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Too many Michigan foster kids not living in families

Use of shelters & group homes rising despite court mandate

LANSING – Michigan’s use of emergency shelters and group homes for children in the child welfare system is among the nation’s highest, with one of every five children living in group homes or institutions that are supposed to be used only for short-term, intensive therapy, according to a new Kids Count report released today.

In its latest Kids Count policy report, *Every Kid Needs a Family: Giving Children in the Child Welfare System the Best Chance for Success*, the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlights sobering statistics pointing to the urgent need to ensure, through sound policies and proven practices, that everything possible is being done to find loving, nurturing and supportive families to help raise more of these children.

Nationally, one in seven children lives in group placements, even though federal law requires that they live in families whenever possible to help reduce the trauma of separation, abuse and neglect. Percentages of young people in such settings nationwide range from 4 percent in Oregon to 35 percent in Colorado. The percentage of Michigan foster children in group placements is among the nation’s highest at 18 percent, tying with Kentucky and Alabama for 36th. It has increased from 15 percent in 2007. Almost one-third of children in foster care were placed with relatives in 2013 while another third were placed with non-relative foster families.

Furthermore, the report asserts that 40 percent of young people who live in group placements nationwide have no clinical need to be in such restrictive settings, threatening their well-being and chances for finding a permanent family.

Court-appointed monitors of Michigan’s child welfare system reported last fall that the state continues to place hundreds of children, including very young children, in shelters for long periods of time despite terms of a settlement agreement made in 2008 on behalf of 20,000 children. The agreement prohibits state workers from placing children in an emergency or temporary facility more than once in 12 months, with limited exceptions, and for no more than 30 days. The latest monitoring report from Sept. 2014 shows that 40 percent of the 355 children placed in a temporary or emergency shelter between July and December 2013 were there for more than 30 days.

“Michigan is failing these children who already are traumatized by abuse and neglect and removal from their families,” said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan project director at the Michigan League for Public Policy, which helped release the report. “Children grow best in loving and stable homes, and if they can’t be with their own families they need to be with relatives or caring foster families who can provide some semblance of normalcy during a turbulent time. Group homes and institutions should be a last resort used sparingly and carefully.”

Research shows that placements in group facilities are harmful to a child’s development of strong, nurturing attachments vital to healthy physical, social, emotional and psychological development. Young people who do not grow up in families also face greater risk of being abused in group placements, and of being arrested. Group placements also are costlier for taxpayers, costing seven to 10 times the amount it takes to place a child with a relative or foster family.

The report details a number of recommendations to improve policy and practices, including:

- Increasing services for families to enable children to remain safely at home.
- Recruiting more relative and foster families.
- Providing adequate support for foster families and relative caregivers.
- Keeping residential treatment short, with family in focus.
- Requiring justification for restrictive placements and prohibiting group placement for very young children.

Michigan has several proven programs at the community-level that provide crisis intervention, family education, and behavioral health to help keep families intact. However, despite rising rates of child abuse and neglect, lawmakers have cut funding for prevention services from \$57 million in 2006 to \$42 million in 2014.

While not investing in prevention of child maltreatment, Michigan at the same time is looking at reducing, not growing, its pool of potential foster and adoptive parents. Legislation passed recently by the Michigan House of Representatives and a Senate committee allows faith-based adoption agencies, which receive nearly half of all state and federal funds for adoption and foster services in Michigan, to refuse services to potential foster and adoptive parents based on religious beliefs.

For existing foster parents and kinship care providers, surveys show 40 percent of families who quit fostering cite lack of support as the primary reason. Providing peer support, crisis response services, and training to help traumatized children and youth are some of the areas foster parents say they need most.

Of the 355 Michigan children placed in a temporary or emergency shelter between July and December 2013, most (40 percent) were ages 12-15 while 27 percent were ages 16 or 17. Twenty-eight were under the age of 6 and 66 were between 7-11 years old.

“A group home or institution is not a healthy setting for children,” said Gilda Z. Jacobs, president & CEO of the Michigan League for Public Policy. “Michigan has a responsibility – legally and morally – to do better for these children, and must do everything possible to help them succeed and overcome the issues that brought them into care.”

Every Kids Needs a Family is available at www.aecf.org.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation’s children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The Michigan League for Public Policy, www.mlpp.org, is a nonprofit policy institute focused on economic opportunity for all. It is the only state-level organization that addresses poverty in a comprehensive way. Kids Count in Michigan is a project of the League.