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Posted on Thu, Sep. 11, 2008

Report: Kids bounce back to foster homes if family problems not addressed

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Philadelphia Daily News

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Although foster homes are supposed to be a temporary refuge for at-risk kids, nearly half of Philadelphia's foster-care veterans ping pong back into foster homes within a year because child-welfare workers don't do enough to fix the family problems that prompted the children's initial removal, a new report charges.

Philadelphia's 43 percent reentry rate is the highest among Pennsylvania's 67 counties and much higher than the statewide average of 28.6 percent, according to the report, released yesterday by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a Harrisburg-based child-advocacy group.

The rate jumps even higher among city teens ages 13 to 15 - 60 percent of that age group wind up back in foster care, according to the report.

City child-welfare advocates must change their strategy if they want to protect the youth in their charge, the report urges.

"Philadelphia needs to get more aggressive in addressing the core challenges that families are experiencing that caused their child to be removed," said Joan L. Benso, president and chief executive of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "For example, if a child's removed because housing is inadequate or unsafe or the parent is abusing substances, and if we are not aggressive in fixing the situation, then we're going to send a child home only to have them come back [to foster care]."

Decreasing reentry rates is a priority for Philadelphia's embattled Department of Human Services, DHS Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose said in a prepared statement issued yesterday.

"We plan to use the report as a tool as we move forward with the implementation of our reform agenda to ensure the safety and well-being of all the children in our care," she said.

Ambrose pointed out that Philadelphia fared better on some measures than the rest of the state.

For example, the city placed more than 25 percent of its foster youth in "kinship care," or with relatives, which is considered the least disruptive placement. That's more than the 22 percent statewide average. Philadelphia also placed 6.6 percent of its charges in "pre-adoptive homes," twice the statewide average. That means that the city "does a good job of family-finding and moving towards the goal of permanency," according to the report.

The report found other statewide trends that paint a bleak picture for many youths placed in foster care:

* A disproportionate number of the 20,000 children in Pennsylvania's foster-care system are black and teen-aged. Forty-six percent are 13 or older; 47 percent are black.

* Nearly 1,600 youths in Pennsylvania "age out" - typically at 18 - of the foster-care system each year. That leaves many vulnerable to unemployment, homelessness and incarceration, the report warned.

* While the median length of stay in foster care is 16 months, about a third of the kids in foster care a year or longer move at least twice during that time. Such repeated movement creates intense upheaval. Philadelphia did slightly better than the state average, with its charges staying about 15 months in foster care.

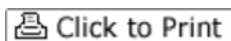
* A quarter of the children in foster care live in group homes and institutions, where they are less likely to develop life skills to prepare them for adulthood.

The cumulative effect of such trends means foster-home veterans are more likely to have relationship problems, academic trouble, aggressive or defiant behavior and mental-health problems, according to the report. *

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