

## **Outlining positives, negatives in foster care system**

By Katrina Dix; Special to Oxford Tribune

Only four percent of children in Pennsylvania lack health insurance - but 20,000 of them lack something even more fundamental: families. The Porch Light Project, an initiative of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, released a report last week with statistics and observations on the pitfalls and potential in the state's foster care system.

Two of the most pressing problems, according to the report, are the re-entry rate, when children are brought back into the program after being reunited with families, and the challenges facing those who "age out" of the system at 18.

These issues have even greater visibility since the report was issued just two months after a public hearing in which the 2007 Child Welfare Review Panel Report revealed that several children died in Philadelphia in 2007 even after neighbors alerted authorities.

This hearing, led by state Sens. Andy Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland, LeAnna Washington, D-Philadelphia, Jay Costa Jr., D-Allegheny, and Michael O'Pake, D-Berks, highlighted the urgency of improving the foster care system.

Children come to the system for many reasons, including as a result of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect or abandonment; or a parent's substance abuse, physical or mental illness, or death or imprisonment.

The Porch Light Project attempts to prevent child abuse, provide stability when children must be removed from their homes, and remains focused on finding a permanent solution for each child. It also seeks to ensure that older youth who are abused receive as much attention as younger children.

Those older youth are especially at risk for "bouncing back." Normally a return to strength, in foster care this phrase refers to children who must leave their families again within 12 months of reunification.

Chester County has about an 18 percent re-entry rate overall; in some counties, that number is as high as 40 percent. The likelihood of bouncing back increases sharply for teenagers; statewide, 36 percent of those age 13-17 return to care, a 10 percent jump over re-entry by children age 10-12 and a 20 percent increase over those age 6-9.

This increasing instability may explain why the greatest obstacle facing those in foster care is often a day which is exciting for most teenagers: their 18th birthdays. Once they are passed out of the system, they are expected to become the kind of responsible adults many of them never had in their own lives.

The public hearing in July focused on this challenge, as many who had struggled through the aging-out process spoke with deep emotion about feeling lost and terrified as they tried to get an education, make it in the "real world," or even afford basic furnishings - one speaker slept on the floor for months, unable to buy a bed.

Every year, roughly 1,600 teenagers age out to unknown circumstances.

Washington recently proposed legislation to meet these needs, which would define guidelines for allowing youths to stay in the system until age 21.

In Chester County, independent living services are available for older youth.

Twenty-four hour short-term Emergency Shelter Care is available for up to 30 days, and group residential care is provided for those whose needs cannot be met by foster care.

The county also provides intensive intervention for children at risk of placement, and counseling and education to children, their families, and foster families.