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COMMENTARY

July 3**State should act now to reform child welfare financing****COMMENTARY Joan L. Benso**

NEARLY 20,000 children live in the foster care system in Pennsylvania on any given day because they have been abused or neglected.

In Luzerne County more than 750 children are living in foster care. The General Assembly can pass child welfare financing reform this year that would help improve outcomes for children in foster care across the state, but some legislators say it can wait.

Foster care children cannot wait any longer.

The state Department of Public Welfare (DPW) is advancing a proposal that aims to help more children find permanent families and to reduce the number of children who enter foster care. It would create a set of financial incentives that would drive counties to increase home and community-based services that help keep kids safe and living in permanent families.

The largest cost driver in child welfare spending is Pennsylvania's over-reliance on placement of children who enter the foster care system in group homes and institutions. More than 25 percent of Pennsylvania's children live in these settings – far exceeding the national average. In Luzerne County, this represents about 100 children.

Research shows that foster children placed in congregate care settings experience poorer social and educational outcomes than children placed in family foster homes. To make matters worse, it costs about \$50,000 more each year to place a child in a congregate setting.

The new proposal is the kind of change legislators need to embrace in tough budget times – one that saves us money and produces better results.

Luzerne County is engaged in positive efforts to assure that every child has a safe and permanent family to call his or her own by working to engage extended family members to help support the child when birth parents cannot be part of decision making. This effort is supported in the proposal through special grants for best practices. In addition, under this legislation, counties that improve conditions for children and save money doing so will receive performance awards.

Making the proposal even better is the fact that it is revenue neutral – meaning that it will not cost the state additional money. It would use the same amount of funds currently spent on child welfare, but use them more wisely. This is an important consideration during one of the most difficult budget sessions in Pennsylvania history.

The measure needs to be passed with the 2009-2010 Pennsylvania state budget, if not before. Under current child welfare law, counties must submit their budget requests for the following year by Aug. 15. Delaying passage of this measure by even just a few months will delay implementation of the changes by a full fiscal year.

Yet, some legislators say child welfare financing reform can wait. Can it? If we could do something now that would improve the lives of thousands of our most vulnerable, why wouldn't we?

Abused and neglected children shouldn't have to wait any longer for a safe family to call their own. The General Assembly should act on this important proposal immediately.

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Joan L. Benso is president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). To learn more about this proposal, visit this Web address: www.porchlightproject.org/pdfs/faqs.pdf.

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