

CNN NEWSNIGHT AARON BROWN

Included: Portions of the show concerning DHS/CYF.

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Intro to piece during the "Whip"

BETH NISSEN, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Now that the head of Florida's child welfare system has resigned, there's renewed debate on how to fix that troubled system. We've been to Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, which includes the city of Pittsburgh, to see how they've transformed their child welfare system into a national model.

Allegheny County/Pittsburgh segment

BROWN: Yesterday, we poured over the "Miami Herald"'s Web site after the head of the state's child welfare agency resigned. And we found an enormous list of stories about kids lost in the system: a chronicle of bureaucratic dysfunction, one that makes your eyes glaze over and tear up at the same time.

And, we began the program last night by saying you can't run or dodge these sorts of problems, and call yourself a leader. You are paid to fix things, and they are fixable. We know that because NEWSNIGHT correspondent Beth Nissen traveled to Pittsburgh for us to report on one county, Allegheny, and its troubles, and lo and behold, its solutions.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

NISSEN (voice-over): Just six years ago, Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, which includes the city of Pittsburgh, had a child welfare system in crisis: 10,000 children in caseworker files, a third of those children in foster care, most with strangers, scores of foster children abused, scores more shuttled from foster home to foster home until they "aged out" at 18.

RICHARD WEXLER, EXEC. DIR., NAT'L COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM: Allegheny County once was a pathetic national disgrace. Today, it is a shining national model. Allegheny County is showing the nation that child welfare systems can be fixed, and it is showing the nation how to fix them.

NISSEN: What did Allegheny County do? They changed standard procedures, standard philosophy, starting with the children who need, for their own safety, to be taken from their parents' care.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Who's that?

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: My mommy and me and my brother.

NISSEN: This six-year-old girl and her four-year-old brother were taken from their mother, a heroin user who was neglecting them. In the past, they would most likely have been placed, separately, with foster parents, strangers.

MARC CHERNA, DIR., DEPT. OF HUMAN SERVICES, ALLEGHENY CO., PA.: Anytime you remove a child from their biological home, it's traumatic for that child, no matter what has transpired.

NISSEN: Marc Cherna is the architect of Allegheny County's redesigned child welfare system.

CHERNA: If you have to place a child in foster care, the first thing we try to do is find relatives.

NISSEN: And license those relatives as foster parents. These children are living with their grandparents while their mother goes through the county's drug treatment program. Fifty-five percent of the children in foster care in Allegheny County are in "kinship care," and it has been a marked success: Children living with relatives are less likely to "act out," more likely to stay in one foster home.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: They're with somebody that they know. They're not with a complete stranger. I think it's easier for them to be with somebody that is family.

NISSEN: When children are placed with relatives, their parents visit more often.

CHERNA: If you can do frequent visits, it keeps their bond, it gives them hope that they will get their children back.

NISSEN: And more of them do get their children back: 70 percent of children in foster care are now reunited with their parents within a year, six years ago, only 25 percent were. Allegheny County's broader goal is to keep children from being taken from their parents in the first place.

WEXLER: Most parts of the country have felt that the answer to all child welfare problems can be boiled down to "take the child and run."

NISSEN: Six years ago, authorities would almost certainly, protectively, have taken 17-year-old Dominique Byers (ph) from her parents' home.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I was running away a lot and drinking a little bit, and smoking a little bit, and doing stuff I hadn't done before.

REGINA BYERS, MOTHER: We just thought, she's out of control, they'll probably take her. We didn't know.

NISSEN: Instead of taking Dominique from her home, authorities sent help to her home: a caseworker expert in handling family crises involving adolescents, who make up 45 percent of the children in Allegheny County's care.

CHERNA: First thing we look at is, are there any kind of services or help that they need to adequately care for their child? And if we can maintain a child there, that makes us happy.

NISSEN: Intensive intervention has worked for the Byers.

(on camera): Do you see a change in Dominique?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Yes, most definitely. Like I said with your help...

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: She slowly helped me to be able to be able to like control my anger and stuff, the problems that I had, and things are starting to kind of turn around.

NISSEN (voice-over): Allegheny County wants to turn things around, offer crucial help and services, before families reach crisis. So the county helps fund a network of community-based resource

centers, such as Hosanna House, located in a rusted corner of Pittsburgh, with a high number of child welfare cases.

LEON HAYNES, EXEC. DIR., HOSANNA HOUSE: They are losing their children, not because they don't love their kids, not because they've abused their kids, but just because "I can't make enough money to take care of my kid."

NISSEN: Anitra Bowen (ph) is a single mother with three young children, one of whom is autistic. She has no money, owes back rent, is unemployed and overwhelmed, a set of conditions that can lead to child neglect.

WEXLER: They do not take chances in Allegheny County. What they do is they remove the risk instead of the child.

NISSEN: At Hosanna House, a team of specialists work with Anitra, coordinate her job training, and her search for work as a paralegal.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The first thing we're going to do is we're going to get your resume together.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Any barriers that might impede your training goals, your ideas of what you want to do?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Housing.

NISSEN: They help her apply for low-income housing. They offer emergency and long-term child care.

HAYNES: The children, as a result of getting these resources, they're going to be healthier, they're going to be happy, and they're going to be home.

NISSEN: Support services for entire families are expensive: Six years ago, the annual budget for the county's children and youth services was \$80 million, now it's \$135 million, from a patchwork array of federal, state and local sources. Child welfare authorities say it's worth it.

CHERNA: An investment in services now, to help families before they really fall apart, saves a tremendous amount of money down the road.

NISSEN: In Allegheny County, the savings have been remarkable: Intervention and prevention programs have reduced the number of children taken from their families by a full third, 33 percent, in six years. County authorities are the first to say their system is not perfect, it cannot save every family, protect every child. But they can show evidence that the system is a vast improvement, is strengthening hundreds of families, and keeping thousands of children more safely in the care of those who love them most.

Beth Nissen, CNN, Pittsburgh.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

BROWN: It can be done.