

# Well-being of foster children being studied

## Two more phases of census to be completed

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LOUISVILLE -- The first phase of an unprecedented census to verify the placement and well-being of children in every foster home has been conducted, said officials with the Kentucky Cabinet for Families and Children.

The agency commissioned the census in July after the case of Rilya Wilson, a Florida toddler who vanished after being placed in foster care. Her case caused a national uproar after it was learned that Florida social workers had skipped more than a year of required monthly visits to her foster home.

While Kentucky has intermittently surveyed certain foster care issues, Cabinet researcher Dr. Ruth Huebner said no state has conducted such a comprehensive report of all children in its care.

Students from the state's eight universities conducted visits for the census and surveyed details ranging from the child's needs and education to their foster family's community and training, Huebner said.

"This put a much finer and clearer picture on those things that are working well and those that need more attention," said Bonnie Hommrich, principal assistant to the Cabinet's secretary.

On any given day, the agency oversees the care of 6,000 Kentucky children, Hommrich said.

The census' first phase included in-home visits with the foster families of 3,162 children in the state's care.

Phases two and three of the census will include conducting visits with the remaining children, who are being cared for by relatives or in homes supervised by private child care agencies.

Although monthly visits are required, the census found that roughly 1 in 31 children had not received a visit from their caseworkers in three or more months.

"No child should not get a visit, but one hundred is a number we can target," Hommrich said. "If we compared it to other states, that's a very respectable number, but I still think we could do better."

Results will be used by regional teams charged with implementing changes that improve services offered to foster children and their families, Hommrich said. Findings also will be presented during a March 2003 federal review of the state agency, Huebner said.

Other findings include:

- More than half of foster parents surveyed said they received limited information when a child was placed in their care, and 44 percent of respondents received few details about a child's biological parents.

- Almost 80 percent of children in the state's care have siblings, and of those, 47 percent had brothers and sisters who were placed elsewhere, the census found.