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Posted: September 22
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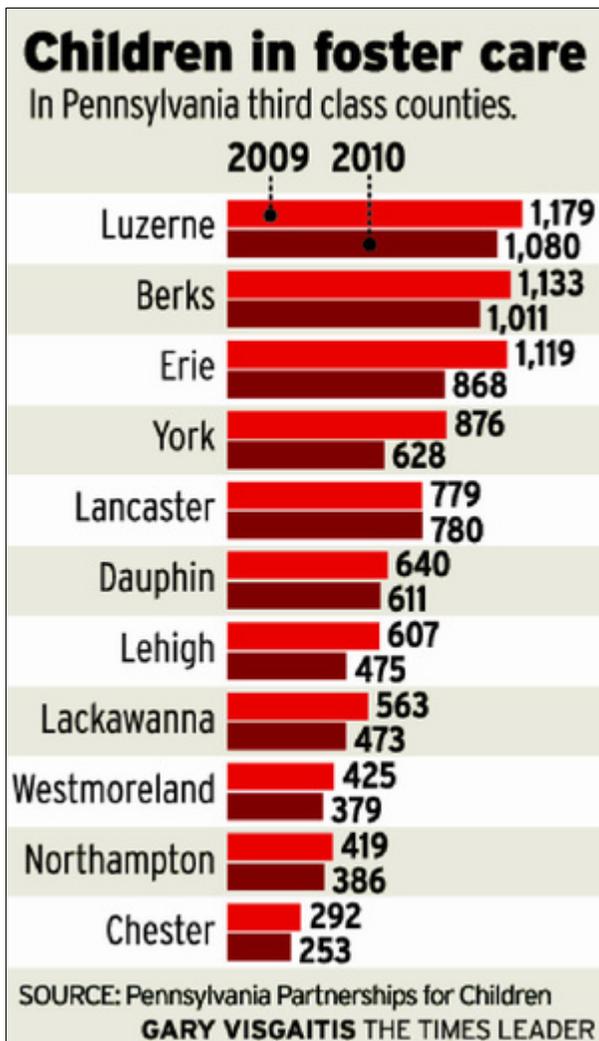
Fewer in foster care, says study

County rate here still higher than in other similarly sized counties in Pa., study says.

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Luzerne County Reporter

Fewer Luzerne County children are in foster care compared to a year ago, though the overall number of children living in temporary homes is still higher here than in other similarly sized counties, according to a new study.

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The study, released Tuesday by the nonprofit Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, says Luzerne County had 1,080 children in foster care in 2010, compared to 1,179 the previous year.

The other 10 similarly sized third-class counties have 2010 placement figures ranging from 253 to 1,011, according to the report.

County Children and Youth Director Frank Castano said Tuesday he has contacted the organization because he has different statistics.

According to Castano's figures, Luzerne County had 810 children in foster care on March 31, 2009, and 579 children on that same date in 2010.

"Their figures make it look like we have a higher placement rate," Castano said.

Pennsylvania Partnerships spokeswoman Kathy Geller Myers said the organization counted the number of children placed outside their homes for a full year, from April 1 through March 31, while counties typically use "snapshot" statistics.

State welfare officials recently commended the county for reducing the number of children placed outside their homes, both juvenile offenders and children involved in cases of suspected abuse and neglect. The county has been working with the state as part of a special program aimed at reducing juvenile placements.

"Do we have more work to do? Yes," Castano said.

Geller Myers said Luzerne County's reduction is positive. Her organization has started tracking the statistics annually as part of its mission to safely reduce the number of children in temporary living situations.

She pointed out 92 percent of Luzerne County children in foster care are placed in permanent homes, compared to the state's 87 percent. That includes the placement of children back home or with relatives, adoptive parents or other guardians, she said.

Only 19 percent of county children in foster care returned to the foster care system, compared to the state's 27 percent, Geller Myers said.

"It's obviously testament that Luzerne County is doing a good job working with families and addressing issues that put them into foster care in the first place," she said.

The county also has a higher rate of substantiated child-abuse claims than all other third-class counties and the state, Castano said. The county's rate is 20.9 percent this year, compared to the state's 15.6 percent. Substantiated claims mean the county established evidence that abuse or neglect occurred, he said.

Parental drug and alcohol abuse is the main reason Luzerne County children are removed from their homes, Castano said. A national study showed children typically remain in foster care longer when parental drug and alcohol abuse is involved, he said.

Pennsylvania Partnership's full report may be viewed at www.porchlightproject.org.

Jennifer Learn-Andes, a Times Leader staff writer, may be reached at 831-7333.

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