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Child welfare study finds Lehigh and Northampton counties reducing the number of kids in foster care

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By SARA K. SATULLO

The Express-Times

A report on the state's child welfare system has found both Northampton and Lehigh counties have safely been reducing the number of children in foster care.

The annual report by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children sets a baseline of data for counties and the state to measure progress and highlight problems.

While the data in the report is not news to Northampton County Children, Youth and Families Division Director Kevin Dolan, he said it is an important tool for the division.

"It helps administratively to realize that we are on target with the programs we've been implementing the last three to five years in Northampton County," Dolan said.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children CEO and President Joan Benso said the counties should be commended for their work.

"There's more to do but both counties seem to be safely reducing the number of children in foster care and that's a good thing," she said.

The breakdown

Both counties have great rates of reuniting children with their birth families although they tend to bounce children around more frequently than their urban counterparts and the state, the report found.

Northampton County has been able to send children home faster by creating court conferences every three months, Dolan said. Previously, there was only a court hearing, and thus an opportunity to go home, once every six months.

"We really work hard in keeping families together in Northampton County," Dolan said, adding he spends close to \$10 million annually on family preservation programs.

Both counties avoid the state trend of placing too many children in group homes and institutional settings, the report found. Rather, there is a strong focus on putting kids in foster care homes, sometimes with relatives, and putting kids back into their homes when it is safe, according to the report.

In Northampton County, where there were 761 reports of suspected child abuse in 2008, there isn't a corresponding number of children entering the system, Benso said.

This is another sign of good family strengthening work and addressing problems before a child enters the system, she said.

"They are very focused on their front door," Benso said.

Family preservation

Northampton County emphasizes giving families the tools to improve and stay together, Dolan said. For

example, the county works with agencies to create family preservation teams that are assigned to families and are on-call to help them in crisis.

The teams will come out at 2 a.m. and stay for hours to help resolve a problem, Dolan said.

The report finds that Northampton could work at using more relatives for foster care, which Dolan says is always the goal.

The report also found that Northampton has a low adoption rate; Dolan calls it a complex issue that the county is studying.

One adoption-related issue Northampton officials have been seeing stems from placing children with relatives. An aunt may welcome a child forever, but doesn't want to adopt the child, leading to permanent custodianship. Those instances hurt the division's adoption statistics but it is the right thing to do, Dolan said.

"If that child has been there (with a relative) for a year and a half, two years thriving," Dolan said, "why in the world would you go through a tough court hearing to terminate the parental rights and place the youth with a stranger? It just doesn't make sense."

Efforts to reach Lehigh County Children and Youth Services Director Pamela Buehrle were unsuccessful Wednesday.

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