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Advocates fear foster care plan will get lost in budget impasse

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Child welfare advocates are concerned lawmakers will ignore a state Department of Welfare proposal to shift foster care money and reduce reliance on institutional care during budget negotiations in Harrisburg.

This proposal is not supposed to cost more, proponents say. It would cut state subsidies to counties for putting foster children in group homes, and allocate that money instead toward placing children with foster families. The goal is to encourage county-run child welfare programs to emphasize community-based foster care, which better helps children, according to children's experts.

With the General Assembly consumed by a budget impasse and a \$3.25 billion state deficit, an effort to attach the proposal to a fast-moving bill went nowhere. The measure was floated this spring in a larger welfare bill, which stalled in committee.

"If it doesn't occur, you have kids going into institutions who may not have needed to, because you couldn't get this movement going," said Ray Firth, director of policy initiatives at the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development.

"And the more you get late into this governor's administration, the more there's a lame-duck mentality. So it's not likely to get held off for (just) one year, but until the next administration. And then they'll take time to study it. So you're looking at multiple years."

Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell, in the third year of his second term, by law cannot seek a third term in 2010.

"There is certainly no lame duck mentality within the administration," said Chuck Ardo, Rendell's spokesman. "The governor is aware of lame legislation and Peking duck, but a lame duck mentality, not so much."

This is one of several child-related policies hanging in the balance while the General Assembly debates cutbacks and tax hikes, Firth said. Legislators have delayed action on services for autistic children; on the Children's Health Insurance Program; and on nurse-family partnerships, a program Firth said helps low-income children perform better in school and stay out of institutional care.

The funding shift has bipartisan support, but several legislators, including some closely involved with human services issues, said they know little about it.

"This proposal could be a step in the right direction; however, no decision we make regarding our children and families should be made in haste," Rep. Matthew Baker, a Tioga County Republican and minority chairman of the House Health and Human Services Committee, wrote in an e-mail.

He was the only one of several legislators contacted for this story to express skepticism on the merits of the proposal. Private providers, county governments and oversight agencies need more opportunity to express their concerns, he wrote.

A quarter of the 20,000 Pennsylvania children in foster care live in group homes, according to the Harrisburg-based advocacy group Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. Comparatively, 17 percent of foster children nationally live in group care.

The group has been pushing counties to minimize how much they use institutions for children. Almost three decades of research shows foster children in home settings are more likely to avoid substance abuse, stay off public assistance, have healthy relationships and pass higher levels of education, according to the group.

"This is the single most important thing anyone in Pennsylvania has proposed for child welfare in almost two decades," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "And it will dramatically improve outcomes in Pennsylvania. And it doesn't cost anyone any more money. So the question is, why are we waiting?"

The plan could reward counties such as Allegheny, which have moved toward keeping children out of group homes, county Human Services Director Marc Cherna said.

The county will have about one of every six foster children in group homes in 2008-09, a slight decrease of the overall percentage, according to its statistics. But the county expects to have 150,000 fewer children in the system than it did two years ago.

This shows the county is "ahead of the curve," even on a national scale, Benso said.

Cherna shared Allegheny County's success story on foster care with a working group of state and county officials, child advocates and private service providers that negotiated the cost-shifting proposal, said Lisa Fleming, a budget analyst with the House Appropriations Committee.

"I guess there's a concern that people will just forget about it," Fleming said. "It's the budget process. It's the making of sausage. It's not pretty and it's very complicated. And this year it's even more complicated because we have this \$3.2 billion shortfall. But with this particular issue, there were a lot of people around the table working on this. ... Clearly there are folks interested in the issue."

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