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Agency releases report on children in foster care

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released a report today that says about 30 percent of the children in foster care in the state have no prospect of a permanent family.

The PPC's report explains that federal law directs a 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.

The report does not list whether compelling reasons existed in any of the cases cited.

When the termination of parental rights occurs, a child may be moved towards adoption. However, across the state, the reported goal for many children's cases is to remain in foster care long-term, to be emancipated or to age-out of the system without a stable family.

As of March 2008, nearly 19 percent of the children in foster care in McKean County — which was 16 children — had been there 17 months or longer. Of that, eight children still had reunification with family as a case goal; one had, as a case goal, to live with relatives; four had long-term foster care; one had emancipation and two had guardianship as goals.

The total number of children in foster care in McKean County between Oct. 1, 2007, and March 31, 2008, was 85, and the median length of stay for those children was 11 months.

The one child who was released to adoption during that time period had spent a whopping 125 months — or 10.4 years — in foster care. That number is higher than those reported for any other county in the state.

Two children who went into guardianship spent a median of 63 months — 5.25 years — in foster care, while two children who were released to an unnamed "other" had spent a median time of 27 months in foster care.

Thirty-six children left foster care to return home to their parents after just one month, while four went to other relatives after one month.

In that same time frame, five children "aged out" of the system, and one of them had been in the system for three years or longer. Twelve children were between the ages of birth and 23 months; 15 children between the ages of 2 and 5; 10 children between the ages of 6 and 9; 10 children between 10 and 12; 14 children between the ages of 13 and 15; 21 children between the ages of 16 and 17; and three children aged 18 and over.

The report also spells out the number of children reunified with their families between April 1, 2006 and March 31, 2007 — and then re-entered foster care within 12 months. There were 86 reunifications and 35 re-entries in total. Broken down by age range, 10 children between the ages of birth and 23 months were reunified and four re-entered the system; 12 children between the ages of 2 and 5 were reunified and seven re-entered the system; seven children between the ages of 6 and 9 were reunified and four re-entered the system; six children between 10 and 12 were reunified and one child re-entered the system; 18 children between 13 and 15 were reunified and eight re-entered the system; and 33 children between 16 and 17 were reunified and 11 re-entered the system within 12 months.

The report also gives figures for a different time span. In McKean County, the number of children in foster care who returned to their families between April 1, 2005 and March 31, 2006 was 103.

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The PPC recommends several strategies to child welfare agencies to help overcome the challenges to finding permanent families in Pennsylvania. The PPC recommends 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 are made available to families; implementing court initiatives that expedite the process to permanency and facilitate family engagement; and ensuring the collection of data for every county to assure accountability.