

Pa. report praises and faults C&Y foster care

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September 15, 2008 6:00 AM

An advocacy group's statewide report on foster care gives Monroe County a mixed review.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children says the county does a great job of preventing children with an initial foster-care placement from returning to foster care once they have been discharged. Less than 10 percent of discharged local children returned to foster care within one year, compared to 29 percent of children statewide returning to the foster-care system.

The problem, says the partnerships, is that it takes Monroe County Children and Youth Services an average of 11 months — six months more than the state median — to return children from foster care to their homes.

Children are typically removed from their families by a court and placed in foster homes or institutions following reports of child abuse, abandonment or neglect, or behavioral problems by the child. There are about 20,000 Pennsylvania children in foster care at any given time. Monroe County had 230 children in foster care for the one-year period that ended March 31.

C&Y Administrator Adelaide Grace said the local agency wants to make sure the right conditions are in place for the child and the family to succeed once the child is returned home.

"Families getting reunified is a process. It's not an event," Grace said. "We might decide more time is needed to complete the process."

She said 25 percent of local foster-care children are placed in the homes of relatives, lessening the trauma of being separated from the primary family.

"We train those homes," Grace said of relatives caring for a foster child. "We have those homes go through the same process as foster homes. They have the same support."

The largest percentage of children in foster care as of March 31 — 18.3 percent — are ages 13 to 15. That age group usually accounts for the highest number of foster children who re-enter the system multiple times, according to a just-released annual county needs-based plan.

The county report points to a lack of local mental health services that would help keep children in their home, and lack of parental supervision due in part to 30 percent of the county's workforce commuting long distances. It also points to insufficient agency funding to keep up with population growth, and an inability by public and private human service agencies to recruit and retain staff because of low local salaries.

The recent county plan said weekly meetings among C&Y agency units, with strong caseworker involvement, have helped reduce the incidence of repeat foster-care placements.

"Additionally, the consolidation of unit management over the past three years, where several units have been combined under the supervision of one manager may be providing for more consistent decisions regarding the prompt reunification of children in placement," states the narrative.

About 21 percent of Monroe's foster children are slated for eventual adoption by a new family, but the county plan acknowledges problems in meeting that goal. C&Y finalized 16 adoptions during the 2007-08 fiscal year — twice the previous year's number — but all were in care for more than two years before the adoptions were finalized.

"The main reasons for this continues to be the same," says the plan. "There are limited services available for families in this county which makes the process longer in achieving the goals of their family service plans. The agency allows for that extra time due to the limited resources which in turn keeps the children in care longer."

The plan says some children eventually placed in adoption are probably kept for too long in a program focused on reunification with the natural family. Often their parents are represented by public defenders who appeal court decisions ordering adoptions, in part because the parents don't have to pay for their attorneys' appeals.