

Report: Fewer children placed in foster care in York County

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More of Pennsylvania's foster kids found their way back into their families' homes in 2009-10 and stayed there.

And York County is no exception, according to a study released Tuesday, which compared data collected between April 1, 2009, and March 31, 2010, with the same time period in 2008-09.

The report - conducted by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children - showed the rate of York County children being placed in foster care dropped from 8.4 per 1,000 children in 2008-09 to 6 per 1,000 in 2009-10, said spokeswoman

Kathy Geller Myers.

Across the state, the rate was 9.2 per 1,000 children, she said.

Lower numbers: York County was among 90 percent of counties in the Commonwealth to reduce the number of children in foster care from 2009-10, she said, noting the report included information for all 67 counties.

"That's significant progress in getting kids safely back home and keeping them there," Geller Myers said.

In 2009-10, 628 children in York County were placed in foster care, much lower than the prior year's report of 876.

The study took a look at all counties' numbers of first-time entries and re-entries into foster care, the type of placement - including group homes and institutions- and adoption rates and lengths of stay in foster care.

York County has been working closely with problematic families "to help strengthen them rather than take the child out of their home," said Deb Chronister, director of Children and Youth Services in York County.

As a result, the number of children in foster care over the past year have declined, she said.

"If the family issues aren't safety concerns for the child, we do whatever it takes to provide counseling and support systems to help them get



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back on their feet," she said. "Foster care is meant to be a temporary intervention to assure the safety and well-being of a child."

When a child spends an extended amount of time in foster care, the likelihood of dropping out of school increases for the child, as well as the risks of experiencing mental health challenges, unemployment and homelessness as an adult, she said.

The county also beat state figures in "timely reunification," meaning when a child entered foster care for the first time, he or she was reunited with family or discharged with relatives within a year.

Approximately 70 percent of foster children in the county returned home with their families within a year, better than the 2008-09 report of 55.7 percent and the state's 53.5 percent.

Needs improvement: But not all news was stellar for York County, the report stated.

While the report highlighted some promising gains, "the news isn't all good," said Joan Benso, president and CEO with the nonprofit.

Of York County children who were in foster care for a period of one to two years, nearly 61 percent lived in three or more foster homes during that time frame.

The increase is a turnabout from the prior year's report of 53 percent, and almost double the state's 2009-10 rate.

A child experiencing multiple placements while in foster care struggles to build and maintain healthy relationships and also could suffer academically due to repeated school changes, Benso said.

Chronister agreed the ramifications of "a child in limbo and without a stable home" makes a huge impact on their adulthood. She noted York County is taking measures to reduce the number of times a foster child moves.

Foster children were generally placed in multiple homes because they were placed in temporary emergency housing if taken from their home on a weekend or holiday. The child was then moved when he or she was placed with a foster family or relatives, she said.

"Regardless, we try our best to make sure a child doesn't have to move around to more than two foster homes," she said. "It's just not fair to the child."

'Aggressive steps': Another improvement for the state and York County to address is "taking more aggressive steps" to ensure that youth do not end their child welfare experience through "aging out of the system" instead of with a permanent family, Besno said.

"Aging out of the system just isn't fair to a child," Chronister said. "For a child to enter the world with no family connections, they're more likely to end up homeless or, sadly, get into criminal issues."

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In York, 376 children left the foster care system in 2009-10; nearly 10 percent of them left as a result of turning 18 years old. The 2008-09 report found that only 5 percent of children were "aged-out" of the system in York County.

York County Children and Youth Services' goal is to continue to find ways to prevent the number of children being released from the system without a family base, said Chronister.

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