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[←--back to story](#)

## County does better at placing children

CYS has better record of finding permanent homes

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POSTED: November 30, 2008

The amount of time spent in foster care for more than a quarter of Pennsylvania children in the system exceeds the federal mandate.

According to a recent report from the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children (PPC), approximately 5,500 of the 20,000 children living in foster care in the Commonwealth have been in placement for more than 17 months but have not been freed for adoption.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 directs welfare agencies to petition the court for the involuntary termination of parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 months out of a 22-month period unless compelling reasons exist not to terminate parental rights.

However, the PPC said 30 percent of children in care longer than 17 months still have reunification listed as a goal in their case plan while another third has placement with relatives or adoption as a goal.

"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. 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. Pennsylvania must make a greater and more consistent to strengthen families so that reunification is feasible or take action to free children for adoption when appropriate," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of PPC.

Although more than 25 percent of the children in the system are in placement for more than 17 months, in Warren County only 10 percent of children are in placement for longer than mandated—a percentage which Benso commended.

"This indicates that your Children and Youth agency is doing quite well," she said.

While the percentage reflect well on Warren County, Benso was cautious in making judgments about the county since small numbers like the five extended placement cases are generally overlooked statistically.

Nevertheless, Benso felt as though Warren County is expediting the process quite well for children.

"It seems to me that (Warren County is) already engaged in moving kids quickly through the system," she said, noting that the average stay for a child in placement in the county is nine months while it is 16 months statewide.

"What is a little rural western county doing right," she said.

Kevin Lundeen, director of Warren County Children and Youth Services (CYS), agreed with Benso's caution in examining small statistics and said, "In smaller counties such as Warren, sometimes the statistics do not really tell the story."

The five cases from which the statistics were drawn each have their own individual story, he added.

In the case of old children, some do not want to be adopted and chose to "age out" of the system and the court system can grant that right.

Both Benso and Lundeen indicated that court appeals and the process involved can lengthen the stay of a child in placement.

As far as the strategies the county uses to move children through the system efficiently and back to a safe home, Lundeen said CYS uses the state mandated risk and safety assessment tools to evaluate the level of risk to a child should they be returned to their home. The assessment gives a quantitative evaluation of 14 factors that would increase or decrease a child's risk. It includes factors such as the child's age and parental history of drug and alcohol abuse.

In addition to risk assessment, Lundeen said, the county Human Services director Mary Kushner has been working to bring in services to children and families at all levels from increasing foster care to in-home services such as Family Based Mental Health and Multi-Systemic Therapy.

Lundeen also indicated that new strategies are aimed at returning kids safely to their family homes or the homes of a relative sooner. The first is called Family Group Decision Making, which began in January 2008. The second is set to kick off in January 2009 and is entitled Family Finding.

"Our approach is really one of helping the family make the child safe in their home and then assisting the family to see that that happens," he said.

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