the color red, some F.L.D.S. members believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth wearing red robes — the color is reserved for him alone, according to a primer on the sect by the Utah State attorney general's office, which Texas officials have used in the raid's aftermath.

“We want them to remain in their culture while we learn fully what's happened to them,” said Darrell Azar, a spokesman for the Department of Family and Protective Services, which was granted indefinite custody of the children by a State District Court judge last week. The judge, Barbara Walther, ordered that each child be assigned a lawyer from among a pool of volunteers around the state.

On Tuesday, the state began moving the children from San Angelo, about 45 miles from the Zion ranch, where they had been held in a makeshift shelter at a multipurpose domed coliseum. Mr. Azar and other state officials would not say exactly where the children were going or how many might be coming to San Antonio.

“With this population, we have to do things differently than we would for a child that comes out of downtown Houston — what that fully entails, we're still working out,” he said.

But state officials also know that the children cannot stay in large group settings like the Children's Shelter forever. Ninety days is the legal limit in a traditional shelter, though a court order this week by Judge Walther, who is overseeing the case, said discussions would be undertaken about longer-term care.

Another unresolved issue is visiting rights. Parents with children in foster care are entitled to visits, usually under supervision — but most children taken from their parents are also usually at least in the same county, not hundreds of miles away. Officials at the Department of Family and Protective Services said that plans were being developed to help mothers in the sect reach their children and perhaps to help the mothers find places to stay as well, but that nothing had been settled on.

A spokesman for the department, Chris Van Deusen, said that the last busload of children left San Angelo on Friday afternoon for their new temporary homes. He said that 17 adult women with infants under 12 months had been moved together to one location together, and that mothers under 18 were also being kept together with their children, but he did not know how many teenage mothers there were.

Meanwhile, traditional foster homes — the presumed next step in the F.L.D.S. diaspora — are waiting. Here in San Antonio, the Block family has already volunteered.

“I told the boys the situation and said, ‘What do you think about helping out some of these kids?’ and they immediately said yes,” said Roy Block, who also serves as executive director of the

Texas Foster Family Association, referring to his two sons. “In fact they even offered to give up their rooms.”

The Texas Foster Family Association is a nonprofit group that receives public and private financing.

Mr. Block and his wife, Judi, first took in their two sons, Thomas, 14, and George, 11, who are brothers, as foster children, then later adopted them. The boys entered the foster-care system about five years ago, after they came home from school one day to find their father being arrested in the murder of their mother.

The Blocks are Baptists but said they would respect the culture and traditions of the sect’s children and do everything in their power to make them feel at home.

“We would hope to show them one day that the world is not all bad, that there are a lot of good people,” Mr. Block said. “We’d try to explain to them why this happened, that they’re victims, that they didn’t do anything wrong.”

Dan Frosch reported from San Antonio, and Kirk Johnson from Denver.