

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Children spend too much time in foster care, group contends

By Mary Pickels

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Children in foster care should stay for shorter periods and more of them need to be placed with family members, says a children's advocacy group.

Across Pennsylvania, approximately 20,000 children spend an average of 16 months in foster care after suffering abuse or neglect, according to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Of the children in the foster care system, 46 percent are age 13 or older.

"Every child deserves a forever family. No child should languish in the system without a safe, nurturing and permanent place to call home," said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

"While there are many things broken in the current child welfare system that must be addressed, there are family strengthening, reunification and adoption strategies in play, too, that deserve mention and, hopefully, further replication across the state."

The Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families needs to improve its average 20-month stay for children in foster care, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children said.

But it does a good job in placing 39 percent of its children with relatives, the group said.

"One of the things you don't see in the report is that we've reduced placements by over 40 percent in the last 12 years," said Mark Cherna, executive director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

"We have under 2,000 children in placement now, low for a county our size," he said.

Placement tends to be longer with adolescents, Cherna said. But part of the longer placement term comes from an effort to keep children in the system beyond age 18, encouraging high school graduation and further education.

He said the office is "very aggressive" with home services to keep children out of the system, and remain safely in their homes.

He said approximately 75 percent of children in foster care return home within a year.

The Westmoreland County Children's Bureau logged a lower re-entry rate than most counties -- 24 percent of children discharged from foster care went back

to foster care within one year, compared to the state average of 29 percent.

The county places only 5 percent of its children with family members, compared to the statewide average of 22 percent.

In Fayette County, the re-entry rate is 14 percent. The county does a good job working with at-risk families once children have been removed, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children reported.

Once a child goes home, the agency bolsters reunification with home services, said David Madison, administrator of Fayette County Children and Youth Services. "This prevents the child from coming back into placement," he said.

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