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# County shows fewer children in foster care

## Numbers dip from 150 to 55 children daily over decade

September 24, 2010 - By AMANDA ALEXANDER - aalexander@sungazette.com

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A number of new initiatives in Pennsylvania are making a dent in the number of children living in foster care, according to a report from Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. It shows a 12-percent decrease in the number of children in the system statewide and a 16-percent decrease in Lycoming County.

"We averaged 55 children in care (per day) last year. Back in the early 2000s, we probably averaged 150 children in care a day," said Mark Egly, administrator for Lycoming County Children and Youth. "We've made great progress in that regard."

Egly said Lycoming County has made efforts in the past few years to front-load the system, attempting to eliminate potential problems at home before children ever become part of the foster care system.

"One of our initiatives was placing a case worker out in the schools to help deal with issues while they're small, to do early crisis intervention before (issues) escalate to the point where they become formal referrals in our system," he said.

Egly emphasized that while foster families are a critical part of the child welfare system, foster care is not meant to be a permanent solution.

"We'd be lost without our foster families, and they do a tremendous job," he said. "But there's really no substitute for a child in their natural family, and it can be the most loving and caring foster home, but it's still not their home. If we can help a family address the issues that are in their home ... we want to help support the family so the children can remain in their home."

Once a child is removed from the home and placed in the foster care system, Egly said the focus turns to finding another loving home for the child.

"We do have some children who, once they enter the system, won't go home," he said. "Then our goal is to find another permanency option for them. The county is very successful in achieving permanency for kids."

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children President and CEO Joan Benso credits the statewide decline in the number of children in foster care to a collaboration between the court system, state- and countywide programs and families. While the foster care system has focused solely on the safety of the children involved for many years, Benso said the system has expanded its focus in the past few years to assure that every child has a safe and permanent home.

Benso said a number of recently implemented state initiatives are allowing more children to safely return home to their families after spending time in foster care. One of these programs, in which Lycoming County is a participant, is Family Group Decision Making.

"The county facilitates a process by which the birth parents are

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surrounded by their family members," Benso explained.

Through this program, the child can remain with the family as they work on any issues with the help of grandparents, aunts, uncles and other supportive relatives.

"Collectively, they come up with a solution to work on that problem," Benso said. "It also builds a heightened sense of accountability to a broader group."

Lycoming County increased the number of foster children being reunited with their parents within a year from 52 percent in 2009 to 70 percent this year.

In addition to family-oriented practices, the county also uses programs focusing on the courts, such as the Permanency Practice Initiative, Legal Services Initiative, the Permanency Project and the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network, all of which focus on removing barriers in the court system that prevent foster children from achieving permanent homes.

But Lycoming County still faces weak areas, Benso noted.

"There are places you still have work to do," she said.

Benso said Lycoming County reported a higher number of children in congregate care (group homes and institutions) than other, similar counties across the state. Lycoming placed 40 percent of foster children in congregate care this year, while only 25 percent of foster children statewide were placed in congregate care.

"Because of the nature of your county, it's very likely that ... fewer family members are living close by. I would say that's a place that Lycoming County really wants to work on," Benso said.

The bottom line, Benso said, is that foster care is meant to be temporary.

"Our goal shouldn't be for the system to raise the children," she said.

"Children who live in the foster care system don't have the kind of positive outcome that other children do."

Children who grow up in foster care are more likely to drop out of school, become pregnant or become incarcerated, she noted.

"Foster care is a temporary solution to an egregious problem."

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