



Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Joan L. Benso
President & CEO

116 Pine Street, Suite 430
Harrisburg, PA 17050
www.papartnerships.org

David W. Sweet, Esq.
Board Chairman

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:01 A.M. NOV. 19

CONTACT: Kathy Geller Myers
717-236-5680; 717-903-3716 (mobile)
kgmyers@papartnerships.org

LARGE PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN LIMBO IN PA **PA Partnerships for Children Releases New Report on Child Welfare System** *New report shows 30 percent of children have no prospect of a permanent family*

(HARRISBURG), Nov.19, 2008 – Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) today released a new report on the child welfare system that shows a large number of children still in foster care after 17 months despite legal guidelines that they be released for adoption. Approximately 5,500 children (of 20,000 children in care annually) living in foster care in Pennsylvania have been in placement for more than 17 months but have not been freed for adoption. For some of these children, parental rights should not be terminated as reunification with their birth family remains a strong possibility. For example, 30 percent of children in care longer than 17 months still have reunification listed as a goal in their case plan while another third has placement with relatives or adoption as a goal. On average, it takes 31 months for a Pennsylvania child to be adopted.

Federal law directs the child welfare agency to petition the court for the involuntary termination of parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 months out of a 22-month period unless compelling reasons exist not to terminate parental rights. When termination of parental rights has occurred, the child can be moved toward adoption.

However, after almost two years in the foster care system, 30 percent of children (1700) have little likelihood of ever having a permanent family to call their own. The reported goal for these children is to remain in foster care long-term or to be emancipated and age-out of the child welfare system without a stable and supportive family. Every child in foster care should have goal of legal permanence that is achieved through reunification with birth families, adoption or guardianship.

“Reunification with the birth family should be the first goal for every child in foster care. If that is not possible, another permanent family should be found, ideally with kin. Our report shows that far too many children not only spend long periods of time in the foster care system but are faced with no prospects to ever have a permanent family. Pennsylvania must make a greater and more consistent commitment to strengthen families so that reunification is feasible or take action to free children for adoption when appropriate,” said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of PA Partnerships for Children.

ADD-1

Pennsylvania faces many challenges to assure that a safe, permanent family becomes a reality for every child experiencing the foster care system. While reunification with the birth family is the goal for most children in foster care, nearly 30 percent of children who return home will re-enter placement within 12 months. More than 25 percent of children are placed in group homes and institutions while fewer than 22 percent are placed with relatives. Additionally, youth 13 and older represent more than 45 percent of children in foster care. Nearly 50 percent are placed in group home and institutions. Further evidence of our failure to achieve permanency for youth is the 1,600 young people who “age out” of the system each year to uncertain futures.

While there are clear challenges to promoting permanence in Pennsylvania, there are key strategies PPC recommends to help overcome these challenges. Some strategies include:

- Assuring a safe, permanent, legal family is a goal for every child, including older youth;
- Requiring concurrent planning for every child to begin at the time he or she enters the child welfare system;
- Ensuring necessary family supports and services such as counseling and substance abuse treatment are made available to families in order to improve safety, permanency and well-being of their children;
- Engaging families in all decision-making that impacts them and their children; and recruiting foster families willing to become permanent families;
- Actively employing family-finding measures to unearth all family members, including fathers, maternal and paternal extended family members who might meet the needs of the child;
- Developing and nurturing strong relationships between birth and foster families and creating stronger and more frequent regular interaction between birth families and their children;
- Implementing court initiatives that expedite the process to permanency and facilitate family engagement; and
- Ensuring the collection of child, program and outcome data for every county to drive policy, practice and assure accountability.

More information including county-by-county child welfare data is available by visiting www.papartnerships.org/porchlight2 or by contacting Kathy Geller Myers, Communications Director, at 717-236-5680; kgmyers@papartnerships.org

This report was made possible in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, whose mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. To learn more, visit www.casey.org. The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (www.papartnerships.org) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Casey Family Programs.

###