State tied for tenth place

ALBUQUERQUE - Children who are removed by the state from an unhealthy or potentially dangerous situation do better when they are placed in a foster family than in a group or institutional setting. This is one child well-being indicator on which New Mexico does well above the national average. That's according to the *Keeping Kids in Families: Trends in U.S. Foster Care Placement* , a new data snapshot released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of its KIDS COUNT® project.

The report looks at data from the child welfare system across all 50 states and the District of Columbia over a 10-year period, to see how placements for young people in foster care have changed. It found that nationwide care systems placed 86 percent of foster children in families in 2017, compared with 81 percent in 2007. But despite this improvement, the data revealed the group placement rate for teens has remained stagnant, and there are persistent racial disparities for children of all ages in foster care.

In New Mexico, 92 percent of all children in foster care were placed in families in 2017, a 2 percent increase from 2007. Nationally, 95 percent of children ages 12 and younger were placed in families in 2017, compared to only 58 percent of children ages 13 and older. In contrast, 97 percent of New Mexico children ages 12 years and younger were placed in families, as were 70 percent of teens ages 13 years and older.

"Children simply do better in a family setting, particularly when they are placed with relatives," said James Jimenez, executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children, which is the KIDS COUNT grantee in New Mexico. "Such placements help minimize the trauma of removal and helps keep sibling groups together, which is also essential to the emotional well-being of children in the system."

Being part of a family is a basic human need and essential to well-being, especially for children, teenagers, and young adults who are rapidly developing and transitioning to independence, as documented in the Casey Foundation's 2015 report, *Every Kid Needs a Family*. The new data suggests a growing consensus among practitioners and policymakers that young people in the child welfare system should live in families. Through the Family First Prevention Services Act, signed into law in 2018, states are empowered to prioritize family placement and high-quality, family-centered settings, which produce the best outcomes for young people.

New Mexico also does better in terms of disparities in placement by race and ethnicity. However, the data does not tell the whole story. While our native children are most likely to be placed with families (94 percent), they may be placed with non-native families, which is not ideal. Our Hispanic and white children are also very likely to be placed with families (92 percent), while our black children are the least likely to be placed in a family (86 percent).

"We clearly need to do a better job to ensure that our black and native children, as well as our older children - particularly teens - are being placed in the kinds of family settings that will best help them thrive," Jimenez said.

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