

Local child welfare agency scores well

Better than state average in finding permanent homes for foster children

By [David Pierce](#)

Pocono Record Writer

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Monroe County does a better job than Pennsylvania overall in moving children from foster care to either family reunification or adoption, according to an advocacy group's report.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children said the 230 Monroe County children in foster care as of March 31 were in the system for a median of 14 months. But 54 of them — nearly one-quarter of the total — remained in foster care at least 17 months without resolution of whether they would be eventually returned to their families.

"It's still lower than the statewide average" of 16 months in foster care, with nearly 28 percent statewide still in the system after 17 months, said PPC CEO Joan Benso. "It's actually a shorter-length stay than other programs. Monroe County is doing a good job of getting children home."

PPC advocates for shorter time frames from the moment children are removed from their families and placed in foster care to a final determination of whether those children will be reunited with families or placed for adoption.

"Overall the goal is to make sure every child gets a permanent family," Benso said. "What we find is there is a particular problem for older children ages 13 and older."

Monroe County Children and Youth Deputy Administrator Oscar Artiles says there might be "compelling reason" for a court to extend a foster placement without making a final determination of whether the biological parents should regain custody. For instance, parents cited for substance abuse might be in treatment programs that haven't yet been completed, he said.

"Looking at stats and numbers, they exist in a vacuum," Artiles said. "It's hard to just answer to a number."

In six Monroe child custody cases — 11 percent of those in which foster care lasted longer than 17 months — parental rights were terminated by the 23rd month, according to the report.

Local C&Y has filed for termination of parental rights for 19 children since the beginning of 2008, said Artiles, and parents of eight of them have filed court appeals. The appeals slow the process, he said.

Another problem slowing adoptions statewide, said Benso, is that Pennsylvania law requires all contact between the child and his or her extended family to end when the child is placed for adoption. Some of those children, even if they don't have a good relationship with their parents, might want to maintain ties with a grandparent or other relative, so they resist adoption.

"I think they'll tell you they have a hard time getting kids to say yes," said Benso, who called for changes in the law. "There should be more openness in adoptions for teenagers."

Artiles agrees that some foster children resist adoption when they learn they must forfeit all contact with their natural family.

"Certainly that is one of the variables in play in that," Artiles said. "The child may not want to be cut off and adopted."

Artiles said C&Y is continually recruiting for additional foster families to take foster children into their homes pending resolution of cases. C&Y places ads for foster parents, makes formal presentations to groups and distributes literature.

"We need good families to take those children," he said. "We are always looking for good homes."