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## Schuylkill child welfare reports mixed

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Local and state leaders are encouraged by a recent report on child welfare in Schuylkill County and across the state, but the number of child abuse cases and other figures are raising concerns.

The report, released last week by the nonprofit youth advocacy group Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, shows the county making gains in a number of crucial areas.

Fewer children are re-entering foster care after reuniting with their families. Fewer children are bouncing between temporary homes and more are finding permanent family settings.

The total number of children in foster care in Schuylkill County dropped from 509 last year to 444 this year, according to the report.

"Like every other county, you've got work to do. But you're really on the right pathway," Joan Benso, executive director of the partnership, said in an interview last week.

The report showed that in 2009, about 16.5 percent of children in the county's Children & Youth Services system eventually re-entered foster care after returning to their parents or legal guardians. That percentage has fallen this year to about 11 percent, while the state average remained steady at about 27 percent.

Last year, 37.9 percent of children in the system had three or more foster homes in a 23-month period, but that number fell this year to 22.1 percent.

The state figure rose from 33.3 percent in 2009 to about 36 percent this year, according to the report.

However, not all the news is good.

The number of substantiated child abuse cases has gone up this year. So far in 2010, 347 child abuse cases have been reported to Children & Youth and of those, 20.2 percent have been confirmed by county caseworkers.

Last year, 345 cases were reported and 16.2 percent were confirmed.

Children & Youth Director Lisa Stevens said the increase in substantiated cases is in part due to the work of her caseworkers and to the increased willingness of school employees, pediatricians and others who come in contact with children to report anything that could indicate abuse.

"If there's suspicion, it's our job to investigate," Stevens said in an interview last week. "We never leave a child in an unsafe situation."

While more confirmed child abuse cases is certainly not a good thing, Benso said there are positives that can be taken from the figures.

"When we see substantiation rates going up in a county from a child protection standpoint, that's not a bad thing," she said. "It does mean that they're doing their due diligence. They're doing their homework. Unfortunately, they're finding more allegations that are founded."

Statewide, the number of reported child abuse cases and confirmed cases fell slightly from 2009 to this year.

The number of children who leave the system through emancipation - which means they turn 18 before finding a permanent home - has also risen to 9.8 percent this year, from 8.2 percent in 2009.

It has gone up slightly statewide during the same time, from 6.6 percent to 6.9 percent, according to the report.

Becoming an adult without having ever had a permanent, stable home can have grave consequences, Benso said.

"They're more likely to be homeless at some point in time. They're more likely to have unintended pregnancies. They're more likely to be in trouble with the law. They're less likely to complete their education," she said.

Stevens said Children & Youth has increased its focus on children approaching emancipation and said some children, even in their late teens, still want to be part of a family.

"We've had one youth who was adopted at 19," she said. "We've been setting up transitional meetings with kids before" they hit

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emancipation to address the problem and prepare soon-to-be adults, she said.

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