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Foster care in Erie making strides

A new report from Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children offers guidelines for improving foster care and giving children a more stable life.

The report found that children in Erie County spend 15 months in foster care, compared to children elsewhere in Pennsylvania who spend 16 months in such care.

Erie County also has one of the highest rates for placing foster children with relatives, providing security for children uprooted from nuclear families. Of the 652 children in foster care here, 37 percent live with relatives, compared to 21 percent statewide.

The longer children stay in foster care, the less likely they are to find permanent homes. In Erie County, 36 percent of children who need care for one to two years wind up living with three or more families.

"Think about what happens in the life of a school-age child," said Joan Benso, president of Pennsylvania Partnerships in Harrisburg. "They transfer schools … They miss a lot of school, so they have a real problem with educational attainment. They have a very hard time making connections." The statistics also show that 41 percent of the children in foster care in Erie County are black, even though black people make up only 9 percent of the county's population.

"That is absolutely something we are going to look at," said Mary Ann Daniels, head of the Erie County Office of Children and Youth. "It bears a lot more study."

Daniels is right to seek answers about the disproportionate number of minority children in foster care. Benso also recommended that child-welfare agencies address underlying problems that cause children to end up in foster care. Substance abuse is a major reason why reunification with families fails, she said.

Erie County's failure rate is 20.6 percent, lower than the statewide average of 28.6 percent. Daniels would like to reduce that failure rate to 10 percent, which is an excellent goal.