

# The Daily Item, Sunbury, PA

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## **Worker harder to rescue children**

— A recent study by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children raises thought-provoking questions about the effectiveness of efforts to move children from foster care back into the homes of their biological families.

Nine out of every 1,000 children in Pennsylvania are in foster care. In rural areas, the rate increases to 10 children out of every 1,000, and in Northumberland County, 12.4 children out of 1,000.

The statistics are significant because children in foster care are more likely to experience lifestyle setbacks that reduce their quality of life and make them more likely to add strain on social service programs.

County officials say the elevated foster care rate is tied to the social problems that are plaguing the county — double-digit joblessness, poverty, drug use and street gangs.

The number of children in foster care is only part of the story. Just as telling, Northumberland County's foster care program has been less successful at returning children to their biological families.

More than 1-in-3 foster children in Northumberland County end up in foster care more than once. The statewide rate is closer to 1-in-5.

That means Northumberland County's social services have not been as effective as similar programs in other counties at solving the problems that caused families to fracture in the first place. County administrators did an adequate job of describing the challenges. Solutions were less clearly defined.

Foster care placement seems like a symptom of a broader social disease as too many of our families are struggling to hold their lives together.

Too many are failing.

The state and nation have serious budget issues to resolve, but we have become overrun by rhetoric about the expansion of government and fears about spending. The simplistic view holds that the government can do no good, so we ought to eliminate programs — casting government workers out of their jobs, in the process — while abandoning those who need support. It is tempting to muse about those anonymous lazy people who collect unemployment because they cannot pass employment screening drug tests.

But we, as a civilized society, have an obligation to help the less-fortunate.

We have known this since the 19th century, but we are still puzzling over finding methods that work best. If social programs are not working because they are flawed, they ought to be adjusted.

The recent disarming statistics indicate that, for a variety of reasons, Northumberland County has to look harder

for a better way to rescue children.