

News

## Delco agencies discuss communities and foster care

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UPPER DARBY — Jessica Freeman wanted something different for her children.

A product of the foster-care system since she was 3 months old, the now-19-year-old wanted her children to be free of the abuse she experienced.

After running away several times, she connected with Pathways PA through the Department of Human Services and has become an A student at Delaware County Community College, working toward a degree in PC technology.

Freeman stands as one example of the difference communities can make when individuals work toward the betterment of society.

She shared her story at Thursday's Stand for Children breakfast at the Drexelbrook Corporate Events Center, in front of 40 service officials from the Delaware County District Attorney's office, Court Appointed Special Advocates/Youth Advocates and Family Support Line.

"The children of today are the adults of tomorrow," said Carol Goertzel, executive director of Pathways PA. "We want a safe world for our kids. It's really important that we put our energy and skills together to make sure that the next generation lives as peacefully as they can."

Delaware County statistics show a concerted effort toward bettering the lives of children, according to Todd E. Lloyd of the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Of the state's record, he said, "We have one of the worst re-entry rates in the country. A lot of these kids age out."

He said 19,000 children are in foster care in Pennsylvania, with an average stay of 15 months. Of those, 27 percent re-enter the foster care system within 12 months.

In Delaware County, he said 15 percent of foster-care children are living in group homes, compared to 25 percent statewide. In addition, 27 percent of foster-care children in Delaware County are living with relatives contrasted with 22 percent statewide.

Also, the county's average re-entry rate was 14 percent and there's a smaller number of African-American children in the system than the state average.

Yet, there is more work needed as the state has set a goal of decreasing the number of children in foster care by 20 percent by 2010.

Lloyd said that is occurring through two methods: Engaging family members and placing the children in permanent situations.

He said advocates are working to find extended family of those at-risk and asking them to become involved.

In addition, foster-care children continue to be placed through family arrangements, adoptions or guardian arrangements.

"Think of how much work we could do in the communities," Lloyd said, if the government dollars were redistributed to communities rather than the foster system.

Delaware County District Attorney G. Michael Green urged family, friends and neighbors to take a stand.

"If you believe something is wrong in your neighborhood, in your family and in a home, ... please reach out to one of these fine victim support agencies. Speak to someone," he said.

Freeman shows the possible transformation.

The teen who lived in 17 different foster homes has hopes for her 1-year-old and 1-month-old.

With a job interview lined up and studies under way at the community college, she is creating a different life for her family than the one she had.

"It's hard to talk about," Freeman said of her past. But, she looked to her future. "I want my kids to have the best."

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