



[Print This Article](#)

Wednesday, Dec. 09, 2009

[Comments \(2\)](#) [Recommend \(0\)](#)

Safety net for kids gets high marks

Anne DanahyCentre County places the fewer children in foster care than any other Pennsylvania county of its size and type.

That's according to The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which released a report Tuesday evaluating how all counties in Pennsylvania do when it comes to children in the foster care system.

According to the report, Centre County does well on several fronts, including reunifying children with their families quickly. But the county also places a high percentage of the children in its care in group homes or institutions.

In 2008-09, almost 30 percent of Centre County children in its care were placed in group homes and 14 percent in institutions, rather than being placed with relatives or foster families. Among similar "urban mix" counties, 13 percent of children in care were placed in group homes and 12 percent in institutions.

President and CEO Joan L. Benso said the goal is to put out indicators every year that show how Pennsylvania and the counties are doing when it comes to making sure every child has a safe and permanent family.

"These are the indicators that reflect the key decision-making points in the system and the life of the child," she said.

Terry Watson, director of the county's Children and Youth Services, pointed to the very low number of children in Centre County foster care to begin with, saying that's due to the preventative efforts that are in place.

Only 50 children entered foster care in Centre County in the year the report looked at and 128 were in care. All other fifth class counties — those with populations between 95,000 and 144,999 — had higher numbers. Similarly, all other counties classified in the report as "urban mix," based on population density, had higher numbers of children in foster care and entering the system.

Watson said Centre County uses intensive, in-home services to prevent children from having to be removed from their families and put in placement.

"When the number is low, the kids who come into care have very, very serious problems or their family does," he said.

He said the intensive, in-home prevention programs include working with the entire family and are largely successful at preventing placement. The county has also had a reunification program in place for about 12 years.

Benso praised Centre County for its work getting children home quickly and keeping them home. She said the institutional placements are an area where the county could continue to improve.

She said children in institutional placements are less likely to reunify with their families and more likely to have negative outcomes, including not finishing school and becoming more involved in crime.

This is the first year for the report, which the Harrisburg-based organization plans to release annually. The report includes policy recommendations, and Benso said the hope is that policy makers won't just look at the numbers but will ask how they can address the issues and evaluate whether they're advancing policies that make sense.

Anne Danahy can be reached at 231-4648.