

Opinion

Don't make foster care kids wait for change

Tuesday, July 21, 2009

In the chaos of state budget negotiations, there's a proposal before legislators right now that doesn't cost taxpayers a dime more, but has the potential to change thousands of vulnerable lives.

There are nearly 20,000 children in Pennsylvania's foster care system (300 of them in Montgomery County) without safe and permanent homes to call their own.

We can begin to change outcomes for foster kids this budget year, if we care enough to make it happen.

Fewer than one in four children live with relatives when they are placed in foster care.

Almost half of foster youths 13 and older are placed in group homes and institutions.

And almost one third of children who return to their families after a stay in foster care will re-enter the system due to abuse or neglect.

But we can change these bleak scenarios for children.

Here's how: The Department of Public Welfare is offering a proposal to change how the state funds county-based child welfare services for abused and neglected children.

The proposal is designed to prevent more children from ever being removed from their homes and placed in foster care, and takes steps to assure a permanent family for every child.

The revenue-neutral proposal would use the same amount of funds currently spent on child welfare, but use them more wisely. This is the kind of government efficiency legislators should crave in these tough economic times.

The DPW proposal aims to help more children find permanent families and reduce the number of children who enter foster care by creating a set of financial incentives that would drive counties to increase home and community-based services which help keep kids safe and living in permanent families.

For example, research shows that foster children placed in congregate care settings experience poorer social and educational outcomes than children placed in family foster homes, yet Pennsylvania has a history of turning to congregate care.

Roughly 24 percent of children in foster care in Montgomery County are placed in group homes and institutions. This is higher than the national average of 17 percent.

We can do better.

And, it can cost up to \$50,000 more each year to place a child in a congregate setting than in a family foster home.

The proposal would provide more funding to county children and youth agencies when they place children in family foster homes

and less funding when they place kids in group homes and institutional settings — which are far costlier, anyway.

The financing proposal is the next natural step to support Montgomery County's program improvement efforts already under way. The county has joined a pilot project sponsored by the National Governors Association — and part of DPW's effort to safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 20 percent by 2010 — to improve outcomes for kids.

The initiative promotes best practices such as family finding, the diligent search of maternal and paternal extended family members willing to support the birth family so a child can safely stay in his home, or if a child must be placed in foster care, making all efforts to place the child with a family member.

It's time for legislators to get on board, support the proposal and aid the good work being done here already to help kids in foster care.

The proposal must not be lost in the commotion of budget talks. Don't make kids in foster care wait one more day.

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

URL: <http://www.thereporteronline.com/articles/2009/07/21/opinion/srv0000005864905.prt>

© 2009 thereporteronline.com, a **Journal Register** Property