

County looks for permanent homes

It wants to decrease the number of children in foster care.

By ANGIE MASON

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York County is looking to decrease the number of children in foster care in several ways, including by increasing adoption and placing more children with their extended families.

"Every child deserves a permanent place to live," said Jerry Anderson, director of York County Children and Youth Services.

The number of children in foster care has dropped from 650 in 2006 to fewer than 500 now, but it needs to drop more, Anderson said. The county wants to cut the number in half.

Several adoption agencies held an event last week to answer questions for potential adoptive parents as part of the agency's efforts to get children into permanent families as quickly as possible.

The ideal goal for foster children is for them to be able to return to their birth families, according to adoption officials. Extended family is usually the next option.

The county is involved in a pilot program called

Pennsylvania Permanency Initiative, and one of the efforts is called Family Finding, Anderson said.

The theory behind the program is that a child has at least 100 to 300 relatives, he said. The county is aiming to find at least 40 relatives for each child as possible sources of help. A new federal law will require family finding to happen within 30 days of a child entering the system.

"It is amazing how many relatives are associated with these families," he said. "Many times, the other relatives didn't even know there were problems."

Adoption is the next-best alternative, but that gets harder as children get older and stay in foster care longer, officials said.

Last week, the nonprofit Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released a report looking at the number of children who stay in foster care longer than is ideal.

Federal law requires that, if a child is in foster care for 15 of 22 months, the child welfare agency must petition the court for termination of parental rights, said Joan Benso, president and chief executive officer of the organization. That frees the child to be adopted.

In March 2008, 151 York County children had been in foster care for 17 months or longer, according to data provided by the organization. Of those, only eight had parental rights terminated and were free to be adopted.

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Anderson said it's not because the county has not worked toward adoption.

"When it comes to terminating parental rights, one of the reasons Pennsylvania and York County, in particular, are challenged . . . is because almost every single one of the terminations are challenged," he said.

Even if the county and the local court act in a timely manner, the process slows down when it hits the Supreme Court level, he said. The state judicial system, he said, is looking for ways to speed the appeals process.

Additionally, the county can consider extenuating circumstances and decide not to terminate parents' rights, he said.

Benso said an example would be if a parent was completing drug treatment.

Stacey Witalec, spokes-woman for the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, said the lack of foster and adoptive families also makes it difficult. There are more than 3,000 Pennsylvanian kids with a goal of adoption who are waiting to find permanent families, she said.

Benso said even if the goal is for a child to return to his or her birth family, an agency should still be planning for adoption as an alternative.

Her organization also advocates for moving toward open adoption for older children, since some teens might be hesitant to say they want to be adopted. Even if children are old enough that

they can soon leave the system and live on their own, they still need a family, she said.

"Our point is it doesn't matter if a child enters (foster care) at 5 or 15. . . . It needs to be our goal to make them have a permanent family," she said.

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FAMILIES WANTED

York County always needs more families to provide foster care and to adopt children, according to adoption officials.

Amanda Wilt, an adoption caseworker for York County Children and Youth Services, said it is recommended that those looking to adopt a foster child become foster parents first so they will know the challenges they might face.

To learn more about adopting in Pennsylvania, call the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network at 1-800-585-7926 or visit www.adoptpakids.org .

The coalition

The York Area Adoption Coalition held an open house Tuesday to celebrate National Adoption Month and to answer questions about adoption. The coalition members are:

--- York County Children and Youth Services --
www.yorkcounty.org , choose "Children & Youth" under "Departments."

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