

Foster care: Does it deliver?

A new statewide report suggests Lancaster County children in foster care languish too long in the system before finding secure, permanent homes.

By ROBYN MEADOWS, Staff Writer

For children in foster care, the journey to a stable home is long and sometimes never ending.

Here in Lancaster County, the median length of stay for a child in foster care is 19 months, according to a new report.

Of the 517 children in foster care in Lancaster County as of March, 128 had been in the system for longer than 17 months, despite a federal law that requires proceedings to terminate parental rights to start in 15 months for most cases.

Of these children, 82 percent, or 105 of them, had not been freed for adoption.

Children who spend too much time in the foster care system lose stability in their lives and the sense of belonging and support that they need to succeed, according to a report called "The Porch Light Project," which looks at foster care data up to March.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a Harrisburg nonprofit child advocacy agency, released the report in mid-November.

Statewide, 89.5 percent or 4,976 of 5,560 children in foster care for more than 17 months had not been freed for adoption, the report found.

Local child welfare officials say there are many legitimate reasons why children are in the system that long.

Joan Benso, executive director of PPC, which advocates for child welfare on such issues as education, agreed that there are compelling reasons not to terminate parental rights too soon. Those reasons are not being tracked by the state, she said.

"But there is a point where you must ask yourself, 'How much of childhood is acceptable to spend in the foster care system?' " she said.

Crystal Gingrich, executive director of the Lancaster County Children and Youth agency, said the county is making strides toward improving services and cutting back on the red tape that can confine a child in the system.

"Of course there is always room for more improvement," she said.

There are some things that could be improved on the part of Children and Youth and others on the part of the court, Gingrich said.

The future is cloudy for the county's 105 children receiving foster care for more than 17 months, the report said.

According to their case plans, the goal for 44.5 percent of them was long-term foster care and emancipation.

Statewide, it's 30.6 percent.

Reuniting with their family was the goal for 22 percent of children in Lancaster County, or 28 children as of the time the report was written.

That's unacceptable, Benso said. Children who grow into adulthood while they are in the foster care system often will live in poverty as young adults; they are more likely to land in prison.

The support offered by a family does not end at the age of 18, Benso said. Family members are there for all of life's joys and sorrows.

Lancaster County Court Judge Leslie Gorbey has been working to launch a program called CASA in Lancaster County. It provides foster children with another advocate to look out for their interests.

"I think if one child languishes in foster care, it is one too many," she said. "I wish we could be perfect. We are certainly trying to make things better."

Lancaster County Court has added two more judges for dependency hearings. The orphan's court, she said, addresses the termination of parental rights two or three days a week.

Gingrich said that it is rare to see a child whose parents' rights have been terminated in 17 months.

Families have plans and goals, and the court reviews their progress toward the goals every five months.

"If they have not made substantial progress, then we would start the process of filing a petition," Gingrich said.

If they are making progress, the court will give them more time to make the changes in their lives that would create a stable environment for their children and eventual reunification.

But there are other reasons that children remain in foster care for extended periods.

At the age of 12, for example, children must consent to being adopted. They often refuse.

And some children and teenagers have serious behavior problems, making it difficult to find an adoptive home, and the state does not want to create "institutionalized orphans," Gingrich said.

For older children who are averse to being adopted, Benso suggests that the state could create an open process, so the child could retain some sort of relationship with their biological family. The state of Oregon has such a process.

Then, too, children remain in foster care additional months if a parent loses their rights and chooses to appeal the ruling.

The appeal process takes time to go through a higher court.

State court officials are holding roundtable discussions to improve procedures, and there are changes in motion to streamline the appellate court process, Gorbey said.

But in the end, "You are always going to have children who are not going to be adopted, but that doesn't mean they don't have stability," Gorbey said.

Dawn Yoder is a social worker with Bethany Christian Services, an agency that contracts with Lancaster County Children and Youth to facilitate adoptions.

She believes red tape is a real problem.

"I have seen that children can get held up in the system," Yoder said.

What she's also seen: Many caseworkers are burned out; they need more support and smaller caseloads.

"I've talked with children who will have three or four caseworkers," Yoder said.

Gingrich said that the average case load is 11 to 15 per caseworker, and that is "within the state average."

Attorney Lisa McCoy is a court-appointed guardian ad litem for children in the foster care system. She advocates for a child through the court process.

She believes that Lancaster County complies with the federal law.

The court system here does "a wonderful job of holding everyone accountable for their actions. They never lose sight of what's best for the child," she said.

PORCH LIGHT PROJECT PROPOSALS

- Set the goal of providing a permanent legal family for every child in the foster-care system.
- Provide counseling and substance-abuse treatment.
- Engage families in decision making for themselves and their children.
- Recruit foster families to become permanent families.
- Employ all measures to find other relatives to care for the child.
- Develop relationships between birth families and foster families.
- Expedite court procedures to find permanent homes for children.
- Ensure data collection for every county to assure accountability.

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