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## Despite mandate, 20,000 children remain in extended foster care

By Jennifer Harr , Herald-Standard

A statewide study has found that about 25 percent of about 20,000 children living in foster care have been there for more than 17 months despite a federal mandate that they should be freed for adoption. The study, conducted by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), found that only 12 percent of Fayette County's 32 children who fit into that category have been cleared for adoption.

Joan Benso, president and chief executive officer of PPC, said that means that 88 percent of the county's children are left without the permanency studies have shown they so desperately need.

PPC is a children's advocacy organization dedicated to the well being of the state's children.

Of the 20,000 children in foster care statewide, the study showed that about 5,500 have been in placement longer than 17 months, but have not been released for adoption. The study noted, however, that of those children, the goal remains for about 30 percent of them to be reunified with their birth families.

Benso noted that Fayette County's rate for adoptions is better than the state average.

"Reunification with the birth family should be the first goal for every child in foster care. If that is not possible, another permanent family should be found, ideally with kin," Benso said. "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."

In 1980, the federal government enacted the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act. Essentially, the act requires a child welfare agency such as Children and Youth Services to petition a judge for the involuntary termination of parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 months in a 22-month period.

Benso said the primary purpose of the study, released last year, was to make it clear that each foster child "has the right to a real, meaningful and vibrant plan for family permanency."

For most children, that should be reunification with their family, Benso said, but in the instance where that is not possible, she said child protective agencies should be moving forward to have children adopted.

In some states, Benso said, child protective agencies have dual goals for foster children. On one hand, a caseworker moves toward reunification. Another caseworker assumes that will not happen, and begins working on a plan that will get the child out of foster care, and into a permanent environment through adoption.

"It's like taking an umbrella to work on a cloudy day," Benso said. "Plan A and Plan B should always happen together."

And while those plans should work concurrently, Benso said she recognizes that there are compelling reasons to go beyond the federal mandate. If a child is removed from the home because a parent has substance abuse issues, Benso said, a judge could extend the deadline for a parent making progress in rehab, but not quite ready to assume custody again.

And as a child grows older, Benso said it becomes increasingly difficult to have them adopted.

The older children are more likely to have behavioral issues, and are generally more resistant to the idea of having the parental rights of their mother or father terminated.

"Your need for a family doesn't go away when you reach 18," Benso said.

The stability that children need is important into adulthood, and is strengthened by a permanent family structure, she said.

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"Children who don't have that, don't make strong, permanent and lasting connections to people in their lives. We learn how to have long-term relationships from people in our families, and children who end up not having a permanent family can suffer emotional and social problems," Benso said.

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