

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Allegheny foster care places fewest children in 19 years

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The number of children entering Allegheny County foster care was on pace last year to be the lowest in at least 19 years, according to a first-of-its-kind analysis by the Office of Children, Youth and Families.

The county had 25 percent fewer children entering its care through late June, as compared to the similar period in 2007. That would be the second straight year those numbers dropped more than 20 percent, according to the CYF report.

Local and regional leaders credit the decline to an effort by several human services agencies to help families before children must be removed from homes.

"They are doing things in Allegheny County that are a model for other counties," said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a Harrisburg-based child advocacy group. "Those are big drops. ... It should be encouraging and persuasive for other jurisdictions to think of how are they using their resources and what are their strategies."

CYF officials presented the numbers to their advisory board last week as part of a first attempt to collect and analyze long-term data.

At the beginning of 2008, the county had 1,959 children in foster care, the lowest number on that date since at least 1995, according to the data. At its peak in 1996, the year Marc Cherna became director of the county Department of Human Services, the system had 3,088 children on New Year's Day.

Cherna said he has made it a top priority to shift the philosophy of child services and ensure the department worked to avoid removing children from homes. That effort led to the development of family centers and the use of other human services agencies to spot the potential for neglect and abuse and help families solve those problems before they require CYF intervention.

CYF recorded steady drops in the number of new children in its system until a surge of adolescents entered foster care in the middle part of this decade, Cherna said. CYF had to refocus its efforts and the number of new children dropped again in 2007, about 22 percent, to 916 children.

The statewide goal is to reduce foster care numbers by 15 percent to 20 percent by next year.

"If you help (families) help themselves, they will keep their kids safe," Cherna

said. "It's a system, not just Children and Youth."

CYF has had cooperation from the courts as well as from the private sector, said Ray Firth, director of policy initiatives at the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development. Local foundations, including the Heinz Endowments and United Way of Allegheny County, have helped provide the support for prevention programs, which can often be a tough sell to government because of their costs, Firth said.

Foundations funded the effort by Human Services to compile and analyze years of data about children and families served by CYF, said Deputy Director Karen Blumen. The department worked with a research center at the University of Chicago to exhume old data and break down results by demographics and other categories.

The depth of data it is producing is rare around the state, Benso said. Cherna said he wants to use the information to help CYF determine its most and least efficient practices, hoping it can eventually be used as one tool to monitor regional offices and supervisors.

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