

Local**CUMBERLAND COUNTY****Seeking permanence in foster care****Local agency agrees with new report emphasizing the need for children in foster care to end up with a safe, permanent family.**

By [Heather Stauffer, Sentinel Reporter](#), November 23, 2008

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The goal is clear, and everyone involved agrees on it: Children in the foster care system should end up with a permanent, safe family.

But when it comes to assessing how an agency performs in relation to that goal, things get murkier.

Last week, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released a new study focused on a federal law requiring child welfare agencies to petition for involuntary termination of parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 months out of a 22-month period.

“Our report shows that far too many children not only spend long periods of time in the foster care system but are faced with no prospects to ever have a permanent family,” said Joan Benso, president and CEO of PPC. “Pennsylvania must make a greater and more consistent commitment to strengthen families so that reunification is feasible or take action to free children for adoption when appropriate.”

Reunification with the child’s family is the first goal, and progress toward that is a “compelling reason” why an extension of the 15-month period can be granted. But to prevent children from languishing in the foster care system, agencies are to take reasonable and timely steps toward “forever families” for children — adoption, legal guardianship, placement with a relative or other planned permanent living arrangement — if reunification is not in their best interest. That’s where the numbers begin — with a caveat.

Numbers

Of the 20,000 Pennsylvania children in care annually, the report says, about 5,500 had been in the system for more than 17 months but had not been freed for adoption. And in Cumberland County, only 16 percent of children were freed for adoption after being in the system for almost two years.

“Think about what two years is in the life of a 6-year-old,” Benso said. “It’s actually a very long period of time.”

The catch in those figures is that, because of what Benso and county Children and Youth Services administrator Wendy Hoverter say is a weak record-keeping system, they don’t show what portion of those children haven’t been freed for adoption because the parent is making progress toward reunification or the child has declined to be adopted.

Both women agreed that can be a big catch.

Asked if they want to be adopted, “Very, very often, teenagers say no,” Benso said.

And, Hoverter said, because reunification with the family is the primary goal, case workers may request an extension to give parents a few more months to complete drug and alcohol treatment or prepare suitable living arrangements for the child.

Additionally, she said, sometimes it is the child who is in treatment and “living with a relative, that’s a compelling reason in and of itself.”

Hoverter also pointed out that the county has a good record when it comes to permanent placement. It’s measured on a different scale nationally, she said, with the standard across the country at about 106. Higher is

better on that scale, she said, and Cumberland's score of 156 — above the statewide 103 and other Class Four counties' 123 — is significant.

That leads to the second set of figures, this one showing that after almost two years in the system, 30 percent of children across the state have a reported case goal of long-term foster care or aging out of the system. Because those aren't "forever family" goals, in PPC terms those children "have little likelihood of ever having a permanent family to call their own."

The Cumberland County number reported in that criteria is 37 percent.

But again, Hoverter raises concerns about the number. In Cumberland County, "There is no goal such as long-term foster care," she said, explaining that confusion as to how classifications are defined might skew the findings.

Going back to the time period on which the report is based is difficult, Hoverter said, but she pulled current statistics and found that right now, the county has a total of 70 children who have been in placement for 17 months or more. Their reported goals are as follows: 35 adoption; 3 permanent custodian; 14 family reunification; and 18 a combination of emancipation or a planned permanent placement.

"I think that kind of sheds a different light on it," Hoverter said.

Improving

Regardless of what the numbers show, both women say permanent placement is an area in which the entire foster care system can always improve.

"We need to be engaged in a dual-prong process," Benso said, explaining how concurrent planning should be "laser-focused" on ensuring that a child will be successfully reunited with a birth family but also provide a ready back-up system if that goal has to be abandoned.

Programs across the state also need to increase the emphasis on a program called "family find," which pulls together all the stakeholders in a child's life to be part of the family's support system and decision process.

"Who's the next-door neighbor or Mom's best friend?" Benso said. With that support, "Oftentimes we don't ever have to remove the child from the home, because the family gets the support they need to be successful."

That system has been in use here, Hoverter said, and has seen success. Appeals also tend to add to the length of the process, she said, so administrators are trying to streamline that by combining two of the necessary ones.

And, Hoverter said, caseworkers do what they can to convince older children to seek some kind of permanent placement instead of just aging out of the system.

"If they're 18, we can talk ourselves blue in the face and not convince them," she said. PPC is also looking at ways to encourage more open relationships between biological and adoptive or foster families, when appropriate.

"You actually have a really terrific system," Benso said. But she still would like to see every child have permanent placement.

"I have a child who's 18 and a child who's 25, and I'm not done being their parent," Benso said. "A family is something you have your whole life."

"Our goal of a permanent family has to be a goal for every child, whether they enter the system at 5 or 15," Benso said.