

## Children trapped in system

**About 25 percent of county children return to foster care within a year of going back to their families.**

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About one in four York County children who were reunited with their families after being in foster care returned to the system within a year, according to a report released Wednesday by a state child advocacy agency.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released the report about the state's child welfare system as part of the organization's Porch Light Project, an initiative to make sure all children have permanent families.

York County's rate of children returning to foster care is slightly lower than the statewide rate of nearly 29 percent.

But younger teenagers reunited with their families returned to foster care at a higher rate.

In the county, about 41 percent of children ages 13 to 15 returned to foster care within a year, which is just below the state rate of 42 percent. About 35 percent of children ages 10 to 12 in the county returned to the system.

Older county teens, ages 16 and 17, returned at

a rate of about 21 percent.

The goal for most children in foster care is to reunite them with their families, said Joan Benso, president and chief executive officer of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

But first, the issues that caused the child to be removed from home, such as abuse, domestic violence or inadequate housing, must be addressed, she said.

"If you don't address those issues in an aggressive way for every child, you can't successfully send them back

home," she said.

Agencies statewide need to adopt policies that focus on strengthening families, she said.

Jerry Anderson, the director of York County Children and Youth Services, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

State Rep. Bev Mackereth, who will become the county's director of human services in December, said Anderson has put into place "intensive services" to try to ensure children don't return to the system.

Officials discussed the topic at a meeting Wednesday, she said.

"Dr. Anderson did talk about concerns about re-entry . . . and the need to put in evidence-based programs and services so we can ensure better

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successes," she said. "We're well aware of the problem and the issue, and we're really looking at what can we do."

Benso said York County has adopted a number of strategies to help families, including a program called "Family Group Decision Making," which involves extended family, supporters and service providers in family matters.

"You have a county agency that said, 'we want to do the best we can,'" Benso said.

The welfare of children is not just the responsibility of the county's children and youth agency, she said. Health and human service organizations, education agencies and private institutions should be involved, too.

"It is much more a community responsibility," Benso said. "We won't solve (the problems) simply by doing more in children and youth agencies. . . . That alone won't solve all the challenges."

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## BY THE NUMBERS

--- 583: Children in foster care in York County in March 2008

--- 100: Children staying with relatives

--- 291: Children staying with foster families that are not relatives

--- 106: Children in group homes

--- 52: Children in institutions

--- 6: Children in pre-adoptive homes

--- 28: Children in supervised independent living, trial home visits or who had run away

--- 350: Children who had been reunited with families between April 2007 to March 2008

--- 88: Children who had returned to the system by March 2008

--- \$50.4 million: Amount of state, county and federal funds allocated to the county's Department of Children and Youth Services

-- Sources: *Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children*, county human services Web site

## AROUND THE STATE

Children who end up in Pennsylvania's foster-care system encounter many obstacles to finding stable, nurturing homes, a statewide children's advocacy group said in a new report.

Nearly 30 percent of all children statewide 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.

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

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share, 47 percent, live in foster homes with nonrelatives. A quarter live in institutions and group homes, and 22 percent are placed with relatives.

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.

About 3,300 of the state's foster children are legally available for adoption, and the Department of Public Welfare is working with county agencies to make sure more children can find permanent homes, agency spokeswoman Stacey Witalec said.

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 39 percent, Delaware County at 26 percent, Erie County at 37 percent and Philadelphia at 25 percent.

- *The Associated Press*

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