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Foster system faulted for not placing kids

By Jennifer Reeger

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Pennsylvania child welfare agencies need to improve their efforts to find permanent homes for children in foster care, a child advocacy group said in a report being issued today.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children said more than 5,500 children of the nearly 20,000 in the state's foster care system have been in placement for more than 17 months without being freed for adoption.

"The goal of a permanent family has to be the goal for every child, regardless of their age," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "We can't wait to fail at the process (of reunification) for the children for which we will fail in that process to think about, 'Now what?' We have to think about that from the first day."

Federal law directs child welfare agencies to 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.

In Pennsylvania, nearly 28 percent of children in foster care for at least 17 months have not had their parental rights terminated. In Allegheny County, that number is near 42 percent; in Westmoreland County it is close to 34 percent.

Other counties, including Armstrong, Butler, Fayette, Indiana and Washington, are below the state average.

The foster child's goal

Benso stresses that in many cases, parents are working toward reunification and even at 17 months, their rights should not necessarily be terminated.

The biggest issue to her is what the ultimate goal is for those children.

"We discovered for about 30 percent of kids statewide that goal is long-term foster care or emancipation," Benso said. "It's not acceptable to say that the permanency goal for an older youth in the system is simply to turn 18 and be emancipated."

Benso said Allegheny County has shown success in that area, while Westmoreland County's efforts fall below the state average.

In Allegheny County, about 20 percent of children in foster care for 17 months or more without terminated parental rights have long-term foster care or emancipation as a goal. In Westmoreland County, it is close to 40 percent --

the same rate of children who have reunification with parents as a goal.

Other counties in the region show mixed results.

About 58 percent -- or seven children -- in Armstrong County fit that profile, while the rate is about 8 percent -- or one child -- in Butler County. Fayette County's rate is nearly 19 percent, while Indiana County sits at 33 percent. In Washington County about 11 percent of kids whose parental rights haven't been terminated have long-term foster care or emancipation as a goal.

Westmoreland County Children's Bureau Director Shara Saveikis said that when she took on her new role late last year, she was particularly concerned with the number of children with other permanency plans, including long-term foster care, as a goal.

While those kids are predominately those older than 12 who have a choice about adoption, Saveikis brought the American Bar Association in to help the bureau develop solutions for permanency.

"We're just in the process of forming subcommittees to review our agency practices and developing some solutions," she said.

Keeping kids in the home

Marc Cherna, director of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, said his agency tries to keep kids in their homes first. If placement is necessary, an attempt is made to place with relatives before foster care.

"Could we do better? Sure," Cherna said. "I think every system could do better, and I think that's our challenge to continually do better by kids."

When a child is placed in Allegheny County, court hearings are held a minimum of once every three months -- more frequently than the law requires.

"Every day counts in a child's life, and there's always a sense of urgency," Cherna said.

Westmoreland is looking at whether to hold such three-month hearings in all cases instead of the typical six-month time frame.

Benso said for older kids, more open adoptions may be the answer.

Both Cherna and Saveikis agreed.

"Most of these parents are not monsters. They have problems, but they still love their kid," Cherna said. "To the extent you can negotiate an open adoption so they can see their kids on their birthdays or send them cards ... or still be in their lives is important for the biological parents and for the kids a lot of times."

Staying realistic

Saveikis said her agency tries to encourage adoptive families to keep that connection if possible.

"That's what we try to do and practice and encourage, making sure we encourage those relationships to continue even though we don't have anything legally to commit them to do that," said Saveikis, who advocates a law change allowing open adoptions in the state.

Cherna said such openness could prevent parents from appealing termination of their parental rights and reduce the time a child waits for adoption.

Benso said while reunification should be the first goal, agencies need to be realistic and come up with concurrent plans in case that's not possible.

Agencies should identify every member of the child's family who may provide support or potentially adoption.

"The worst-case scenario is you do some double work and the child ends up going home successfully," Benso said.

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