

# Bucks and Montco get good marks from child welfare group

By: PETER HALL The Intelligencer

**The number of Bucks County children in foster care declined, while the number of children who left foster homes for permanent homes increased last year, according to a report released Tuesday by a child welfare advocacy group.**

In Montgomery County, the number of children in foster care dropped only slightly and the number of children who found permanent homes stayed level.

But indicators of child welfare performance in both Bucks and Montgomery in those and many other areas examined in the report were better than the average for other urban counties or Pennsylvania as a whole.

"The good news here is that there is good news here," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children, which published the report.

The PPC's report, "The State of Child Welfare," is part of its Porch Light Project to pursue public policy reforms and build political will to ensure that all children have a permanent home where their needs for safety and well-being are met.

The report looks at data provided by children and youth services agencies in each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties and compares it from year to year to assess progress toward the goal of providing safe and permanent homes.

"The overall picture in Pennsylvania is that we are really on the right track here," Benso said.

That statistical picture will be useful in coming months as Pennsylvanians elect a new governor and state agencies prepare for the change in administration, Benso said. The PPC will be able to make a case that current policies and systems are working.

In Bucks and Montgomery counties, the numbers show child welfare administrators are committed to the group's goal of safely reducing foster care placement and increasing family reunions when appropriate, Benso said.

According to the report, the number of children in Bucks County's foster care program dropped about 8 percent to 593 from 2009 to 2010.

Of those 593 children, more than 91 percent exit the foster care system by going to a permanent home with their birth parents, through adoption, guardianship or to live with other family members. That number increased from about 86 percent in 2009. The state average is about 87 percent.

Although other Pennsylvania counties performed better on average, Bucks increased the number of children placed in foster family settings from 62 percent to 65 percent. It also decreased the number of children placed in group homes or institutions from 33 percent to 30 percent.

In Montgomery, the number of children in foster care dropped negligibly from 526 to 521 between 2009 and 2010. The number of children who left the system to enter a permanent home remained level at 87.8 percent, slightly better than the state average.

And the number of family placements in Montgomery County declined from 69 percent to 62 percent, while the number of group or institutional placements increased from about 28 percent to 31 percent.

Benso said that the numbers for Bucks County are encouraging because they indicate the county's children and youth services agency is demonstrating a preference for family placements.

"The trauma of a child being removed from his or her home is being mitigated somewhat because they're living with someone they know," she said.

Benso also noted that the number of children leaving the foster care system because they turn 18 has dropped in both counties, which indicates the system is working efficiently to place children in permanent homes.

Benso said the fact that Montgomery County's numbers stayed level or regressed slightly is no cause for concern. She said Montgomery County is performing better than the state average in most areas.

"I don't think there is anything there that sends us a warning sign," she said.

Bucks County Children and Youth Director Lynne Kallus-Rainey said the agency's improvement in family placements is attributable to two factors: A state law that requires social workers to do an exhaustive search for kin with whom to place abused or neglected children and a new strategy for drawing on the strengths of a child's extended family network.

"Generally, there are strong members of a family network. Are those strong members of the family network willing to come forward and support the child?" Kallus-Rainey said.

Kallus-Rainey said the Bucks County Children and Youth Social Services Agency is also examining why the number of children re-entering the foster care system after returning to their families jumped from 15 percent to 22 percent between 2009 and 2010. Montgomery County saw a similar jump from about 8 percent to 15 percent.

Such a jump could be attributable to failed reunions involving a number of large groups of siblings. In other cases people are simply unable to cope with the challenge of caring for children as they watch the children's parents struggle with addiction or other issues, Kallus-Rainey said.

Bucks Commissioner Diane Ellis-Marseglia, a licensed clinical social worker who has paid particular attention to foster care issues as a commissioner, said she's glad that the Porch Light Project is tracking the data, but noted that it doesn't include information on whether children are being placed in homes in their own counties.

Marseglia has raised concern about agencies hired by Bucks County that use group homes and foster families outside Bucks County.

When children are separated from their parents and schools by long distances, it compounds the trauma of being placed in foster care, she said.

Peter Hall can be reached at 215-345-3067 or [phall@phillyBurbs.com](mailto:phall@phillyBurbs.com)

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