

Local counties receive 'good' rating in child welfare report

12/9/2009 3:32 AM

Washington and Greene counties have received news about how they are meeting the needs of children and families in the state's child welfare system.

The counties received "good" ratings by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which released a reported Tuesday on the performance of the state's child welfare system.

The report provided the first comprehensive data for all 67 counties on how they are doing in providing safe, stable and permanent families for children in the system. The report looks at the number of first-time entries and re-entries into foster care, type of placement and length of stay in foster care.

"These indicators were selected as measures for our report because they are the key decision and transition points in the life of a child experiencing the child welfare system," said Joan L. Benso, president and chief executive officer of PPC. "The choices we make for children in foster care, such as placing them with a relative, a foster family home or in a congregate setting, affect permanency outcomes."

According to the report, children throughout the state are more likely to re-enter foster care after being reunified with their families when they are from urban communities.

However, urban communities do a better job than rural counties of placing children who are in foster care with their relatives. Rural communities tend to move their children out of foster care more quickly, with the exception of taking longer than other communities to move children to adoption.

The report indicated that Washington and Greene counties are successful in reunifying children with their families within 12 months.

Washington County reunifies more children in 12 months than the state average. Sixty-eight percent of children are reunified in fewer than three months versus six months for the state average.

"They send a lot of kids home and do it more quickly," the report states. "Re-entry also lower than the state. Placement stability high."

Washington County Dependency Judge Mark Mascara said the good ratings can be attributed to the county's Children and Youth Services agency and Master Dennis Paluso.

Mascara handles mostly cases where children have been in the system for a long time. It's CYS and Paluso who diligently handle the majority of cases and placements.

Mascara said he's seen significant improvements since the county implemented a range of new programs, and was one of 15 counties chosen to participate in phase one of the Pennsylvania Permanency Initiative that is overseen by state Supreme Court Judge Max Baer.

Kids also get home more quickly and the re-entry rate is low in Greene County. However, the report indicates that the county has more children who have been in three or more settings than the state average, posing greater placement instability.

Greene County Judge William Nalitz, who handles child dependency cases, could not be reached for comment late Tuesday afternoon.

"Our primary goal as stewards of our most vulnerable population is to ensure every child can live safely with his or her family, but if that isn't possible, then we must do what we can to find another safe, stable and permanent family for the child as quickly as possible," Benso said.

The report also examines, by county, repeated child abuse; in-home services for families in crisis; age and race of children in foster care; type of placement setting; reasons children leave foster care, such as adoption or guardianship; and foster care placement stability.

"Are counties keeping children safe in their homes so fewer children ever have to enter foster care? Are they taking the steps to ensure these children will be reunified safely with their families?" Benso asked. "These are the types of questions we must ask ourselves and the types of questions we cannot be afraid to answer. Our children are counting on us."

In addition to the county indicators and data, the report provides public policy recommendations to safely reduce the number of children in foster care and assure a legal and permanent family for every child.

Copyright Observer Publishing Co.