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Report on DHS hits return rate

Children discharged from foster care are "highly likely" to reenter. But there is success for those placed with relatives.

By Alfred Lubrano

Inquirer Staff Writer

A new, wide-ranging report that delivers both discouraging and hopeful news on child welfare in the city found that children discharged from Philadelphia's foster-care system reenter it at "extremely high rates."

At the same time, the city does well in placing foster children with relatives or in homes where adoptions are likely.

Additionally, the report found that 23 Philadelphia children died of child abuse in 2006 and 2007. One of the children was Danieal Kelly, whose emaciated, bedsores-ridden body was found in her mother's home in August 2006.

Compiled by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a statewide child-advocacy group in Harrisburg, the report was released yesterday.

"I am proud of the progress that has been made over the last two years and . . . [the report] shows that we . . . are on the right path in our reform efforts," wrote Anne Marie Ambrose, commissioner of the city's Department of Human Services, in an e-mail last night.

Ambrose, who took over DHS in June, has said she was working to implement changes in an agency laid low by a July grand-jury report that concluded that DHS practices and personnel contributed to the death of 14-year-old Kelly. Her parents, as well as two DHS caseworkers and two employees of a private agency hired by DHS to visit the girl, face criminal charges in her death.

In the main thrust of its findings, the Partnerships report found that within a year of release from foster care, 43 percent of children are back in the system in Philadelphia, compared with 28.6 of children throughout the state. Among Philadelphia children 13 to 15, the reentry rate is 60 percent.

The report found that seven Philadelphia children died from child abuse in 2007. Deputy Mayor and Health Commissioner Don Schwarz, who oversees DHS, said yesterday that he had studied the deaths and determined that none of the children who died in 2007 had been under DHS's care.

"They were not children known to DHS," he said.

Schwarz added that he had not studied the 16 child-abuse deaths that occurred in 2006, one of which was that of Danieal Kelly. "I wasn't around then," he said.

Last night, Stacey Witalec, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Welfare, said the agency determined that six of the 16 children had been receiving DHS services in their homes.

Frank Cervone, executive director of the Support Center for Child Advocates, said the report suggested that "the quality of services DHS is bringing to the families isn't good enough. That data suggests we're failing. It's hard to sugarcoat that."

Cervone and other advocates acknowledged that it's extremely difficult for a caseworker to decide when it's time for a child who had been placed in foster care because of family problems to return to the family.

Still, DHS must shoulder a lot of the blame, according to Richard Gelles, dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice. Gelles has been a vocal critic of DHS's handling of the Kelly case.

"The tools DHS uses to make decisions on when to return a child to the home have no known validity," Gelles said yesterday. "Their clinical judgment is no better than flipping a coin."

Gelles criticized DHS union leadership for resisting a probability-based method of assessing a family's readiness to welcome back a child who had been taken out of the home for his or her safety.

The concept, known as structured decision-making, uses a number-crunching algorithm that takes into account a family's history and determines the probabilities of a family's re-abusing a child returned to the home after foster-care placement.

"The union isn't ready to embrace that," Gelles said. "It thinks it strips away from the social worker the aura of professionalism."

Reached last night, Rita Urwitz, vice president of Local 2186 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said: "I really can't address what Dr. Gelles said. The union has nothing to do with deciding what kinds of models are used."

Ambrose was unavailable to respond to Gelles' remarks, her spokeswoman said last night.

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

There was some good news in the report.

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 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 with 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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