

Local

STATE

## Report: Some children languish in foster care

### Cumberland County performance ahead of other parts of the state

By [Jeremy Grad, Sentinel Reporter](#), September 11, 2008

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Cumberland County is performing a little better than the rest of the state at finding stable, nurturing homes for children who end up in foster care.

A statewide children's advocacy group released a new report Wednesday giving Pennsylvania's foster care system low marks as a whole.

Statewide, 28.6 percent of foster children who are reunited with their families end up returning to foster care within a year, and that rate is as high as 40 percent in some counties, according to the report released Wednesday by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

As of Aug. 31, Cumberland County had 172 children, ranging from infants from to those 18 years of age but still in school in foster care, said Wendy Hoverter, director of Cumberland County Children and Youth Services.

"We had 86 reunifications and we had 20 re-entries within 12 months and that is 23.3 percent," Hoverter said. "We're a little better than the state but we would like to improve that." Work harder

The finding shows that child welfare agencies must work harder to address underlying family problems that result in abuse and neglect before allowing foster children to reunite with their birth families, said Joan Benso.

"One of the primary reasons a child is removed from the home is substance abuse," Benso said. "If the parent doesn't get effective substance abuse services, the notion that you're going to successfully reunite (the parent with the child) is pretty slim."

The report is the organization's first study of child welfare in Pennsylvania.

About 20,000 children are in foster care at any given time, and they typically stay there for 16 months, according to the report. The largest share, 47 percent, live in foster homes with non-relatives. A quarter live in institutions and group homes, and 22 percent have been placed with relatives.

For younger children placed in foster care, generally due to parenting issues, Cumberland County provides "intensive reunification services" to families, Hoverter said.

"That is a service that works very intensively with them before the return and then they stay with them after the return. Those are in home services for the parents and the children," Hoverter added.

For adolescents who may be experiencing problems ranging from skipping school to substance abuse, Cumberland County employees a different methodology.

Those services "are more like family counseling," Hoverter said. "Resolving behavior issues that adolescents may be struggling with. It's an in-home service and it's very intensive."

'Kinship care'

Hoverter said another initiative the county is using is an effort to place foster children in "kinship care."

"Kinship care is just being placed with a relative or family friend and we've found that to be a lot more stable," Hoverter noted. "If you have an established relationship with the child that leads to increases stability. We really

prefer to go with kinship care if that's a possibility for the child."

According to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Cumberland County places 9 percent of foster children with relatives, compared with 22 percent statewide.

But the longer children remain in foster care, the less likely they are to find stable homes. More than 30 percent of all children who spend one to two years in foster care live with three or more different families, and 94 percent of all children who spend more than two years in foster care experience the same fate.

"Think about what happens in the life of a school-age child," Benso said. "They transfer schools. ... They miss a lot of school, so they have a real problem with educational attainment. They have a very hard time making connections."

A Department of Public Welfare spokeswoman did not immediately return a telephone message Wednesday seeking comment on the report.

#### Breakdown

Teenagers account for 46 percent of the state's foster children. Thirty percent are children ages 6-12, and 24 percent are under 6 years old.

The report also notes that several counties exceed the statewide rate of placing foster children with relatives, including Allegheny County at 30 percent, Delaware County at 26 percent, Erie County at 37 percent and Philadelphia at 25 percent.

The organization is releasing the report as part of a project to improve the state's child welfare system.

"We have excellent foster families," Hoverter said. "The goal is to keep the foster families stable and work hard towards the reunification."

According to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, from birth to age five make up 30 percent of the foster care system; children six to 12 equal 24 percent; while the vast majority or 46 percent of children living in foster care are teenagers 13 and older. Roughly 1,600 youth age out of the system each year to unknown circumstances.

— The Associated Press contributed to this report

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