

Child Protection Improvements Pose New Challenges for Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System

Commonwealth Needs to Ensure Foster Care System Works Toward 'Forever Families'

(HARRISBURG, PA) March 31, 2015 – Improvements to Pennsylvania's child protection laws and an increased public awareness of child abuse and neglect are helping to fuel an increased need for foster care in Pennsylvania, according to a new *State of Child Welfare* report from Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC).

The number of children entering foster care in Pennsylvania has exceeded the number exiting foster care for the second year in a row, the report found. In all, 10,364 children were placed in foster care last year, compared to 9,769 who left foster care.

The increase in foster placements has been accompanied by a sharp increase in child abuse reporting, which has fueled more referrals to the commonwealth's new Child Welfare Information Solution (CWIS). In January 2015 alone, CWIS referrals specifically related to child abuse reports increased by 38 percent over the previous January.

"We've certainly made progress in better protecting Pennsylvania's children, but now we have to make sure the children who have been removed from unsafe or unhealthy environments have the services and support they need," PPC President and CEO Joan Benso said. "Our foster care system is doing a lot of things right, but there's also room for improvement."

The 2015 *State of Child Welfare* report shows Pennsylvania continues to make progress in placing children into family-type foster care settings instead of relying on "congregate care" settings such as institutions or group homes. Research shows family-based foster care is more beneficial to a child's long-term development and well-being.

The commonwealth also is making progress in reducing the length of time a child typically spends in foster care. This is beneficial because children who spend long periods in foster care are more likely to face mental health issues, drop out of school or experience homelessness or joblessness as adults.

But the report also found children in foster care who have a court-ordered goal of a permanent living arrangement sometimes never reach that goal. Many age out of the foster care system between ages 18 and 21 without ever finding a permanent family upon which they can rely. Looking ahead, Pennsylvania needs to strengthen its efforts to ensure foster care is a pathway to finding a "forever family" for every child.

"The good work Pennsylvania has done to better protect our kids has created a new set of challenges that will require us to pay close attention to our foster care system in the years

ahead,” Benso said. “Saving a child from an unsafe or abusive environment is only half the battle. We also need to do our best to make sure that child ends up in a safe, supportive and permanent family.”

PPC began issuing its annual State of Child Welfare report in 2009 to gauge the performance of Pennsylvania’s child welfare system in meeting the needs of the children and families the system serves. The report includes comprehensive data for each of the 67 counties, including information on foster care placements, children leaving or re-entering foster care, and efforts to reunify children with parents or relatives.

The 2015 State of Child Welfare report, along with county-level child welfare statistics, can be found at porchlightproject.org.

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