



Troubled families of Franklin County -- Foster care: How long is too long?

By VICKY TAYLOR Staff writer
Are many of Franklin County's foster children living in limbo after more than 15 months in the foster care program?

Recent figures show that 26 of the county's 88 foster children have been in foster care for one to two years, and another 18 have been in foster care for more than two years.

Those figures don't tell the whole story, however, according to Deborah E. Pheil, assistant administrator with Franklin County's Children and Youth Services.

Children and Youth is the local public child welfare agency responsible for assuring the safety and well-being of

dependent and abused children. As such, it investigates cases of abuse, neglect and assault on children.

At times those investigations result in court action that sends a child to foster care, but Pheil said separating a child from his or her birth family is an action of last resort.

Children and Youth case workers would rather keep the child in the home and work with parents and others to solve the problems within the family.

For the 88 in placement this month, Children and Youth is providing services to another 190 children in their own homes.

"When parents accept our services, we work to help them resolve their problems," Pheil said.

Yet sometimes, foster care is needed to get a child out of a dangerous situation while caseworkers try to change the situation that put the child at risk.

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And sometimes, children stay in foster care longer than caseworkers and the courts plan.

But those children aren't necessarily in limbo or without permanence, Pheil said.

"We do everything we can to see that children we work with have permanence," she said. "To truly believe in their own worth, children need to be connected to somebody and something."

Many foster children are able to go back to their families fairly quickly. In November, there were 26 who had been in foster care less than six months and 13 who had been in foster homes between six months and a year.

Although Children and Youth is the agency charged with investigating cases, it is the court system that makes the decision about whether a child should be taken from a home and placed in foster care, Pheil said.

A case must go before a judge, along with a plan to reunite the child with his or her family, and that plan is reviewed at least every six months by the court.

Federal guidelines call for foster children in care more than 17 months to be released for adoption.

While the goal remains reunification with birth families, some of Franklin County's foster children are adopted every year, Pheil said.

But others for various reasons stay in foster care until they "age out" at 18 or finish school.

"These are kids firmly connected to their foster family," Pheil said. "Some are in prescribed mental health treatment, and some just don't want to be adopted."

She tells of one young man who had a wonderful relationship with his birth father but could not go home. He also developed a very good relationship with his foster family, and after high

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school asked to stay in foster care so he could go on to college.

"His situation was permanent, even if it was not a legal situation like adoption," Pheil said. "We have had other cases like that, and they work out well."

Sometimes teenagers don't want to be adopted for one reason or another and are kept in foster care until they "age out" at 18.

"Sometimes they move into other programs, or transition into the adult system," she said. "Sometimes they just decide to go when they turn 18 just because they are looking for some kind of freedom."

Adoptions of foster children can come only after a judge terminates parental rights. Once that is done, the child is freed for adoption, something Pheil said her agency believes in when children are not able to be reunited with their birth families, or placed with relatives.

Adoptions run the gauntlet of the age spectrum, from younger children through teenagers.

"We believe every child is adoptable," Pheil said. "We've achieved adoptions of sibling groups and even an adoption of a child 17 1/2 years old."

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Franklin County foster children

In November, 88 children were in foster care, including:

- 26 children in foster care less than six months;
- 13 children in foster care six months to one year;
- 26 children in foster care one to two years;
- 18 children in foster care two to

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five years.

November in-home cases: 190
(services provided to family so child
can stay in the home)

By age, as of end of June:

- Six foster children were less than a year old.
- 15 were 1 to 4 years old.
- 14 were between 5 and 11 years old.
- 43 were between 12 and 17 years old.
- Five were older than 18.

Cases investigated in November: 99

Abuse cases investigated in
November: 31

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