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### Foster care is revolving door for many kids

**Agencies must work harder to address parents' underlying woes, report says.**

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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 this week by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

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 nonrelatives. A quarter live in institutions and group homes, and 22 percent have been 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.

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

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. The report "really helps highlight where the problems are, and pushes the level of intensity of our efforts up a notch," Witalec said.

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



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