

Legislature shouldn't play budgetary waiting game with foster kids' lives

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Over the course of our lives we wait for lots of things: wait to see a doctor, wait in check-out lines, wait in traffic; some state employees may even have to wait to get paid during this budget stalemate. But the nearly 20,000 children in [Pennsylvania](#)'s foster care system -- placed due to abuse or neglect -- should not have to wait one more day for us to make life better for them.

In Lehigh and Northampton counties, nearly 600 children are living in foster care. The General Assembly can pass child welfare financing reform this year that would help improve outcomes for children in foster care in the Lehigh Valley and across the state -- but some legislators say it can wait until next year.

The Department of Public Welfare (DPW) is advancing a proposal that aims to help more children find permanent families and reduce the number of children who enter foster care. The plan would not cost the state any more money, and would create a set of financial incentives that would drive counties to increase home and community-based services which help keep kids safe and living in permanent families.

The revenue-neutral proposal would use the same amount of funds currently spent on child welfare -- but use them more wisely. This is an important consideration during one of the most difficult budget sessions in Pennsylvania history.

Research shows that foster children placed in congregate care settings experience poorer social and educational outcomes than children placed in family foster homes. To make matters worse, it costs about \$50,000 more each year to place a child in a congregate setting. This is the kind of change legislators need to embrace in tough budget times -- one that saves us money and produces better results.

Both Lehigh and Northampton counties have stepped up to the plate and committed to safely reducing the number of children in foster care. They have joined more than a dozen other counties in two statewide improvement efforts -- one project is sponsored by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts and the other is part of a six-state effort sponsored by the National Governors Association.

These initiatives promote best practices such as expedited court reviews and family finding. Family finding is the diligent search of maternal and paternal extended family members willing to support the birth family so a child can safely stay in his home, or if a child must be placed in foster care, making all efforts to place the child with a family member. Both counties are carefully looking at their data and analyzing problem trends within their communities that are the catalyst for children entering foster care.

The financing proposal is the next natural step to support the counties' program improvement efforts already under way and to provide a higher level of state reimbursement to support their work -- such as assuring more children in foster care are placed in home settings -- and providing special incentive grant funding for the use of evidence-based practices.

The measure needs to be passed with the 2009-2010 Pennsylvania state budget. Under current child welfare law, counties must submit their budget requests for the following year by Aug. 15. Waiting to pass this proposal will delay implementation of the changes by a full fiscal year! That's 12 months from now and that's a long time in the life of a child who is living out of home, awaiting placement with a family to call his or her own.

Yet, some legislators say child welfare financing reform can wait. Do we really want to tell nearly 600 children in the Lehigh Valley they can wait another year to be reunified with their families or placed in permanent homes? If we could do something now that would improve the lives of thousands of our most vulnerable children in Pennsylvania, why wouldn't we?

This is one of the most important measures the General Assembly can pass for children.

Joan L. Benso is president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). To learn more about this proposal, see <http://www.porchlightproject.org/pdfs/faqs.pdf>.