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Pa. Success a Guide for DYFS Plan

Allegheny County's system, once broken, is now a model.

By Troy Graham and Mitch Lipka, Inquirer Staff Writers

PITTSBURGH - When New Jersey's top leaders introduced their long-awaited plan to fix the state's child welfare agency last week, they pledged to turn a system that has become a national embarrassment into a national model.

Although promises of change have gone unfulfilled in the past, the family-friendly and neighborhood-oriented philosophy unveiled Wednesday in a 191-page plan has been tested before - and has been proven successful.

The child welfare system in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County - often touted as a national model - adopted a strikingly similar approach eight years ago, pulling that agency out of a long tailspin of bad management and controversy.

Marc Cherna, director of Allegheny County's Office of Children, Youth and Families, said that most children were better off with their birth parents, who often are capable of caring for children if given some help. If children must be taken from the home, they should stay with relatives. And, if adoption is the only option, a home should be found quickly.

That philosophy, and many of their methods, could soon become policy in New Jersey, should the state's ambitious plan win approval and funding.

"That New Jersey is doing a complete about-face and coming to where [Allegheny County] is, shows the whole new mindset," said Richard Wexler, the executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. "No two places will be alike. The most important thing is the outlook."

Some observers of the New Jersey plan said it lacked specifics, but child welfare experts said the state should look to Allegheny County to see how these theories have turned around another moribund agency.

"I really hope they're successful," Cherna said last week. "I'm convinced that's the way to go."

Cherna spent 13 years at New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services before taking control of a debt-laden Allegheny County system, which includes the city of Pittsburgh, in 1996. Although he shied from critiquing his former employers, he acknowledged the similarities between Allegheny County's past and DYFS' present.

DYFS has suffered from years of failures and child deaths that eventually forced the state to settle a lawsuit filed by the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc., leading to the court-supervised reform package.

Eight years ago, Allegheny County had similar woes, culminating in the death of a child, which forced out the last director.

"There were numerous reports blasting the agency," Cherna said. "There was no public confidence."

Caseworkers, he said, had taken an "us versus them" approach toward parents, holding to the traditional notion that children are kept in troubled homes only at the expense of their safety. Cherna disagreed, instituting a program that views parents not as villains, but as victims - of poverty, ignorance, alcoholism, drug addiction.

"It was extremely radical. None of this stuff had been done," he said. "This place was a disaster."

DYFS has fostered a similar reputation for quickly yanking children out of homes, overloading the foster-care system. The plan says the agency must change its culture "from one in which we see ourselves as dictating to or judging the parent to one in which we understand that the parent is our most important initial resource."

"If you pull them out of a marginal home and put them in a marginal foster home, what's the benefit?" Cherna asked. "A lot of times we can do more harm than good."

In unveiling the DYFS plans, director Ed Cotton echoed that belief.

"If we can keep a child safely at home, that's our preference," he said. James Davy, acting commissioner the Department of Human Services, which includes DYFS, says "foster care is our last resort."

To keep children at home, parents often need help. Allegheny County provides an array of services to struggling parents, from help with job hunting, housing and transportation to addiction counseling and a 24-hour mobile mental-health unit.

All those services are available in each of the agency offices, which are situated in various county neighborhoods.

DYFS has also pledged a more neighborhood-oriented approach by assigning workers to small geographic areas. The agency has promised to dramatically increase services, such as domestic-violence and substance-abuse prevention, and housing and medical aid.

Of the children taken from homes in Allegheny County, 60 percent are placed with relatives, who are trained and paid like any other foster family. The goal for most is to return to their birth parents.

Each regional office has an administrative judge who hears cases several times a week for foster children.

At a hearing last fall in North Hills, a working-class Pittsburgh neighborhood, Judge Mark Cancilla heard a report about a mother addicted to drugs whose six children were placed with their grandmother.

The mother had been in rehab and found an apartment, but she did not have any furniture.

"When I talked to her, she said she's not ready to have the children back," the social worker said. "She's in school and looking for a job. She's trying really hard."

Cancilla agreed that she was not ready, but he stressed that reuniting her with her children was the goal. The hearings are about accountability, for the system and the parents, Cherna said.

"It puts pressure on us to do our job and on the parents to get their act together," Cherna said. "If they don't, it becomes pretty evident."

Cotton and Davy said the new DYFS would seek to place foster children with their relatives or, at the very least, keep them close to their neighborhoods, schools and friends.

"Studies have shown that children placed with kin are more likely to go home and more likely to go home safely," Cotton said.

If they can't go home, "we must move to adoption without delay," Davy said.

Cherna views adoptions as "a failure in the system." But, if children must be adopted, they should have homes waiting for them. All but 20 children in Allegheny County's adoption process are living in the homes that will eventually adopt them.

"Judges don't like to create orphans," Cherna said.

The results of his approach have been remarkable. The number of children in foster care has gone down from 3,300 to 2,300, with half coming into the system as troubled teens, not as children likely to be raised by the system. The backlog of adoptions has dropped from 1,600 to 450. And Cherna has found his approach, with fewer children in foster care, to be cheaper.

"We're not looking to save money," he cautioned. "We're looking to spend it better and keep families together."

Both Davy and Gov. McGreevey said last week that they could not turn DYFS around without help from outside community groups. In Allegheny County, Cherna also has leaned heavily on the community.

He enlisted a local law firm, which has done free legal work for close to 800 adoptions.

He created a foundation with the help of Pittsburgh icons like the Heinz Endowments and aluminum giant Alcoa Inc. They pay into a fund, and Cherna takes requests to the foundation board.

Many of the services provided to parents come from contracted agencies, such as the Urban League, which have representatives at the regional offices. Cherna also taps dozens of outreach programs, such as Gwen's Girls, run by a former Pittsburgh police commander.

New Jersey's Davy said that the agency must also work to "keep children from coming through DYFS' door in the first place."

Cherna has relied on outside help to meet that goal as well. His office helps fund 32 family-support centers and after-school programs in housing projects that are largely run by parents and community members.

In North View Heights, a community of low-slung public-housing buildings perched on a Pittsburgh hillside, a basement has been transformed into a thriving after-school program.

The neighborhood has been hammered by the usual maladies: drugs, crime, fatherless households, and latchkey kids. Before the after-school program, there was little for children to do.

The program is run by Patricia Bagley, a resident and "community mother" who is helping raise a second generation of children.

"You know these people care about these kids because it's their neighbors," she said. "It kind of gives you more sense of pride in your community... because you're helping to rear these children."

The system is far from perfect, Cherna is quick to admit. With 20,000 children passing through the system each year, mistakes are unavoidable.

"All this stuff is judgment," he said. "The key to child-protective services is that it's a community responsibility. People want to put this on government, but government can't take care of kids."

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