

Phila. kids re-enter foster care at 'extremely high rates'

By Alfred Lubrano

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Philadelphia children discharged from foster care re-enter the system at "extremely high rates," according to a new report on child welfare released today.

Within a year of release from foster care, 43 percent of children are back in the system in Philadelphia, compared to 28.6 of children throughout the state, according to the report, compiled by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a statewide child-advocacy group based in Harrisburg.

Among Philadelphia children aged 13 to 15, the re-entry rate is 60 percent.

The reasons for high rates of re-entry are complex. "Our best sense is we don't do enough - not just in Philadelphia, but everywhere - to strengthen the families these children left," Joan Benso, president and CEO of Partnerships, said in a phone interview Tuesday night.

For example, if a parent's substance abuse was the reason a child was taken from the home and placed in foster care, that abuse must be addressed, Benso said. If it isn't and the child returns home, the child will likely be taken out of the home and placed back into foster care, she explained.

According to the report, 6,570 Philadelphia children are in foster care, which represents more than one-third of the total 20,000 children in the foster care system statewide.

Along with the negative re-entry information, there was some good news in the report.

For example, more than 25 percent of Philadelphia children placed outside the home by the child welfare system are living with relatives. The state average is 22 percent.

Research shows that if family problems are addressed, the child is better off with his or her natural family.

Additionally, 6.6 percent of Philadelphia children in the foster care system are placed in pre-adoptive homes, which is twice the state average. This is defined as a home run by people willing to adopt the children and awaiting finalization of the process that would make them adoptive parents.

"This implies that Philadelphia does a good job of family finding and moving toward the goal of permanency for its children placed in the child welfare system," the Partners report concluded.

Also, the report says, the median length of stay in foster care for Philadelphia children is 15 months, compared to the statewide median of 16 months.

"This suggests that a system of care is in place that moves children more quickly to either reunification with their family or [into] other permanent homes," the report says.

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