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Nearly 25% of Phila. foster children live with kin

By Alfred Lubrano

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A new statewide child-welfare report shows a mixed picture in the region - including the encouraging finding that the percentage of Philadelphia children in foster care who live in the homes of relatives is higher than the state average.

Nearly 25 percent of foster children in Philadelphia are placed in the homes of relatives, compared with around 21 percent for the state as a whole, according to the report released yesterday by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a statewide advocacy group based in Harrisburg.

Children placed with family members do better than those in nonfamily settings, the group's analysts said.

"Children in foster care are best served in the least restrictive and most family-like settings," said Kathy Geller Myers, spokeswoman. "These settings are found ideally through family-finding efforts, which are the diligent searching and recruitment of relatives and extended kin. Ideally, the child-welfare system would find relatives or kin that could provide permanency for children in foster care."

Nearly 43 percent of children in foster care live with nonrelatives in the state, while in Philadelphia the number is around 34 percent. Around 13 percent of Pennsylvania children in foster care live in group homes, compared with around 11 percent in Philadelphia.

The news wasn't all good, however.

In Philadelphia, instances of suspected child abuse were recorded at a rate of 11.7 per 1,000 children in the population, compared with the state's rate of 8.3 per 1,000. In all, there were 4,753 reports of suspected child abuse in Philadelphia during the year that the report covers, from April 1, 2008, through March 31 of this year.

In Bucks County, there were 830 reports of suspected child abuse, a rate of 5.2 per 1,000 children; in Chester County, 809 reports, or 6.8 per 1,000; in Delaware County, 1,038 reports, or

7.2 per 1,000; and in Montgomery County, 836 reports, or 4.4 per 1,000.

Also, substantiations of child abuse in Philadelphia ran higher than in the state as a whole: 21.2 percent vs. 16.4 percent.

One analyst for the group said this could mean that the city's Department of Human Services does a good job of investigating child abuse. It could also reflect the high volume of abuse reports, the analyst added.

In Bucks County, substantiations ran at 8.4 percent; in Chester County, 9.8 percent; in Delaware County, 9.3 percent; and in Montgomery County, 13.5 percent.

The report shows that Philadelphia had a much greater percentage of children running away from a foster-care setting (10.9 percent) than the state as a whole (3.8 percent). In Bucks County, the rate of runaways was 0.8 percent; in Delaware County, 1.5 percent. In Chester and Montgomery Counties, no children ran away from foster care.

The rate of adoption of foster children into families in Philadelphia was poor: 9.8 percent vs. the state's rate of 15.7 percent.

"It takes six months longer for a Philadelphia child to get adopted out of foster care, and that's a long time in a child's life," said Joan Benso, president and chief executive officer of the group.

In Bucks County, the rate of adoption was 21 percent; in Chester County, 11.4 percent; in Delaware County, 15.2 percent; and in Montgomery County, 19 percent.

There were 9,905 children in foster care in Philadelphia during the year covered by the report, Benso said. Throughout the state, there were 31,537 children in foster care during that time, she added.

The group wants to use the report as a basis to compare data from subsequent years.

The nonprofit agency was founded in 1992 and gets funding from various private sources, among them the William Penn Foundation in Philadelphia, the Pew Center on the States in Washington, and the Casey Family Programs in Seattle.

Some of the questions the group wants to answer include:

Are counties keeping children safe in their homes so fewer children have to enter foster care?

Are counties placing children in foster-care settings that increase the likelihood of a permanent family for every child?

Are counties preventing children from repeat abuse or re-entry into foster care?

"This report . . . will enable us to look back every year and see how we are doing in achieving our goal of a 'forever family' for every child," Benso said.

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