

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## **Report: Local counties surpass state average in moving children through welfare system**

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Allegheny County's child welfare system is outperforming state averages in almost every category, according to a report released today by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

The county has a lower rate of child abuse and children reentering foster care than the rest of the state, according to data spanning from the spring of 2007 to 2009. A higher percentage of Allegheny County foster children reunified with their families within 12 months and a higher percentage of those children stayed with relatives.

Allegheny County's ability to keep kids with their extended families is one of the reasons it has fared so well across the board, said Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children President and Chief Executive Officer Joan L. Benso. Keeping children with relatives limits their trauma, and encourages birth parents to stay active and accountable, she said.

"I would have to say it's been our primary focus," said Marcia Sturdivant, who leads the county's Office of Children, Youth and Families as a deputy director at the Department of Human Services. "Although we put it into policy, it took us awhile to get philosophically there, for everyone to believe children are better serviced in their own families. Now it's just the norm."

Allegheny County also excels at keeping families together. More than 35 percent of foster children there stay with relatives.

The county works with a nonprofit agency that specializes in kinship foster care. It also created a program to help police find extended family before calling the Office of Children, Youth and Families. The department has had a lot of help from the region's strong nonprofit and foundation organizations to help them succeed, Sturdivant said.

"Not that we won't toot our horn, but ... we have to recognize the uniqueness of Pittsburgh," Sturdivant said. "By and large we have families who are born and raised and ... they stay here. The stability in our communities, particularly around strong family networks ... still exists here in Pittsburgh."

The county's foster children do spend a little more time in the system — an average of 12.5 months — than children elsewhere. The state average is 10.7 months, the average in other urban counties is 12.3 months, and the county has struggled for years to lower the amount of time children spend in its system.

Children in Butler, Washington and Westmoreland counties spend less time in foster care than those in similar counties statewide. Beaver and almost all of the region's rural counties are struggling in comparison to other rural counties in the state.

Allegheny, Butler, Washington and Westmoreland counties are also releasing a higher-than-the-state-average percentage of children from their welfare systems and back to their homes within a year. More than 80 percent of Butler County's foster children are reunified, and their average wait is less than a month. The state averages are 58 percent and six months.

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