
Limbo lessened for Bucks County's foster kids

By: **LAURIE MASON** (Thu, Nov/20/2008)

While many of Bucks County's foster kids stay in the system too long, officials here — unlike other parts of the state — have a plan for every child that will free them from foster care limbo, a state child advocacy group said Wednesday.

"You should be commended in Bucks County," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which released a statewide report this week on problems in the state's foster care system.

"In Bucks County, virtually all your children have a plan in place for them, whether it be reunification with their birth families or adoption. Your system is clearly directing itself toward these goals, and that is very good news."

The news is not so good for kids in other parts of Pennsylvania, the report shows. After spending more than two years in foster homes, at least 5,500 of 20,000 children statewide remain in foster care more than 17 months, despite a federal law making that the deadline for moving them into permanent homes.

About 1,700, or 30 percent, of the state's foster kids have been in the system more than two years and have little likelihood of ever becoming part of a permanent family, the PPC report found.

Bucks County still has too many kids staying over the 17-month limit — about 30 percent — the report showed, but Benso said that the oversight here is much better than in many other communities.

"You are very clearly focused on the well-being of your children," she said.

There were approximately 433 foster kids living in Bucks County as of March, when the study was done. Currently, 388 kids are under the care of Bucks County Children and Youth, the county's child protective services agency.

Lynne Rainey, executive director of Children and Youth, said that her staff works hard to protect children from slipping through the cracks by focusing on the problems that landed them in foster care in the first place.

"One primary factor to assisting children in exiting from foster care is the support and development of family life-long connections. The services and delivery of those services to support and develop family resources are a priority in our approach to helping children achieve permanence," Rainey said. "We are thoroughly committed to eliminating foster care limbo and have made many strides in the right direction."

Federal law says that child welfare agencies must begin the process of terminating parental rights if a child has been in the foster system for 15 of the past 22 months unless there are compelling reasons against that action. Once rights are terminated, the child can be adopted.

Only 14 percent of children in Bucks County were freed for adoption after being in the system for almost two years, higher than the state average of 10 percent, the report showed.

By comparison, Montgomery County has approximately 333 foster children, and fewer than 10 percent of them were still in care after 17 months

Statewide, it takes an average of 31 months for a foster child to be adopted.

There are many reasons why officials may not move to strip away parental rights even after the child has been in foster care over the limit, Benso said. If the parent has a drug problem, for example, and can show that they are working toward sobriety.

Getting kids back with their parents is a priority, Benso said, and that takes time.

"Reunification with the birth family should be the first goal for every child in foster care," she said. "If that's not possible, another permanent family should be found, ideally kin."

Stacy Witalec, spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Welfare, said the agency was "deeply concerned" by the PPC's findings and noted that various efforts are under way to reduce the time kids spend in foster homes.

"Our goal is to safely reduce placements by 10 to 15 percent by the end of 2010 while increasing safety and well-being," she said.

Benso, whose agency authors the "Porchlight Project," which advocates finding a permanent home for every foster child, said that staying too long in foster care can have life-long ramifications for kids. A child who spends one to two years in the system moves an average of three times, she said, and may attend numerous schools.

"Their ability to make lasting relationships with adults is diminished. They may lack the ability to trust. And there is often a significant interruption in their education."

Studies bear this out; at least 40 percent of the country's homeless population spent time in foster care as children, Benso noted.

Benso said that while the report was mostly positive for Bucks, it should still send up a red flag about the length of time children spend in foster care. She urged people to help lessen the gap by becoming an adoptive parent, especially for an older, hard-to-place child.

"We believe that every adult in society should do whatever they can to help the children in their lives."

Article's URL:

<http://www.phillyburbs.com/pb-dyn/news/111-11202008-1624842.html>