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Luzerne County child welfare draws praise, but some needs are seen

More children should be placed in foster care with relatives, a report concludes.

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Law & Order Reporter

WILKES-BARRE – A report issued by a non-profit child advocacy organization shows Luzerne County's child welfare system is performing well in comparison to other counties, but there are areas that need improvement, an official with the advocacy group said.

Joan Benso, executive director of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, said statistics indicate Luzerne County has a good record in keeping foster children who were reunified with their family from subsequently re-entering the system.

But the county lags behind other counties in its efforts to place children removed from a home with a relative, versus a non-family foster home.

The analysis, culled from data from the state Department of Public Welfare and other agencies, shows 19.3 percent of the 290 children who were reunited with their families between April 2007 and March 2008 ended up back in placement within a year of their release. That compares to a statewide average of 28.6 percent.

Although she believes 19 percent is still too high, Benso said county officials should be commended for their efforts, particularly their willingness to embrace a wide variety of programs that have been shown to prevent recurrence of the issues that resulted in a child's placement.

"We know what to do in many circumstance to get a family the resources they need to successfully parent their children. The evidence is that Luzerne County is on the right pathway there," Benso said.

Frank Castano, executive director of Luzerne County Children and Youth Services, said one program that has shown promise is Family Group Decision Making. The program brings together everyone involved in the child's life – parents, family friends, relatives, a pastor, a teacher – to discuss the family's concerns and develop a strategy to address their strengths and weaknesses.

"They have ownership of the plan. All we do is facilitate the dialogue on the strengths of the family and how to build upon them," he said.

The Partnership's report also identified some weaknesses within the county's child welfare system,

Benso said. Of particular concern is the percentage of children who are placed with relatives versus foster parents with no biological ties to the child.

In March 2008, 13.3 percent of the 692 Luzerne County children in foster care were placed with relatives, known as kinship care. That compares to a statewide average of 21.7 percent.

Benso said she finds that statistic troubling because children who are placed with relatives adapt much better than those placed with strangers.

Castano said CYS shares that philosophy and has taken steps to increase its kinship placements, including creating a special unit in 2006 that is dedicated solely to that endeavor in 2006. That resulted in a significant increase in the number of kinship cases.


In April 2006, there were just 50 children in a kinship placement, Castano said. As of April 2007, that number jumped to 134, he said.

He noted the Partnership's report only looked at a single month, which can be misleading because those figures can vary significantly from to month.

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