

EDITORIAL

Monday, March 15, 2004

Flexible funds bring foster kids home

MONTGOMERY COUNTY CHILDREN SERVICES spends about half of its \$50 million annual budget on foster-care and adoptive services. Much of the money comes from the federal government.

- But the agency's director, Helen Jones-Kelly, says when it comes to programs for abused and neglected children, federal regulations can be "schizophrenic."

"They can work at cross-purposes. Many of the standards are geared toward working with children in their own home, while funding focuses on placement in foster homes," she said.

Ohio Sen. Mike DeWine, a leader in Congress on foster-care issues, agrees that with federal funds, the government "gets what it pays for." If they only can be used to place children in foster families, that's how agencies will tackle the problem.

Sen. DeWine has helped develop more flexible funding strategies that support services designed to *prevent* the need for foster care. What's at issue now is funding for foster care itself, which amounts to nearly \$5 billion annually.

A report funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts issued last week (read it at www.fosteringresults.org) assesses the experiences of various states that have received trial "waivers" from rigid federal requirements for these funds.

The waivers were designed to test whether foster-care goals — creating a safe environment for abused or neglected kids while working quickly to move them to a stable, more permanent home — can be better achieved if agencies are allowed to use funds for a greater array of services.

One state used foster-care money under the waiver program to provide substance-abuse treatment to children's parents. Others applied funds to support permanent guardianship by family members. Each was designed to shorten foster-care stays, provide a permanent home and minimize the need to terminate parental rights.

Ohio participates in the waiver program through 14 counties (including Clark, Greene and Hamilton). According to Public Children Services Association of Ohio, a coalition of children service agencies, these counties have saved nearly 700,000 foster-care days using alternative strategies.

The Pew charities are a big player in foster care, aside from their production of the recent waiver study. They have also organized a foster-care commission. This spring the commission will recommend changes in federal foster-care funding to Congress, as well as suggest what family courts can do to ensure accountability in state systems.

The waiver experience offers great promise for more flexible — and effective — federal policies for helping children.