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Fewer children going into foster care in county, across Pennsylvania

BY DENISE ALLABAUGH (STAFF WRITER)

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The number of children being placed in foster care is declining in Luzerne County and 90 percent of counties statewide, according to a report released by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

The report showed 321 children entered foster care this year in Luzerne County, a 34 percent decline from 488 last year.

Joseph DeVizia, director of Luzerne County Office of Human Services, and Frank Castano, director of Luzerne County Children and Youth, attribute the decline to county and state officials being more aggressive to get children back in their homes or adopted.

"A lot of effort has gone into keeping kids out of placement," DeVizia said. "A major goal is giving permanency to kids."

Luzerne County is one of 16 counties statewide that participates in a National Governors' Association initiative to safely reduce the number of children in out-of-home care. The program's goal is to safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 15 to 20 percent by Jan. 1, 2012.

"We've exceeded that goal in 17 months," Castano said. "Our goal is to keep families in tact. That's our ultimate goal but when it crosses the line of jeopardizing safety, then we take action."

Luzerne County Children and Youth officials looked at factors that drive many children into foster care and implemented strategies to address those issues, Castano said. Parents' substance abuse problems are the most common factors leading to children being placed in foster care, especially at a young age, he said. These children tend to stay in foster care longer because of parents' difficulties overcoming their alcohol and drug addictions, he said.

Luzerne County Children and Youth partners with Wyoming Valley Alcohol and Drug Services, Catholic Social Services and Serrento Gardens to help parents overcome their addictions, he said. Caseworkers also do "intensive" services with families to determine what other factors threaten children's safety to help reunification occur, he said.

In addition to drug and alcohol problems, other problems that lead to children being placed into foster care include economic problems, housing and child care issues, Castano said.

While Luzerne County has reduced its rate of placing children in foster care, more children are still placed in foster care than in other urban counties and the state, according to the report.

The report also shows that children who re-entered foster care in Luzerne County in fewer than 12 months following reunification with their parents or relatives increased from 17.2 percent in 2009 to 19.1 percent in 2010.

"We know that we have been able to reduce placement but we are aware we still have some work ahead of us," Castano said.

Luzerne County still has a high rate of child abuse, Castano said. Drug and alcohol problems often lead to child abuse, he said. The report showed the numbers declined from 586 suspected child abuse in Luzerne County in 2009 to 570 in 2010.

"Sixteen less cases in Luzerne County are not big enough numbers to talk about," said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a nonprofit organization aimed at improving the health, education and well-being of children. "That's really a small change."

According to the report, the change in substantiated reports of repeat child abuse statewide showed a slight decline from 25,655 children in 2009 to 25,342 in 2010. Poverty often can be a predictor of child abuse and neglect, but that is not the only factor, Benso said.

The report showed almost 90 percent of counties reduced their foster care placements over the last year resulting in a nearly 12 percent drop in children living in foster care and a decline of more than 16 percent of children entering the system.

"Commendable steps have been taken to fulfill our goals of safely reducing the number of children in foster care and creating safe, stable, permanent family connections for all children," Benso said.

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