

Summit aims to protect children

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AUGUSTA, Ga.---The Justice for Children Summit tries to find the best family life for kids, by giving tools and information to those who work with them.

For every 10,000 kids in Augusta, nearly three are taken from their families and put in foster care, every month.

"You try to do just do everything you can and if they don't give their effort then sometimes it's a lost cause," said Columbia County Social Services Manager Dayna Ferguson, who works to find permanent homes for kids taken from their birth parents.

Local welfare workers, juvenile judges, and police officers all met at the Justice for Children Summit, sponsored by state agencies, to talk about how they can improve their cause. Richmond, Columbia, and Burke Counties were all represented.

"We're really trying hard as much as we can to try to strengthen Georgia's families and to bring about some change," said Ferguson.

One change recommended across Georgia is using fathers as resources. When children are taken from single mothers, the father is often overlooked, the state says. They want fathers to play a role in deciding where the child goes, perhaps with his family members or himself.

For the workers, what matters most is what's best for the child in a bad situation.

"They are in multiple homes. They have forgotten the smell of their mommies. They remember it, but she's not there," said Augusta Circuit Juvenile Judge Bill Sams.

He says they all do a tough job, but it's even tougher on the kids. He says only about 20% of kids in foster care will get a high school diploma by age 19.

"What are they going do? Either the gangs are going to get them, or they're going to have to support themselves by a life of independent crime," said Sams.

Compared to the rest of the state, Deputy Project Director Beth Locker says Augusta fares well in taking care of these kinds of children. The main area she says Augusta lags behind in is adoptions. She says there are slightly fewer adoptions than the state average, and the time it takes to get children adopted is slower than average.

This is the first time the summit, which is made possible through a federal grant, came to Augusta. The state hopes to bring the summit back at least every year or two.