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Armstrong County's foster care services get good marks: report

By **Renatta Signorini**

LEADER TIMES

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Armstrong County foster care services have had success in reunifying children with their parents in less than a year, according to a report completed by a children's advocacy group.

Dennis Demangone, administrator of Children, Youth and Family Services, credited that fact to intensive community programs in the area that are available to families and children.

Armstrong County children experience an average stay of 11 months in the foster care system, according to a study of the child welfare system completed by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. The group's findings were released last week.

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The state median is 16 months until reunification, according to the study. Demangone said the goal is to have children reunified with their family within 12 months.

Some of the programs available to families in crisis are offered through Adelphoi Village in Kittanning and Holy Family Social Services in Ford City, he said.

Multisystemic therapy is an intensive family and community-based treatment for mainly teens who are at high risk of out-of-home placement, Demangone said. The service helps a family build a healthy living environment.

"We've been able to reunify some children, some teens with their families rather quickly because of this intensive in-home counseling program," Demangone said.

Other key services -- mental health, day treatment and drug and alcohol counseling -- assist in the reunification goal, he said.

CYF is attempting to strengthen its "kinship care" services -- when a child is placed in foster care with relatives, instead of strangers, Demangone said.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children study found that 13 percent of children in foster care in Armstrong County are placed with relatives. The state average is 22 percent.

"We are making some advances in this area," Demangone said.

CYF has proposed to use a strategy of "family finding" in its 2009-10 fiscal year, he said. "Family finding" is an evidence-based practice in which caseworkers and other staff can be trained to locate family members willing to take in a child, he said.

One program CYF is using now -- family group decision making -- could increase the percentage of children in "kinship care," Demangone said. In this program, a family -- including extended family, friends and other supporters -- makes a plan for the well-being of a child or children, he said.

According to a press release from Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, 20,000 children and youth in the state foster care system spend about 16 months in placement. In some counties, as many as 40 percent of children who have been discharged from foster care return to the system.

Armstrong County's figures for foster care re-entries have been about half of the state average since 2003.

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for children president and CEO Joan L. Benso said that the state child welfare system must do more to provide family strengthening and support and permanency for children.

"Every child deserves a forever family," she said. "No child should languish in the system without a safe, nurturing and permanent place to call home."

In Armstrong County, CYF provided ongoing services to 248 children and placed 84 children during the 2007-08 year.

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