

March 2015



# State of Child Welfare

The child welfare landscape has changed significantly in Pennsylvania in the last year, in large part due to much-needed improvements to child protection laws at the state level and a new federal law enacted last fall that makes a number of changes to promote permanent families for children and youth.

These are positive steps, but they also have led to new challenges for the child welfare system, including a growth in the number of child abuse reports and the subsequent need for increased services to help children and families. The changes in child protection at the state level also are likely to fuel an increase in the need for foster care services as more children are removed from unsafe or unhealthy environments. This anticipated increase in the use of foster care could effectively reverse Pennsylvania's sharp decline in the use of foster care in recent years.

These new dynamics will require Pennsylvania public policymakers, child welfare officials and children's advocates to remain focused and committed so that we can keep building on the progress we have made in better protecting our children.

## ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PA'S NEW CHILD PROTECTION LAWS

A two-year effort to improve Pennsylvania's child protection laws resulted in the passage of more than 20 pieces of legislation in the 2013-14 legislative session, with many of those changes taking effect at the start of 2015.

While the immediate goal of these changes is straightforward — to better protect the commonwealth's nearly 2.8 million children from abuse and neglect — the long-term impact on Pennsylvania's child welfare system remains to be seen. However, early signs seem to indicate the unprecedented and bipartisan action of the General Assembly in recent years is having its intended effect.

In January 2015 alone, nearly 16,800 referrals were entered into the state's new Child Welfare Information Solution (CWIS) case management system, stemming from reports of child abuse and neglect, the need for general protective services, the need for law enforcement response, or other complaints to be investigated. More than 3,500 of these referrals were specifically reports of child abuse — a 38 percent increase over the approximately 2,500 child abuse reports made in January 2014.

**This sharp increase in child abuse reports seems to indicate the changes to Pennsylvania law are working to root out suspected instances of abuse that might have previously gone unnoticed or unreported.**

While some of the recent improvements to child protection laws focus specifically on children who are suspected to have experienced

abuse or neglect, there are other changes that are serving to improve the safety of all children in the commonwealth. Pennsylvania has new and broader clearance requirements for those who directly interact with children, whether through employment or volunteering, and an expanded scope of people who are legally required to report suspected abuse. These clearance requirements serve as a critical safeguard to proactively identify individuals who should have restricted access to children due to past behavior. While there is a cost associated with conducting these clearances, the cost — less than \$48 per individual — is nominal and secondary to the overall goal it achieves: keeping our children safe.

Concerns have been raised about whether the costs of clearances might deter potential volunteers and subsequently limit opportunities for children. To alleviate such concerns, steps could be taken by the state to lower or even eliminate the clearance cost for those who might face an economic hardship. The \$60 million fine paid by Penn State University in the wake of the Sandusky abuse scandal could also be a possible source of funding to help cover the costs of clearances for those unable to afford them.

Looking ahead, policymakers need to carefully monitor the implementation of the new child protection laws, which already are showing signs of identifying more child abuse and neglect. Just as it takes time for these laws to be implemented, it takes time for the full impact of their implementation to be assessed. No matter the short- or long-term impact of the laws, victimized children need and deserve the appropriate resources to deliver the necessary in-home protective services and, in some cases, provide foster care.

## INCREASED USE OF FOSTER CARE

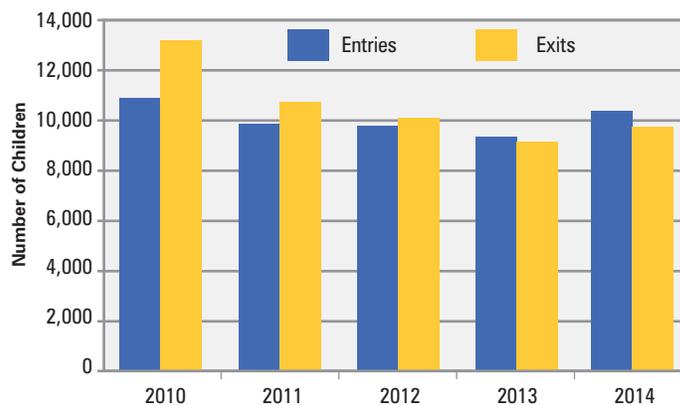
For the second year in a row, the number of children entering foster care in Pennsylvania has outpaced the number exiting foster care — with 10,364 children entering in 2014 compared to 9,769 leaving.

While the overall number of children served in foster care during the past year has grown, the length of time they are in foster care has lessened somewhat. The latest data shows the median length of a stay in foster care has declined by about 5 weeks — roughly equivalent to half of a summer school break in the life of a child.

The shortened stays in foster care are a positive sign, because foster care is intended to be a temporary intervention to help ensure a child’s safety and well-being. Children who spend long periods in foster care are more likely to have mental health challenges, drop out of school or experience unemployment and/or homelessness as adults.

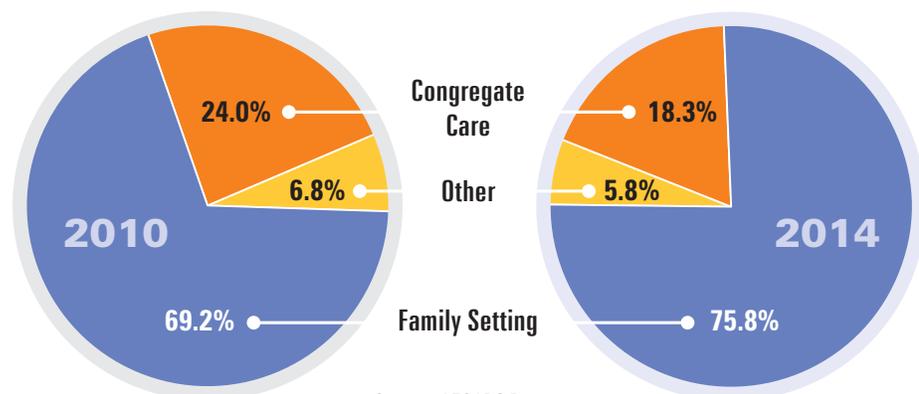
Another positive trend is a continuing shift away from placing children and youth in group homes or institutions — settings typically referred to as “congregate care” — and instead placing them in family-based settings. The most recent data shows about 1 in 6 foster care placements now involves congregate care, compared to about 1 in 4 foster care placements in 2010.

## Foster Care Entries and Exits



Source: AFCARS Report

## Percent of Children Served in Foster Care by Placement Setting



Source: AFCARS Report

Children and youth placed in congregate care run a greater risk of becoming delinquent than their peers in family-based placements. Research shows youth placed with foster families experience higher levels of education, fewer alcohol or other drug abuse problems, more positive relationships with biological siblings, greater housing stability and higher levels of optimism about their economic future than their counterparts in congregate care.

The continued movement away from congregate care is a positive sign for the child welfare system and needs to continue.

For several years, Pennsylvania was making tremendous strides to safely reduce the overall number of children in foster care, in part by using evidence-based strategies at the state and county levels and in the court system. These effective strategies fueled more than a 31 percent reduction in foster care since 2006. In recent years, however, this reduction has slowed and the numbers of children in foster care is on the rise in roughly half of Pennsylvania’s counties. This increase in some counties could be connected to the growth in child abuse and neglect reporting Pennsylvania has experienced over the last two years.

The increased public awareness and reporting of child abuse and neglect, coupled with improvements to child protection laws, have expanded the child welfare system’s scope of responsibility and increased the number of children and families it serves. These changes likely will lead to an even greater increase in the use of foster care over the next few years as Pennsylvania adjusts to a “new normal” in its child welfare needs.

### A FOREVER FAMILY FOR EVERY CHILD ... AND YOUTH

Every Pennsylvania child and youth in foster care has a court-ordered goal or outcome the child welfare agency is responsible for working toward. For instance, when families are in crisis and children must enter foster care, the court-ordered goal is typically to reunify these children with their parents or caregivers as soon as possible once the crisis is appropriately addressed.

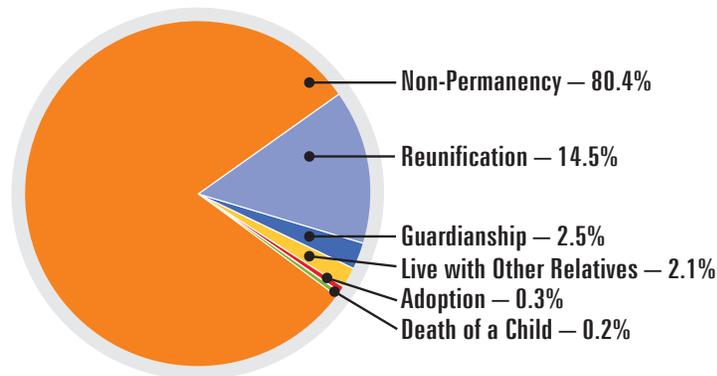
While reunification is the preferred goal, it is not always achievable. In the alternative, the courts require agencies to work toward finding another family through other options, with adoption or legal guardianship being the preferred alternatives if reunification isn’t viable. When reunification, adoption or legal guardianship all have been ruled out, courts require child welfare agencies to work toward Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement, or APPLA.

### Pennsylvania should work to reduce the number of children and youth in foster care who have a court-ordered permanency goal that doesn’t achieve any form of legal permanency.

When APPLA is the goal, it typically translates into long-term foster care for this statistically small, but nonetheless important, group of children and youth. This is clearly demonstrated in Pennsylvania by the fact that among foster youth ages 16 to 20, about 1 in 4 have an APPLA goal, and 80 percent of children and youth with a goal of APPLA who leave foster care do not

achieve permanency. The vast majority of these youth eventually “age-out” of foster care, sometime between age 18 and 21, without ever finding a permanent family on which to rely. We need to do better for these foster youth.

### Children with APPLA by Discharge Reason



The extremely negative outcomes associated with “aging out” of foster care are well documented, and the child welfare system can do more to help ensure every child achieves legal permanency.

For starters, the system must never give up on finding a family for older youth in foster care. Congress agrees, and last year it established new requirements for states to greatly limit when and how APPLA can be used. Pennsylvania must now decide how to establish state requirements to be in compliance with this new federal law. Pennsylvania can and should have a very different vision for children in foster care: a forever family for every child — a family that will always keep the porch light on to guide and welcome them home.



## AN IMPORTANT NEXT STEP: ENSURING EDUCATIONAL STABILITY



As we move forward, Pennsylvania's public policymakers should work to improve the quality and use of foster care similar to the way they strengthened Pennsylvania's child protection laws in recent years. A critical and much-needed improvement relates to education.

Children and youth in foster care deserve educational stability, meaning they should be appropriately enrolled in school, receive an education aligned with the commonwealth's academic standards, and have the opportunity to attend the same school when they enter foster care as they did before they were placed in foster care or stay in the school they are attending if they change foster care placements. Unfortunately, this doesn't always occur, often due to a lack of communication and coordination among child welfare agencies, courts and schools.

Pennsylvania lacks reliable data on our children who enter foster care, but national data indicates that:

Half to three-quarters of foster care children change schools upon entering foster care;

A third of foster care children change schools five or more times;

Only half complete high school by age 18; and

While more than 80 percent of foster youth express a desire to go to college, only about 20 percent of those who graduate high school are able to attend college.

Clearly, education interruptions and school changes make it very difficult for children in foster care to succeed academically.

Governor Wolf and the General Assembly should prioritize statutory changes needed to promote educational stability for this vulnerable population. Such changes might include giving the courts and child welfare agencies increased flexibility to determine the best school for a child in foster care to attend, and calling on schools to enroll these children more promptly so their learning is less disrupted.

For more information on data reporting periods, citations and sources, visit: [porchlightproject.org/socw15.shtml](http://porchlightproject.org/socw15.shtml).

[porchlightproject.org](http://porchlightproject.org)  
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