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County foster care re-entry rate second-highest in state

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An emergency shelter that temporarily houses youths in need and the inclusion of juvenile delinquents in the data are two reasons that Lycoming County has the second-highest number of children who re-enter foster care within a year of returning to their homes.

That explanation was given Wednesday by Mark Egly, administrator of Lycoming County Children and Youth Services, after the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released a new report on child welfare in the state.

The child advocacy group based in Harrisburg reported that 42 percent of the children in foster care in Lycoming County re-enter the system within one year of being discharged. The statewide average is 29 percent. The only county with a higher rate is Philadelphia at 43 percent.

Egly said the two factors of having the shelter and including juvenile delinquents in the data may have had a negative impact on the county's re-entry rate.

However, he said the shelter benefits county youths in many ways.

The shelter, a 16-bed facility built in 2003, is available for children ages 12 to 18 who may not require long-term placement outside of their permanent residence, but are in need of a short-term, alternative home setting, he said.

"In Lycoming County, we're fortunate enough to operate an emergency shelter," Egly said. "We have found it to be an effective alternative for some youths. Generally it's teens who experience some parent-child conflict from the home, things of that nature.

He explained that a short, out-of-home stay can be an effective attention-getter or wake up call for troubled teen and the family to deal with issues that exist in the home. Most often, the youth then may return to the home.

The agency strives to keep families intact whenever possible, Egly said.

"Unfortunately, it has the downside if kids return quickly," Egly said, as the returning youths count toward the county's re-entry rate.

"But certainly, from our point of view, it's maintaining the family intact. A brief period of out-of-home care allows us to work to keep that family together," he said.

Juvenile delinquents are counted, Egly said, because some of the funds to house them come from some of the same funding streams as Children and Youth.

A positive finding in the report showed Lycoming County does a good job of moving children out of the system and into a permanent living environment. According to the report, the median length of stay for children in the foster-care system in the county is 11 months, compared with the state median of 16 months.

"One of the areas we do well in is of actual permanency for kids in our system," Egly said. "The year in the life of a young child is a significant portion of their life to date. The longer they're in substitute settings, the harder it is to develop connections and sense of belonging and purpose in a family."

The report showed 128 children in the county in foster care as of March - 17, or 13.3 percent ages 1 or younger; 21, or 16.4 percent, ages 2 to 5; 23, or 18 percent, ages 6 to 9; 8, or 6.3 percent, ages 10 to 12; 29, or 22.7 percent, ages 13 to 15; 27, or 21.1 percent, ages 16 and 17; 3, or 2.3 percent, ages 18 to 20.


According to the report, at any given time 20,000 children and youth are in the foster care system in Pennsylvania, spending about 16 months in placement. Children from birth to age 5 make up 30 percent and children 6 to 12 make up 24 percent, while 46 percent are teenagers.

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