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## **OCY chief targets failure rate**

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Foster children in Erie County spend less time in foster care than most of their peers in Pennsylvania, and Erie County has one of the highest rates in the state for placing foster children with relatives.

Those newly released findings, while laudable, are not good enough for the executive director of the Erie County Office of Children and Youth.

Mary Ann Daniels, named to the county's top child-welfare post at the beginning of the year, said she has introduced new programs to improve the county's foster-care system, which handled the cases of 652 children as of March.

One of Daniels' primary goals is to halve the number of cases in which neglected or abused children must be returned to foster care within a year because of a failed reunification, due to abuse or other problems, with their biological parents. Such incidents -- known as re-entries into the foster-care system -- can be particularly damaging to already fragile children in desperate need of stability.

The percentage of such failed reunifications now stands at 20.6 percent in Erie County, or eight percentage points lower than the statewide figure of 28.6 percent.

"I'd like to see that come down to 10 percent," Daniels said of the county's percentage. "That is one of the goals we need to get better at."

OCY's handling of foster care has come into a clearer focus with the release of a first-of-its-kind statewide report on foster care, "A Forever Family for Every Child," by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, based in Harrisburg.

The report, the first of several the nonprofit has planned on child welfare in Pennsylvania, concluded that state and local agencies need to spend more time and resources dealing with affordable-housing concerns, substance-abuse counseling and other underlying programs meant to help troubled families and reduce the need for foster care.

The report also showed that finding a permanent home -- through reunification with the biological parents or through adoption -- can be a time-consuming and difficult process for many of the 20,000 children in foster care in Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

"We must get much more serious about strategies that strengthen families to begin with," said Joan Benso, president and chief executive of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which released the report Wednesday. "The outlook for children who spend a long time in the foster-care system is not good.

"The entire state, including Erie County, has a long way to go to make sure every child has the benefit of a family that will commit to them forever."

The report showed the median length of stay in foster care for children in Erie County is 15 months, or one month less than the statewide median of 16 months. The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children also said "Erie County does a good job of placing children in foster care with relatives" -- 37 percent, compared to a statewide rate of 22 percent.

### **Seeking stability**

Of particular concern to Benso is the shuttling of children among foster homes before they are permanently reunited with their biological parents or placed with an adoptive family. In Erie County, about 36 percent of all children in foster care for a year to two years are placed with three or more families. The number is about 65 percent for children in foster care for more than two years. The statewide figures are about 32 percent and 94 percent, respectively.

Without stability, Benso said, "kids move into adulthood with a very difficult time developing normal attachments to people. Basically, their social, emotional and cognitive development is thwarted." Benso said she knows Daniels professionally and praised her abilities. Daniels, the former head of human services in Mercer County, called the Pennsylvania Partnerships report "excellent."

"It gives us some benchmarks," she said.

Daniels succeeded Gary Lucht, who took over OCY after a particularly tumultuous time for the agency, which has 175 child-welfare employees who deal with about 2,000 neglected and abused children a year.

Then-Erie County Executive Rick Schenker brought in Lucht in November 2005 to reform OCY in response to the case of Brittany Legler, a mentally disabled 15-year-old who died after her adoptive mother beat her in Millcreek Township in May 2004.

Lucht stayed on under County Executive Mark DiVecchio until Lucht resigned early this year to take a job at Stairways Behavioral Health. While at OCY, Lucht restructured the agency and tried to make it more transparent.

Daniels said she has worked to stabilize the OCY staff and to start programs meant to reduce the amount of time a foster child must wait until he or she is adopted or permanently reunified with his or her biological parents. Daniels said she has made the agency more focused on families, with an emphasis on using resources to help parents.

"There was a period when you wouldn't necessarily have been able to say that," Daniels said.

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