

Va. Trails in Foster Care Adoption Rate

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Faced with a federal mandate to reduce the time that children spend in foster care and to boost adoptions, Virginia has raised its rate of adoptions from foster care by 66 percent, according to a recent study.

That performance has left Virginia in the bottom fifth of states nationwide -- far behind the District, which nearly tripled its adoptions from foster care, and Maryland, which more than doubled them.

Released this month by a public education group at the University of Illinois called Fostering Results, the study found that 33 states and the District at least doubled adoptions from foster care in the first five years after passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997. Of those states, two quadrupled and six more than tripled their adoption performance.

Nationwide, the number of children placed in adoptive homes topped 230,000 from 1998 to 2002, more than during the previous 10 years combined, the study found.

Using methodology adopted by Congress as part of a program of financial bonuses for increasing adoptions, the study showed that adoptions from foster care jumped from an average base line of 28,000 a year before the law was passed to more than 58,000 afterward, based on each state's peak annual performance.

"Most experts in 1997 thought the prospect of doubling adoptions from foster care was a pipe dream," said Jess McDonald, co-director of Fostering Results. "But the impossible happened, and the number of adoptions exceeded all expectations."

In Northern Virginia and the commonwealth as a whole, comparatively small increases in adoptions were attributable in part to the success of efforts to keep children out of foster care in the first place, state and local officials said.

"We're looking to find ways to make improvements" not just in adoptions but "in all areas of foster care," said Charles Ingram, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Social Services.

According to the department's statistics, Virginia has about 7,600 children in foster care at any time, a number that has held steady in recent years. Four of every 1,000 children in the state are in foster care. Virginia's rate is low compared with those of other states, the department says. Nationwide, the median is seven children per 1,000 in foster care, and only five states have rates lower than Virginia's.

That rate "suggests we are doing a good job of keeping children in families, and when we get children in the foster care system, they may not be the most desirable children for adoption," Ingram said.

Carolyn Fowler, manager of the foster care and adoption program in Fairfax County's Department of Family Services, said some of the highest-ranking states in the Fostering Results study had relatively low base lines, making it easier for them to produce big increases in adoptions.

Michael Shaver, deputy director of Fostering Results, agreed, noting that some states with historically high adoption rates did not have the ability to double their numbers, while others with backlogs of children in foster care responded to the 1997 law by dramatically boosting adoptions and thus earning federal bonuses.

"This is not a ranking of best performers to worst performers as much as it is a measure of . . . improvement over past records," Shaver said.

Wade F. Horn, assistant secretary for children and families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said the bonus system, which expired last month, was not meant to "pit states against each other" but to induce each state to increase its own adoptions.

"This is a program that has been so successful that everyone is in favor of reauthorizing it," he said. One expected modification calls for additional bonuses for states that increase adoptions of children 9 or older, Horn said.

The latest round of incentive payments, totaling nearly \$15 million to 25 states, included \$712,000 to Maryland, said Pamela Carter, an HHS spokeswoman. Since the payments started in fiscal 1998, Maryland has received nearly \$3.5 million, compared with \$1.1 million for Virginia and \$480,000 for the District.

Of Virginia's five regions, the populous Northern Region, covering 30 local jurisdictions, has the highest number of children in foster care, accounting for 30 percent of the state's total. State figures show Fairfax County with a daily average of 491 children in foster care over the last two years, Alexandria with 137, Arlington County 166, Loudoun County 40 and Prince William County 118.

In Fairfax, the number of children in foster care dropped by one-third between 1997 and last year. With fewer children entering the system, the county was hard-pressed to maintain its adoption numbers. In fiscal 1999, adoptions from foster care in the county rose to 67 from 36 two years earlier and steadily declined to 46 last year and 27 this year.

"This decline reflects the fact that we've done a good job in taking care of our backlog," Fowler said. "We're delighted that we've seen over time a decrease of children entering foster care, so fewer children need adoption planning as a result."