

## EDITORIAL

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### **Courts key to foster-care accountability**

NOT EVERY BLUE-RIBBON PANEL JUST HOLDS hearings and produces a thick report on a complicated issue. Sometimes the powers-that-be actually want to get something done.

That's the case with a national bipartisan commission charged with finding better ways to help the more than a half-million children in foster care.

Sixteen experienced hands — lawmakers, judges, social service providers (including Helen Jones-Kelly, executive director of Montgomery County Children Services), and a former foster child now in college — met for a year before recommending specific reforms.

All abused and neglected children should be eligible for federal aid, the commission concluded, not just those from low-income families. And child-protection agencies should have broad discretion to use that money to quickly get kids into a safe, stable, long-term living arrangement.

The problem has been that federal funds are tightly restricted; they mainly are available to help children in the care of strangers. Some jurisdictions (including several Ohio counties) have been allowed more flexible use of these funds on an experimental basis, for example, to aid substance-abusing parents or to help distant relatives willing to take long-term custody of a child.

Strategies such as these, the commission found, have proved successful, with children spending less time in foster care. The commission, organized through the Pew Charitable Trusts, would make this flexibility a permanent feature of the federal program.

It also suggests that states shoulder more foster-care costs, but that they not be penalized for successful programs. Those that reduce dependence on foster care should be permitted to reinvest their savings in other child-protection programs.

The commission's work is expected to be influential on Capitol Hill — a real driver of national foster-care policy. But while Congress considers what it can do better, the commission also wants

state judges and local communities to get juvenile courts more involved with foster children.

Under the commission's recommendations, juvenile judges should be hands-on collaborators with social service agencies — not just decision-makers from the bench, but outspoken leaders in the community. Their courts should be energized and well-funded. Automated systems would timely track the status of every child in foster care. Then that information would be used to hold local people and agencies — and the court itself — accountable for children's progress in being placed in permanent homes.

The commission wants each state's top judge to push lower courts to adopt the commission's recommendations. Ohio Chief Justice Tom Moyer has a network of judges' groups and committees in place to help him do that. He should encourage them to get off to a fast start.

Children deserve no less. Nearly 20 percent of foster children nationally wait five years before getting a permanent home. Thousands "age out" of the system each year, moving into adulthood without ever having had a real family.

A former foster child had it right when he told the commission, "I just think everybody deserves a family when they're young."