



## **2019 State of Child Welfare – Executive Summary**

Collaboration. Partnerships. Advocacy. Shared goals. These are just a few of the thoughts that come to mind when reflecting on the historical advancement of the *State of Child Welfare* in the Commonwealth and the organizations working together to improve our child welfare system, which is intended to ensure that children are protected and free from abuse and neglect, and that if a child must be removed from their natural environment, they are placed in the most family-like setting while permanency is sought. As well intentioned as these efforts may be, sometimes there are unintended consequences or implementation does not occur in ways that best impact and improve the lives of the children and families involved. It is only through collaborative relationships, strong advocacy and systematic policy reform that the lives of children, youth and families can be improved through interaction with the child welfare system.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) is pleased to share the 10th annual *State of Child Welfare* report, which provides a 5-year analysis of how Pennsylvania fares with practices around child safety, placement and permanency. The analysis is our contribution to improving Pennsylvania's child welfare system, not only providing county-level data, but also statewide and geographic trends. Our goal is for this data and research to be used to inform advocacy efforts and support initiatives that better serve children and families.

The *State of Child Welfare* allows everyone to be part of the conversation about outcomes of these efforts, as we all have a role in keeping children safe and families intact.

### **Public Awareness Helps Increase Referrals**

Five years ago, the Commonwealth implemented several changes to the Child Protective Services Law due to heightened public awareness of failures and flaws in the system. This comprehensive package of nearly two dozen pieces of legislation was implemented by the Office of Children, Youth, and Families and further through local child welfare agencies. The rates of referrals have soared as a result of this increase in public awareness of child abuse and neglect and positive improvements in mandated and permissive reporter requirements.

- Between 2013 and 2017, the state saw a 76 percent increase in child protective services referrals and is showing no signs of slowing down.
- The state has seen a 24 percent increase in reports since the state began capturing general protective services referrals in 2015.
- In-home service rates have increased by 16 percent since 2014.

A core mission of child welfare agencies is to preserve families whenever possible by offering supports and services. As a result of increased referrals, there is additionally an increased need for services to alleviate safety and risk factors by keeping families intact.

### Federal Law Sparks Focus on Prevention

More recently, the Bipartisan Budget Act was signed into law in 2018 creating the largest child welfare financing reform in 25 years. Also known as the Family First Prevention Services Act, federal funding shifts will occur focusing on reimbursement for front-end services, when historically financing has been for back-end placement services. The law offers states new resources to use evidence-based programs to keep families safely together in the effort to prevent the need for out-of-home placement. The law also dictates new standards of appropriateness and quality for any foster care placement that is not with a family, so that children do not languish in low-quality group care; and when group care is necessary, that it is either in a specialized setting or a Qualified Residential Treatment Program.

With the continued increase in child abuse and neglect referrals, and counties focusing on ways to best support families in their natural communities, the state is well positioned to utilize this stream of funding to be creative in improving service options and focusing on programs that serve children and families further upstream. Relative to prevention services and the reimbursement opportunity, the federal government has set high standards for services that will qualify. Specifically, the service must be a mental health, substance abuse treatment, or in-home parenting program that scientifically meets evidence-based standards and defined as either “supported, well supported, or a promising practice.” Additionally, the approved service must be rated and placed on the health and human services evidence-based clearinghouse. Lastly, the child must qualify as a “candidate for foster care” as an initial criterion, as defined through a prevention plan. While states have the option to capitalize on this opportunity starting October 2019, there are only 12 programs currently under review, and no programs have yet been placed on the clearinghouse to draw down funding. Due to the multiple complicated layers that currently exist regarding seamless implementation, the Office of Children, Youth, and Families decided to delay implementation until October 2020.

With the option to draw down federal funding for prevention services also means that the state must be working to reshape the use of congregate care. Congregate care rates in the state are the lowest in 5 years, indicating that counties have been strong in refining internal practices. However, more than 3,570 children who were placed in a group or institutional setting last year, proves that work still needs to be done to evaluate appropriateness of those placements and be creative in developing ways to service them in the most family-like setting. Under Family First, reimbursable programs will include those

for pregnant and parenting youth, supervised independent living for youth over the age of 18, as well as Qualified Residential Treatment Programs. Currently, no Qualified Residential Treatment Programs exist in Pennsylvania, and due to the definitions of the specialized settings, much work needs to be done to ensure that these providers are making adequate changes; concurrently, caseworkers, providers and the courts need high-quality training to understand the process for utilizing these settings. This is an additional layer that reinforced the state's decision to delay until October 2020.

Family First creates a new opportunity to reshape child welfare practices and move towards improving the lives of children and families. It should not only be viewed as an opportunity to draw down new funding only, but a way to enhance current practices.

## Children Do Best with Family

Child placement is always a difficult decision for child welfare agencies, but when it is truly necessary, it is important that children are placed in the most family-like setting.

- Since 2014, the rate of children served in foster care has increased by 13 percent, however, from 2017 to 2018, the rate per 1,000 children has remained the same.
- Approximately 84 percent of the foster care population is either in a non-relative, adoptive or kinship home; additionally, upon a child's first placement, 83 percent enter such a setting initially.

State and county efforts to place children have been positive, as the rates have increased over the past five years. However, work still needs to be done, as less than half of children placed in a family-based setting are placed with a relative. We know that children thrive when they are with someone they know, trust and have a well-established connection with, and so further policy changes should be aimed at refining current practices for identifying, connecting and supporting kinship caretakers.

PPC championed Act 89 of 2018 establishing the Kinship Navigator Program in Pennsylvania, which will allow kin to safely and competently care for children without the need for formal child welfare intervention. The program will establish a website, toll-free hotline, and have specially trained kinship navigators who will assist kin with navigating the state and county level services and programs to adequately care for the children in their care. The Office of Children, Youth, and Families spared no time in issuing a request for application, seeking bids from providers interested in implementing this program. The program will be implemented later this year, and it is our hope that the rates of children entering formal foster care will decrease as kin will get help understanding the services, legal options, and county welfare assistance available to them.

## Considering the Needs of Older Foster Youth

While children under the age of 11 primarily make up the foster care population, it is important to highlight that one-third of the foster care population are 13 and older. This population are often classified as transition to successful adulthood. Transition age youth

are often the most difficult population to place in a family-based setting, and, more frequently, reside in less-than-ideal group settings.

- While rates of older youth entering care have decreased, they make up almost 49 percent of re-entry into foster care, which means they return home and re-enter the system within one year.
- 80 percent of youth with a goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) exit foster care without adoption, guardianship or a family connection.
- 25 percent of older youth have a goal of APPLA.

Far too often, APPLA is still utilized as a goal for this age group, which means poorer outcomes. Pursuant to Act 94 of 2015, an APPLA workgroup was convened to study and review the population of youth with such a goal and make recommendations to improve outcomes. While the data supports that some progress has been made, it also supports that the state has not been successful in achieving the goals that have been identified. We must ensure we are preparing older youth for successful adulthood. That starts the moment they enter the system and continues through adulthood.

## In Conclusion

We challenge child welfare advocates to utilize the *State of Child Welfare* to build upon strengths identified and to further refine the work towards achieving optimal results. Areas of deficiency are not failures but a call to action to improve outcomes for children and families, because child abuse and neglect is not a state or county issue, it is a community issue, which we all have a role in helping to improve. PPC's hope is that the *State of Child Welfare* will be a catalyst for engaging in those conversations.