

Easy, smart way to boost foster care

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State lawmakers face some of the toughest choices they will encounter in their careers as they wrestle with an overdue budget amid a stubbornly weak economy.

They should welcome, then, a proposal to substantially improve a crucial, mandated state service at no additional cost.

At any given time in Pennsylvania, about 20,000 children live within the foster-care system rather than with their families, most often due to neglect or abuse. According to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, 46 percent of those are 13 or older, 30 percent are younger than 5 and 24 percent are between 6 and 12.

Abundant research has shown that kids in the foster care system do much better socially and in school when they are placed in family settings, yet Pennsylvania places 25 percent of children in the system in what is known as "congregate care" - institutions or group homes. Nationally, the average for that type of care is just 17 percent. That is so even though family-based foster care, in addition to being more effective, also is substantially less expensive than institutional care.

That rate is not uniform across the state. Lackawanna County, for example, does much better than even the national average, placing all but 10.9 percent of foster children in family settings.

That means, however, that institutional placements are much higher in other counties. The state should have a uniform, comprehensive system for placing as many foster children as possible in the best possible setting.

Under a proposed change to the state code covering child welfare, the state government would promote more family placements by altering the distribution of state and federal funds, which account for 80 percent of all money used to fund the system. In the fiscal year that just ended, the statewide budget for the system was just under \$1.5 billion.

The state would increase its share of payments to counties for family placements while reducing its share for institutional and group home placements. That would provide county agencies with greater incentives to recruit relatives and foster parents for family placements.

Institutional placements always will be part of the system because some kids simply need more intensive services than others. The new proposal would go a long way in ensuring that the most kids possible end up in the most appropriate settings. Lawmakers should embrace the opportunity to improve a vital system at zero cost.

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