



The Patriot-News

Study cites foster program shortfalls

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BY GARRY LENTON

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More than 20,000 children were removed from their homes in Pennsylvania for their own protection in the last year. Most will spend up to 16 months in foster care.

Of those, about a third will return to a foster home within a year of being reunited with their families.

Another third will be moved three or more times, according to a study by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

The long stays and frequent turnover are harmful to the children, many of whom end up struggling in school or dropping out, said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

"The challenge is that we continue to traumatize children," she said.

Benso said she hopes the study will convince child welfare agencies across the state to adopt aggressive, consistent strategies to strengthen the families children are taken from.

"This could reduce the number of children at risk," she said.

"I'm not surprised a bit," said Sarah Cooper of Harrisburg when told of the study. Cooper, 27, a teacher, and her husband, Scott, have taken in 11 foster children since March 2007.

The couple's first foster child was a 3-day-old girl, who they have adopted. She's now 17 months old. This week, the Coopers took in their new daughter's 3-day-old brother.

Cooper, who was a developmental therapist, said she worked with foster children and witnessed the program first hand. She's seen children taken from homes and returned, only to be taken away again.

Midstate children and youth programs scored fairly well on the data Partnerships for Children examined.

In Cumberland County, kids move to adoption in about 24 months, compared to a statewide median of 31 months. But the county places only about 9 percent of children with family members, compared to 22 percent statewide.

Dauphin County's children waited about 30 months for adoption and spent slightly longer in foster care than the state average, but the agency got praise for its work with families.

"We're on the cutting edge of everything right now," said County Commissioner George Hartwick III, who has oversight for child welfare services.

The county increased child care reviews from two to four times a year, set up a program that works directly with families and is building support for 18-year-olds who leave the system.

The Partnerships for Children study said about 1,600 children statewide leave foster care each year with no permanent home to go to.

"We think the report is an accurate reflection of the foster care system in Pennsylvania," said Stacy Witalec, spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Welfare, which oversees federal funding for child welfare

programs.

The department is working to decrease the number of children in institutional care or group homes by trying to recruit more people like the Coopers, Witalec said.

"Unfortunately, there is still a stigma surrounding children needing foster care," she said. "That's a barrier to them moving out of the foster system permanently."

Cooper said she and her husband have no regrets.

"The children we have had at our home have all been wonderful," she said.

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HOMES NEEDED

There is a need for foster parents, particularly those willing to take in children with medical needs. To find out how to become a foster parent, go to www.adoptpakids.org.

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