



The Patriot-News

State foster care referrals on the rise

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BY GARRY LENTON

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On average, a child in foster care in Pennsylvania waits 31 months to be adopted, according to a study released Tuesday.

About 20,000 kids statewide are waiting to be returned to their homes, or adopted. For nearly 30 percent of those children, that wait will be 17 months or more, according to the report released by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

National statistics also show the state ranks in the bottom quarter among the states when it comes to finding adoptive parents for children in foster care.

And it's a problem that may worsen in the tough economy, some child welfare workers say, adding that referrals to their agencies are increasing.

"Financial stressers are some of the worst that we encounter," said Wendy Hoverter, administrator for Cumberland County's Children & Youth Services office.

The number of families referred to Hoverter's office increased 22 percent last year and was projected to increase more than 36 percent this year. She could finish 2008 with a record 1,146 referrals.

Stacey Witalec, spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Welfare, said the agency was "deeply concerned" by the PPC's findings and noted that 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.

In the second of two studies by PPC in the last two months, the group called on county child welfare agencies and the state Department of Welfare to adopt strategies that will shorten the amount of time kids spend living outside a family.

"Reunification with the birth family should be the first goal for every children in foster care," said Joan Benson, president and CEO of PPC. "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."

According to the report, only 22 percent of children are placed with relatives, which is preferred, while 25 percent go to group homes.

The latest report, while praising the efforts of county and private child welfare groups, urges more focus on the problems that most often lead to a child being removed from a parent. Among those are substandard housing and substance abuse, Benson said.

In Dauphin County, officials increased the number of child care reviews from two to four times a year, set up a program that works with families and began building up support for 18-year-olds who leave the system.

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HOMES NEEDED

There is a need for foster parents, particularly those willing to take in children with medical needs. To find out how to become a foster parent, go to www.adoptpakids.org

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