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Opinion

## Editorial Support of foster-care amendment urged

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The continued wrangling in Harrisburg over the annual, seemingly futile, attempt to pass a timely budget has led to a flow of letters and pleas from supporters of programs in danger of losing cost-of-living increases or, at worst, facing budget cuts.

While most of the programs stating their case for Pennsylvania funds provide good reasons for continued support, a lack of state revenue indicates cuts are unavoidable.

One program, though, is not asking for more money. It's unique approach is requesting funds be provided in a more accountable way.

Foster care is one function of the child welfare system in Pennsylvania. An amendment to SB 850, being discussed by legislative leaders during this budget process, has the potential to increase positive outcomes for kids in the foster-care system and to make individual counties accountable for initiating and following up on services.

Child welfare is state managed and county administered in Pennsylvania. The state's 25 percent placement of children in institutional care greatly exceeds the national 17 percent average.

The new child-welfare financing proposal wants to help reduce children in foster care by 20 percent by the end of next year. The way to do that, according to the Department of Public Welfare, is to increase state support to counties that place more children in home settings rather than congregate care settings.

Counties would receive financial rewards for high performance in achieving permanent outcomes for children and youths. In other words, this proposal rewards results. It asks for accountability for government funds.

Children from birth to 5 make up 30 percent of the foster care system; children from 6 to 12, 24 percent; and teenagers 13 and older, 46 percent.

Secretary of Public Welfare Estelle B. Richman organized a "child welfare workgroup" to review the proposal to amend the welfare code. The support was overwhelming from the group, which included the executive director of the Juvenile Court Judges Commission, the executive director of PA Council of Children, Youth and Family Services and the executive director of the Support Center for Child Advocates, among others.

Joan Benso, president and CEO of PA Partnerships for Children, has campaigned for the changes as the most prudent use of state and federal funds.

Sandra Cornelius, president of Elwyn, signed a letter to legislators urging support of this "important step to improve our child welfare and juvenile justice systems."

DPW and the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts have partnered with 14 Pennsylvania counties to implement these proposed initiatives, which statistics prove help children through trying times and onto a successful transition to responsible adulthood.

Delaware County is not among the 14, but Delaware County already utilizes many of the practices advocates recommend in this budget proposal. Throughout the entire state, children in institutional care exceed the national average of 17 percent by 8 percent. Delaware County's average of children in institutional care as opposed to private homes is 18 percent.

Only one major congregate care organization has lobbied against the amendment, Northwestern Human Services, which has five locations in the state. Its CEO is former state Sen. M. Joseph Rocks. Hopefully that fact will not exert undue influence on his former colleagues.

Delaware County's legislators on both sides of the aisle should support this amendment. Our county has led the way and could receive financial benefits. Delco representatives in Harrisburg should note the hard work of the county's child welfare system and demand the same from all areas of the state.

Accountability for using state funds – an idea whose time has come.

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