

Foster care: Proposal would spend funds more efficiently

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Fewer children should be sent to group homes and institutions.

Lawmakers are facing many difficult decisions as they work on the state budget. Here's one that is not.

It is time to change our thinking about foster care. Too many of the 20,000 children who are in the system end up living in group homes or other institutional settings -- more than 25 percent in fact.

It should come as no surprise that children who live this way are prone to do worse in school, have poorer social skills and after leaving the system get in trouble with the law, according to research.

Looking at U.S. statistics, it certainly seems Pennsylvania sends far too many children through what is called "congregate care." While the national average of all foster care children living in a group environment is 17 percent, the figure is 24 percent for the commonwealth. In the midstate the figures are no better. Most are even higher than the state average:

York County is 27 percent

Lebanon County is 26 percent

Cumberland County is 25 percent

Dauphin County is 24 percent

Perry County is 20 percent

The other important factor to consider in this season filled with finding ways to cut spending is that placing more children in foster homes instead of congregate care would save the state money in the long run. In the short run it is revenue neutral -- meaning it doesn't cost the state any additional funding.

There is a proposed change to state law concerning child welfare funding which should be considered by lawmakers as they look at a new budget because it would assure that public funds are spent more efficiently.

This is the very thing lawmakers should insist upon in this tough economic time. It aims to rearrange the funding sent to counties for covering their costs so that more of it will be spent on finding good foster care homes and less on paying for children to spend their time in group homes or institutions.

One of the challenges to providing strong statewide support for foster children is that each county has certain latitude to determine how to handle where children will live. For example, McKean County has a high rate of sending children to a congregate care facility, 37 percent, while Northumberland County has a low rate at 7 percent. There should be a better standard in place.

The ultimate goal in Pennsylvania should be to keep children in permanent homes, but when they are neglected and abused they are sent to the foster care system. Some live with relatives or other families. Some children, of course, are eventually adopted by their foster families. It is a sad commentary that too many kids who have been abused or neglected by no fault of their own wind up living in group homes or other institutions until they turn 18 and in many cases are then off on their own.

Of course, some children will always need to be in a group home or institution because of special circumstances, but many would flourish in a foster home.

Pennsylvania must do a better job for these vulnerable children and one good way is for lawmakers to approve this proposal.

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