

Report: OCY placing fewer kids in foster care

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The Erie County Office of Children and Youth is placing fewer children in foster care, a trend consistent with the agency's initiative to find more permanent homes for abused and neglected children.

OCY had about 12 children per 1,000 in all types of foster care between April 1, 2009, and March 31, 2010, according to a statewide study released Tuesday.

That rate is down from OCY having about 16 children per 1,000 in foster care during the same period in 2008-09, the nonprofit Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children said in its annual State of Child Welfare report.

OCY's own figures show the number of children it has placed in traditional foster care -- or with foster parents unrelated to the children -- has declined by 47 percent since fiscal 2005-06 -- June 30, 2005, to July 1, 2006.

According to the Pennsylvania Partnerships report, OCY in 2009-10 also improved to 62.6 percent the number of foster children reunified with their parents or other biological relatives.

That percentage is up from 57.6 percent in 2008-09, and is better than the statewide percentage of 53.5 percent in 2009-10, the report said.

Those figures, as well as rates for adoptions and other permanent placements, show Erie County's continued commitment to reducing reliance on foster care -- a strategy that has taken hold over the last several years throughout Pennsylvania and the United States.

The policy shift is meant to put troubled children in stable homes, preferably with relatives, rather than let them languish in foster care for years, until many of them are too old to be adopted.

"Those are the cornerstone strategies," said Joan Benso, chief executive of the Harrisburg-based Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Referring to the information on Erie County, Benso said: "I think we have good news here. It is very positive trend data."

The primary responsibility for OCY and other child-welfare agencies is to make sure children are safe, Benso said. Once officials achieve that, she said, the agencies must ensure a child has a permanent home, whether with relatives, a legal custodian or an adoptive family.

OCY and the other agencies must handle children by "acting prudently and swiftly to make sure they don't grow up in the foster care system," Benso said.

Benso has worked on developing permanency strategies with child-welfare administrators statewide, including the director of OCY in Erie, Mary Ann Daniels.

Since she took over at OCY in February 2008, Daniels has pushed for more permanency and less use of foster care, particularly long-term foster care.

Helping fuel the nationwide policy is a 2008 federal law, the Fostering Connections Act. It allows the use of federal money to help children who leave foster care to live with relatives other than their parents, according to the Associated Press.

Daniels referred to long-term foster care as "stranger care," and she equated long-term foster care with having the government raise a child.

"I don't think the government should raise the child," Daniels said. "A family should raise a child, permanently."

The use of one program has driven much of Erie County's permanency figures. It is subsidized permanent legal custody, or SPLC, in which a judge permanently places a child with a relative or other legal guardian while leaving open the possibility that the biological parents can still have contact with the child.

The program is less time-consuming and absolute than adoptions, in which a judge terminates parental rights, and often works well for older children who are in foster care, Daniels and other officials said. Erie County had its first SPLC placement in fiscal year 2008-09, with the numbers increasing to 44 in fiscal 2009-10, an anticipated 64 in fiscal 2010-11 and a projected 94 in fiscal 2011-12.

"There are cases that fit that need," said Erie County Judge John J. Trucilla, who has advocated the SPLC program as head of the local courts' Family Division, which includes OCY cases of dependent children. Trucilla -- who hears the bulk of the OCY cases along with Judge William R. Cunningham -- said he is "very pleased" with the efforts of OCY and the courts to place foster children in permanent homes.

"There is no question that there is a restructuring and a reorganization and a change in a way we handle dependencies," Trucilla said. "We have had a lot of success."

As Daniels said, OCY "still has a lot of work to do."

The Pennsylvania Partnerships report pointed out what it considered a high rate of children in foster care in Erie County moving from one foster home to another -- a situation that can lead to instability for the child.

Daniels questioned the Pennsylvania Partnerships' figures for those movements. She said any increase might be due to OCY relocating foster children from foster homes to more permanent homes, with relatives and others, during the same calendar year.

Overall, statewide and in Erie County, the child-welfare system is changing for the better in terms of eliminating long-term foster care, said Benso, head of the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

"There is a sea change," Benso said, "and the results are showing."

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