

## Foster care placements falter in county and beyond

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The number of children living in foster care is declining in Lebanon County, which reflects a statewide trend, a nonprofit youth advocacy organization reports.

Almost 90 percent of counties in Pennsylvania recorded a reduction in foster care placements in the past year, the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children has reported. The actual number of children in foster care across the state dropped from 31,537 to 27,776, according to the organization's figures, which were collected by the Porchlight Project, an affiliated research group.

The drop in number of placements is seen as a positive development because children living safely with their birth parents, a guardian or adoptive family are considered to be in a healthier environment when compared to a lengthy stay with a foster family, said Joan Benso, president and CEO of PPC. Those who stay in a foster home for a lengthy period are more prone to mental-health and other problems.

"We are very happy with the data. It is good news," she said. "The number of children in placement is going down. And the correlation between that and the fact that re-entry (into foster care) and abuse numbers are not increasing is a good indicator that we are safely reducing the number of foster care placements in the state."

In Lebanon County, 187 children were placed in foster care between April 2009 and March 2010, compared to 215 during the previous 12-month period, according to the Porchlight Project data. That is a decline of

13 percent, which slightly outpaces the state's decline of 12 percent.

Reducing foster care placement has been a priority for the county and the state for many years, but not at the expense of a child's safety, said Jim Holtry, director of Lebanon County Children and Youth Services.

"What has happened over the last few years is, we have made a concerted effort to provide more intensive in-home services to the family," he said. "But I don't want people to get the wrong picture. If a child's safety is in question we go with placement."

The in-home services are contracted through Youth Advocate Program, a youth counseling service whose caseworkers frequently visit the home, Holtry said.

"We contract with the Youth Advocate Program, and they provide intensive in-home, family-based services dealing with parenting and getting the kids involved in community, providing educational assessments - it's an array of services," he said. "They may be in the home two, three or even four times a week."

Foster care placements include children living with foster-parents, in a group home or a residential facility, Holtry said. The latter is where youths with mental or behavioral problems are sent where they can receive counseling.

The county's foster care placement numbers are lower than what is included in the PPC report -



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possibly because the reporting periods were different or those placed in multiple foster homes were duplicated, Holtry said. But they still reflect the same downward trend in foster home placements.

Children and Youth Services is funded by the state and county and operates with an annual budget of about \$7 million, Holtry said. A reduction in out-of-home placements also saves money, although that is not the motivating factor for encouraging more in-home treatment.

"It has always been my feeling that you need to address issues while the children are in the home," he said. "Keeping them in their own community is critical because that is where they have ties to their school district and other support."

In addition to monitoring the foster care system, PPC is pushing for legislation that will promote adoption and clarify the rights of foster children, Benso said.

On Wednesday, the state Senate unanimously passed a bill designed to increase the number of teens adopted by allowing them to maintain contact with their birth parents and siblings, if the adoptive family agrees, Benso said. Under current law, those arrangements can be made informally, which means an adoptive family could end the connection at any time. By making it a statute, it ensures the child has the right to remain in contact.

"Many teens don't want to be adopted because they don't want to have their parental rights terminated. They want to continue having contact with their birth family," Benso said. "Hopefully creating an open adoption for kids in foster care will change this."

Other states that have adopted the law have seen their adoption rates rise, Benso said. The bill will

now move to the House but must be passed quickly before the session ends.

PPC is also advocating a bill that would consolidate into one statute the rights foster children and foster parents have, Benso said.

"It would make sure that every child in the foster care system and every adult fully understand what protections available to the child how to exercise them," she said. "It doesn't extend the protections; it simply codifies what they are - it's almost like a consumer protection law."

Benso said her organization will continue to collect data as a way of monitoring the foster care system and protecting the rights of neglected and abused children.

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