

# TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Counties excel at reuniting foster children, families

By Jennifer Reeger

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Sally Dingman knew the risks of getting emotionally attached to children who weren't hers.

As foster parents, Dingman and her husband, Tim, took three children into their Latrobe home, dreamed that they might be able to adopt, then watched them go back to their own families.

"It's emotionally very hard, but in the end you realize it's out of your hands. It's the way it's meant to be," said Sally Dingman, 40. "The (Westmoreland County) Children's Bureau, they just make sure everything is safe. ... If the parents do what they're supposed to do, they deserve their kids back. They should be able to have their kids."

Westmoreland and several other area counties are helping more children in the welfare system reunify with their families at a rate better than the state average, according to a report released Tuesday by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Westmoreland, Fayette, Allegheny and Washington counties are all releasing a higher percentage of children back to their homes within a year than the state average. Children in Westmoreland's system are back with their families after an average of 4.4 months in foster care, compared to a 5.9-month state average.

The Harrisburg-based advocacy group does frequent statistical reviews on how effectively each of the state's 67 counties move children through their welfare systems. Children who spend too long in foster care are more likely to drop out of school, commit crimes, or end up homeless and unemployed as adults, according to the group.

"What the goal is with this report is to ID a set of indicators so really people can stand back and say how well is the state and how well are our counties doing to ensure our children who are at risk of abuse and neglect never enter foster care, or, if they do, enter and exit quickly into a safe and permanent family," said Joan L. Benso, president and chief executive officer of the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

More than 31,500 children lived in Pennsylvania's foster care system in 2008, according to the report. Families of more than 120,000 children received some type of service at their home to address abuse, neglect and substandard housing, often in an attempt to avoid removing children from their families.

When children do need to be removed, counties should first have to search for extended families for temporary or adoptive care, according to the group's

policy recommendations. Keeping children in so-called kinship care often helps ease the transition for children and families, leading to better outcomes, child advocates say.

Allegheny County has excelled in that area, according to the report. It works with a nonprofit agency that specializes in kinship foster care, and created a program to help police find extended family before calling the Office of Children, Youth and Families.

Westmoreland, Fayette and Indiana counties have not fared as well statistically, but officials there said the data don't tell the whole story.

Shara Saveikis, executive director, said when the Westmoreland children's bureau gets involved with a family, caseworkers first try to find relatives willing to care for the children informally, without entering them into the foster care system.

"Some of our families will choose the private arrangement and don't want to go the formal route, and some would choose the formal route," said Saveikis. She has noticed more families choosing to formally enter the kids into foster care so their relatives will be reimbursed for care.

Indiana and Fayette counties also exhaust informal "kinship care" before putting kids into the foster system.

"When the children do come in to (foster) care, there's usually not the relatives available to help," said Paula McClure, director of Indiana County Children and Youth Services. "At this point, these children are ones who may be moving toward adoption and may not have the relatives available to provide care."

The report recommends that counties review foster cases in court more often — every three months rather than the six-month reviews required by law.

"It's really a quick look at what have we worked on with the family — what's working, what's not working," said Saveikis. Westmoreland began reviewing cases more frequently in October. "Instead of finding that out at six months we're finding that out at three months."

A big concern is whether the children will end up back in the system.

Only 11 percent of children in foster care in Fayette County return to the system within a year, far below the state average of 27.8 percent. Westmoreland and Indiana counties also were below the state average.

Madison said his county stays very active with families even after the children go home by providing in-home services for months after.

"To bring them back into foster care is extremely traumatic, and that's something we don't want to do," Madison said.

Foster parents Angela and John Beers worry that too much emphasis is put on reunification to the detriment of children. When they adopted a child they had been fostering in July 2008, the Beers said the process went smoothly.

Since then, the Youngstown couple has fostered eight other children, including their adopted son's half-sister, who was returned to her birth mother.

"Most certainly there's a lot of room for improvement," Beers said. "They really need to search the background of the parents, especially if other kids were taken away from them."

John Beers, who spent his childhood in and out of the child welfare system, understands that a faster decision on permanency is beneficial to kids but worries that speed might trump thoroughness.

Sally Dingman has heard similar concerns from other foster parents, but she hasn't had any worries yet.

Since becoming foster parents 3 1/2 years ago, the Dingmans have adopted two of the children they fostered as infants. The boy and girl are now 2 years old. They are serving as foster parents to a third 2-year-old and have a 15-year-old biological son.

Still, Sally Dingman often thinks about the children she's sent home.

"It was heartbreak. You'll never forget them," she said. "You'll always think about them and wonder where they are, and you'll never see them again. But it just seems like it's in God's hand. It's meant to be. It's how they're meant to live their life."

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