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Report says DHS doing better job with foster kids

By JULIE SHAW
Philadelphia Daily News

shawj@phillynews.com 215-854-2592

A statewide child-advocacy group says that Philadelphia's foster-care system is showing encouraging signs, based on data in a new report released yesterday.

"In general, this report sheds a very positive light on what is happening in Philadelphia," Joan L. Benso, president and chief executive officer of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, an independent nonprofit organization in Harrisburg, said yesterday.

The organization released the report on the state of child welfare in the commonwealth's 67 counties with data it compiled and analyzed from other sources.

The report, coupled with other data, shows that the number of children in Philadelphia's foster-care system has declined and that Philadelphia has been doing a fairly good job of putting children in home settings while under foster care, and is on the right path in trying to find children permanent homes.

But, the report indicates, the city has a lower percentage of kids who are adopted compared with kids statewide, and such kids spend a longer time in foster care before being adopted.

In Philadelphia, 9.8 percent of children who left foster care between April 1, 2008, and March 31, 2009, did so because they were adopted, compared with 15.7 percent statewide, the report says.

The city's Department of Human Services Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose said in an interview yesterday that the agency would like to increase its adoption rate.

She also noted that the number of adoptions has increased in the city from 357 in fiscal year 2008 to 448 in fiscal year 2009, which ended June 30.

The report also shows that Philadelphia has fewer children in the foster-care system than before. On March 31, 2009, the city had 6,167 children in foster care, about a third of the statewide figure.

This was a decrease of about 400 children compared with the same day a year prior.

Ambrose said that yesterday's figure showed 5,075 kids under DHS care.

Benso, of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, also said that Philadelphia has been doing a good job of keeping kids within their family networks while under foster care and of dealing with older kids in the system.

Data show that about 25 percent of children in foster care in the city were living in a relative's home compared with 21 percent of children in foster care statewide. Benso credited DHS' decision to work with families in keeping kids in their family network.

She also pointed out that Philadelphia has a lower percentage of kids who "age out" of the system (5.1 percent of those discharged from foster care from April 2008 to March 2009) compared with the statewide figure (6.6 percent).

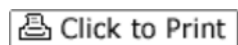
As a way to increase adoption rates, Benso said, her agency would like to see a change in state law that would allow kids who are adopted to have contact with their birth parents and siblings, if all parties are in agreement.

Ambrose said that under the system of permanent legal custodianship, in which a person obtains legal guardianship over a child but does not adopt him or her, the child can maintain contact with his or her birth family.

About 9.5 percent of children who left foster care in Philadelphia went to the home of a legal guardian from April 2008 to March 2009 compared with 5.9 percent of children statewide, the report shows.

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