

Child advocates laud Monroe and Pike anti-abuse, foster programs

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Reported child abuse incidents and foster care placements are both down in Monroe and Pike counties, according to a children's advocacy group.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which issued a statewide report on child welfare, credited local officials with enacting successful early intervention programs.

"There are a lot of positive practices in your counties that are strengthening families and moving people through the system faster," said group spokeswoman Kathy Geller Myers.

One program assigns nurses to homes of low-income, first-time single mothers in both counties to help moms cope with stress and make the right decisions. "That is a program that has proven to reduce child abuse," Myers said.

Monroe County Children and Youth also uses a family group decision-making program in which caseworkers work closely with parents and extended families and friends when children have been removed from a home. "They actually engage the parents in what they need to do and stuff that needs to be done to get their children back," she said.

Another program employed in the two counties uses paralegals to help expedite permanent placement decisions in the courts.

Initial suspected child abuse reports in Monroe dropped from 379 last year to 349 in 2010. Monroe's new rate of 9 abuse reports per 1,000 children is lower than the average rates for rural counties and the state as a whole.

Initial child abuse allegations in Pike County dropped from 127 last year to 108 this year. The new figure translates to 8.2 incidents per 1,000 children.

Monroe needs to cut down on the number of times that children in care for one to two years change placements, Myers said. More than half of Monroe children in this category had three or more placements.

"Every time a child moves, the traumatic experience of separation and lack of continuity in his or her life grows," she said.

Diane Rogers, Monroe Children and Youth's program manager, said multiple placements sometimes make sense, given the circumstances. Children are removed in an emergency and placed in temporary care, pending a more permanent placement.

"Within the next 72 hours we are generally able to get them into a placement within their school district," Rogers said.

It sometimes takes a while to put multiple siblings into a foster setting that can accept all the brothers and sisters without breaking them up, she added. Sometimes relatives are screened and approved to take in siblings.

C&Y assistant administrator Stacie Gill credited the array of intervention services used by the agency — both by staff and subcontractors — with improving outcomes.

Myers said Pike should reduce the upward trend of older youth "aging out" of the system and becoming emancipated before authorities find permanent homes for them. This year, 19 percent of youth were emancipated, compared to 13 percent last year.