

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Allegheny excels at reuniting foster children, families

By Tim Puko

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, December 9, 2009

Brandi Harrison has cared for more than a dozen foster children at her Carrick home in the past three years. Some of those children were reunited with their birth parents or relatives, but some who did returned to Allegheny County's child welfare system.

"Some families, the problems with the parent are the same for the whole family, and in those cases it's not the best for the children," said Harrison, 35. "Usually it goes well. I've had younger ones, so they might jump up and down, they'll run and hug (their relatives). Their faces show excitement, and they'll talk very positively. In my opinion, overall, it's a case-by-case basis."

The Harrisburg-based child advocacy group is pushing state lawmakers and county welfare agencies to keep families together by actively recruiting extended family members when children are removed from a home. Extended family members can be foster parents or help in planning, which can limit traumatic experiences for children and give them much-needed stability.

Allegheny County ranked above state averages in almost every category of the group's study, in part because of recent efforts to work more with extended families, said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. Westmoreland, Armstrong and Fayette counties place a smaller percentage of foster children with relatives, according to the data.

"I would have to say it's been our primary focus," said Marcia Sturdivant, deputy director of Allegheny County's Department of Human Services, and head of its Office of Children, Youth and Families. "Although we put it into policy, it took us awhile to get philosophically there, for everyone to believe children are better served in their own families. Now it's just the norm."

Reuniting children with birth families is one of the most effective ways to ensure children don't linger in the welfare system, child advocates said. Children who spend too long in foster care are more likely to drop out of school, commit crimes, and end up homeless and unemployed as adults, according to the report.

Involving extended families helps to ensure the nuclear family reunites, Benso said. It pushes birth parents to be more active and accountable for their children, she said.

Allegheny County works with a nonprofit agency that specializes in kinship foster care. It created a program to help Pittsburgh police find extended family members before calling CYF. The region's charitable organizations have

helped the department join a national trend of working more with extended families, Sturdivant said.

Westmoreland, Fayette and Indiana counties have made similar efforts, though the data may not show it yet, officials there said. When extended families there help, it is usually on an informal basis, keeping children out of the welfare system, they said.

To make sure kinship care and family unifications work, child welfare agencies have to be vigilant about background checks, Harrison and other foster parents said.

"Kinship care can be a nightmare for some families," Allegheny County caseworker Alvin U. Grinage said. "Sometimes you get the wrong family member, and they can unite with the parent and turn against CYF. They say they're doing all the things they're supposed to be doing, and you find out later (they're not). Other times, kinship care is the best thing for everyone."

Tim Puko can be reached at tpuko@tribweb.com or 412-391-8650.

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