

THE PLAIN DEALER

Editorials

Fostering a better system

Monday, May 31, 2004

Usually, it's the most outrageous, horrendous cases of foster care abuse that attract the spotlight. Cases like that of little Rilya in Florida, a 4-year-old foster child who disappeared in 2001. Or Antwone Fisher's horrible tale of beatings and sex abuse while in the care of Cleveland foster parents.

But many smaller, quieter tragedies happen every day in the "unquestionably broken system" that cares for more than 500,000 children, according to a recent report by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. They impact youngsters who are moved from home to home, or 18-year-olds who "age out" of the system into nowhere.

The Pew report properly calls on Congress and state courts to do more to prevent these tragedies.

The commission spent a year talking to state officials, social workers, judges and former foster children still reeling from a life spent in limbo. They uncovered a system that is seriously off-track. The federal government showers states with money for foster care placement. Yet it spends relatively little for services like counseling, or mental health treatment for neglectful parents that could help them keep their children. Most states can't close the gap.

It's no surprise, then, that many children end up in foster care - not as a last resort, but sometimes as the best and only option.

Still, the federal government's lopsided system is no excuse for the poor grades states recently received on federal child welfare reviews. Every state flunked the review, which assessed such critical benchmarks as repeated maltreatment of children. There is no excuse for failing to protect children whose safety depends on the state's vigilance.

The commission, echoed by Ohio's officials, makes many smart recommendations that could better serve children and the workers who seek to help them. It urges the federal government to change its funding formula and give states more flexibility to use foster care dollars to treat broken families. It calls on courts to do a better job of tracking foster care cases and working with the child welfare department. They should reduce delays and work harder to resolve cases where the same youngsters reappear time after time.

And it also urges the government to support grandparents and other kin by loosening restrictions and recognizing their special role in stabilizing a child's life.

We add one caution: It would be wrong to move to a system that is foster-care-phobic. Some children simply are not safe with their parents. Treatment may not change that sad fact; agencies must be quick to act in the best interests of children at all times.

But a system dedicated to looking at each child's family - and trying to determine if it can be soldered together before it is sundered apart - is much better than the one that is in place now. This is a report that policy makers dare not ignore.

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