

Legislators doubtful over DYFS reform

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO Star-Ledger Staff December 03, 2004

The starvation death of a baby five weeks after the Division of Youth and Family Services declined to investigate his family raises questions about the "practical results" of the state's \$320 million plan to reform the child welfare agency, the chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee said yesterday.

Human Services Commissioner James Davy faced sharp questioning from committee Chairman Louis Greenwald (D-Camden) and other members of the Assembly panel over the death of Jmeir White of Asbury Park, who was 14 months old. They also posed questions on the abrupt drop in the DYFS caseload -- 10 percent, or 6,400 children -- since the implementation of a new hotline and screening system in July.

Davy and his senior management team appeared before the committee at Greenwald's request to discuss a quarterly progress report on reform of DYFS, the state's child welfare agency. But the topic that dominated the hearing in Trenton was the Aug. 22 death of Jmeir, whose parents, Tahija Handberry of Asbury Park and Wesley White of Neptune, were arrested last week on charges of starving him.

Greenwald first criticized the progress report as "worthless" because the data are two months old. Then he peppered Davy with questions about the efficacy of worker training, noting that Jmeir's death came 10 months after four boys in Collingswood were found starving in a home frequently visited by DYFS.

"This seems to be something that in light of what happened in the starvation case in Collingswood, that should have been caught," Greenwald said.

A caseworker visited the Asbury Park family once in June after a visiting nurse service called to report that another child in the home had missed two home medical appointments. The worker noted that Jmeir and his 3-year-old sister were small, but Handberry attributed their size to a medical condition -- a point the worker did not confirm with a doctor. A supervisor later approved the caseworker's decision to close the case without further investigation.

"We are looking for the hard data, so we can understand the correlation between the effort, the dollars, the training, and the results," Greenwald said. "The members of this committee have concerns -- not about your efforts or your intentions, but in the practical results."

Criticism from acting Gov. Richard Codey and now Greenwald is generating concern from those who champion the child welfare reform effort. They fear that with a \$4 billion shortfall in the upcoming state budget, Codey and Greenwald will deny Davy some of the \$180 million he wants to continue the DYFS overhaul.

Lawmakers appropriated \$15 million in early 2004 and \$125 million in the current budget year after former Gov. James E. McGreevey signed an agreement in federal court to avoid a class-action lawsuit on behalf of foster children.

Human Services officials assured the committee that policies have changed since Jmeir's death. Nurses assigned to the southern Monmouth DYFS office in Asbury Park -- which handled the family's case -- will be asked to review all children's cases that involve medical neglect and physical abuse. That practice eventually will go statewide. The state also now requires any family investigated for abuse and neglect to undergo a "strengths and needs assessment" -- scrutiny that caseworkers usually reserve for high-risk cases. Jmeir's family was considered a moderate risk.

In his testimony, Davy tried to focus on the strides the child welfare agency is making, citing the child caseload drop from 68,454 in July to 61,987 in November. However, Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union) and Assemblywoman Joan Quigley (D-Hudson) questioned whether a new screening system is suppressing cases that should be investigated. They also questioned whether ongoing cases are being closed prematurely.

"We must be making sure we're not dropping kids that might be in danger," Quigley said.

Assistant Commissioner Edward E. Cotton said the teams targeted cases to be closed where abuse was never proved, or where foster children had returned to their families long ago. "The children were all seen before the case was closed," he said.

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DYFS can't make safety foolproof, official tells panel

Commissioner James M. Davy said no amount of new resources would ensure all children were protected.

By Angela Delli Santi Dec. 03, 2004 Associated Press

TRENTON - Despite hundreds of millions of dollars being poured into overhauling the state's troubled child-welfare agency, there is no way to guarantee the safety of all children it oversees, its chief told lawmakers seeking accountability in the starvation of a toddler.

Human Services Commissioner James M. Davy spent more than two hours yesterday before an Assembly panel investigating the case of Jmeir White, the 14-month-old who died of chronic malnutrition in August, two months after a caseworker had been in the boy's Asbury Park home.

Jmeir was among 26 New Jersey children to die of abuse or neglect this year, one of 16 whose families were known to the Division of Youth and Family Services before they died, agency spokeswoman Laurie Facciarossa said. The agency considers all families with whom it ever has contact as "known" to it, even if the case was closed years ago.

DYFS's only visit to the Whites had been triggered by a visiting nurse's concern for an anemic newborn in the home, but the caseworker who noted the small size of the two older children accepted the mother's explanation without verification, Davy told the panel.

"With the benefit of hindsight, we believe he made the wrong judgment," Davy said.

The agency has adopted new protocols to prevent similar fatalities.

The caseworker and supervisor were not disciplined, Davy said, although they were pulled off their cases for 30 days while the files were audited. Jmeir's parents have been charged with aggravated manslaughter.

"These are the kinds of cases that keep us up at night, wondering what could we have done to keep the child safe from harm," Davy told the panel. "My dream is to have our agency be in a position where we don't have any children die because we made the wrong judgment call."

He acknowledged, however, that he could not guarantee the safety of all children who have contact with the agency, no matter how much money the state spends or how many safeguards are put in place. Jmeir was never in state custody, and Davy said the caseworker had met with the mother to facilitate contact with the visiting nurse on behalf of the infant.

Davy's comments were his most extensive to date on a case that outraged acting Gov. Richard J. Codey and had members of the Assembly Budget Committee questioning whether changes already ordered in court would turn around the agency.

"The members of this committee have concerns not in your efforts, not in your intentions, but in the practical results," Chairman Louis Greenwald (D., Camden) told Davy. "This seems to be something, in light of what happened, in light of the starvation case in Collingswood, that should have been caught."

Nine DYFS employees were fired after four adopted brothers were found starving in Collingswood in October 2003. Caseworkers who had been in the home of Raymond and Vanessa Jackson regularly to check on the family's foster child failed to note the conditions of the bone-thin brothers.

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Report says state failing at-risk kids

Advocate tells how DYFS, others missed signs and let a dozen die

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO AND JONATHAN SCHUPPE Star-Ledger Staff December 10, 2004

A 17-year-old boy committed suicide after three different agencies wrongly thought the others had arranged for his treatment when school let out for the summer.

A boy's doctor failed to let child welfare workers know about five separate injuries that suggested abuse. The 5-year-old died from a ruptured intestine in March.

A 5-year-old boy was scalded to death after a state caseworker bogged down by a huge workload failed to investigate who was watching him while his mother worked the overnight shift at a factory. The boy's baby-sitter was a 10-year-old.

Child welfare workers and other professionals missed many opportunities to protect children who died in 2004 after they were deemed at risk of abuse or neglect, a report released by the Child Advocate's Office yesterday concluded. The report suggested the state is still failing to safeguard its most vulnerable children.

"When families cannot or will not care for children, it is up to the state to protect them," said Child Advocate Kevin M. Ryan. "In too many of these cases, those efforts were just not good enough for our kids."

The report points out that investigations by the Division of Youth and Family Services often fell short because workers were poorly trained and supervised, and had too many cases to handle. But it also says children were ill-protected by other professionals who should have warned that they were in danger: teachers, doctors, local social service agencies, and day care providers. It concludes that children suffer when these professionals and DYFS fail to talk to each other about potential dangers.

While stressing that "the child welfare system did not kill any of these children," the report identified "systemic breakdowns" and said political leaders should support an ongoing \$320 million effort to reform DYFS.

The report examined 11 child abuse cases from January to August, as well as the suicide of a 17-year-old who had "extensive involvement with the child welfare system." Ryan's office may release the results of probes into as many as five more deaths still under review. The advocate concluded there were problems in how all but one of the 12 cases were handled.

The report sharply criticized DYFS' work in the case of Jmeir White of Asbury Park, who died from chronic malnutrition in August, 14 months after he was born with severe anemia. Jmeir's parents, Wesley White and Tahija Handberry, were arrested last month for starving him.

In this case, the boy's pediatrician apparently didn't know about his anemia because it was not included in medical records from the hospital where he was born, Jersey Shore Medical Center in Neptune, according to the Child

Advocate.

The pediatrician didn't sound an alarm when he saw the boy in December 2003 and March 2004 and noted that his weight had remained a mere 15 pounds. And the DYFS caseworker who saw the child and noted his small size in June said he never consulted with the nurse assigned to assist the southern Monmouth DYFS office because "she was frequently busy with field work," the report said.

"A caseworker with modest training ... was left to assess the medical condition of a child at demonstrated risk," the report said.

Ryan said this was a clear example of how a child can fall through the cracks of the health care system.

"As you go through some of these cases, you can't help but walk away and say we have got to build a stronger bridge between New Jersey's child welfare system and its health care system," Ryan said. "It's about the police, the hospitals, schools, day care. It's about teachers. And it's also about DYFS."

Anthony D'Urso, a psychologist who chairs the state Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board, said the report's findings mirrored what his annual reviews reveal: that many deaths under DYFS are the result of poor communication with medical professionals, such as doctors and mental health clinicians. He said that still missing from DYFS is a "culture of consultation" in which caseworkers and supervisors aren't afraid to seek outside help.

One dramatic example of a lack of communication between state and local agencies is the suicide by hanging of a 17-year-old boy July 5.

The report said the boy had discovered his mother's body after she committed suicide nearly a decade earlier, and was under DYFS legal custody since 2001 because his father had a drinking problem. In the months before school let out this year, the boy's grades were high and he had gotten a job at a grocery store. But his condition deteriorated over the summer, when he no longer had daily treatment for behavioral problems.

Three groups assigned to his care each thought, incorrectly, that others had arranged his treatment through the summer, or that he didn't need any: the ACE Program, an alternative school for youths with learning and behavioral problems; his DYFS caseworker; and the county-based mental health consortium known as Case Assessment Resource Team.

"None of these agencies ever contacted the children's behavior health system to link (the boy) with supportive services and care. The fragmentation of this system looms large in these events," the report said.

DYFS workers were criticized in the case of 5-year-old Samuel Allen, who was left with a 10-year-old baby-sitter while his mother worked an overnight shift at a factory. Police believe the boy was scalded to death when he could not turn off the hot water in the bathroom. When the family was previously investigated for an unrelated complaint about neglectful supervision, the DYFS worker did not independently verify the reliability of the mother's baby-sitters.

Ryan stressed that the report was not "a verdict" on a \$320 million effort to reform New Jersey's struggling child welfare system, saying the state's involvement in these cases occurred before it began implementing the reforms. The reforms are monitored by a federal judge, and are expected to restructure and expand the state child welfare and mental health systems.

"The report clearly makes the case for reform, and if anything, it should burnish our political leaders' demand for reform and continued investment in the reform plan," he said.

State Human Services Commissioner James Davy said "the tragedies outlined in this report underscore the need for us to continue to work tirelessly to reform our child welfare system..." He said he expects the reforms to solve many of the systemic problems linked to the deaths, but acknowledged: "Clearly, we have not yet reached that day."

Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights Inc., whose lawsuit prompted the reforms, said stories of the 12 children are "illustrations of what happens if reform doesn't take place."

"The real tragedy from a public reaction standpoint is to think there are any quick fixes, because there are not," Lowry said. "We will make sure (the plan) is lived up to."

The report stresses that reducing high caseloads is "imperative." It suggested expediting the training and hiring of new supervisors, and the planned creation of a training academy for child welfare staff. Davy said the state is in the midst of implementing many of the advocate's recommendations.

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Advocate: DYFS erred in deaths

By Mitch Lipka Inquirer Trenton Bureau December 10, 2004

TRENTON - A review of the deaths of a dozen New Jersey children whose families were under the state's watch found patterns of poor follow-through, inadequate training of supervisors, and a lack of coordination with medical professionals.

The examination from January to August by the state Office of the Child Advocate - released yesterday - found that the Division of Youth and Family Services and medical professionals had made errors in practice and judgment that could have contributed to some of the deaths.

In some cases, the review found DYFS was still dealing with two long-standing problems: workers and supervisors carrying too many cases and closing them too soon. Most of the cases occurred before the July 1 launch of a court-ordered agency overhaul.

Among the deaths were those of Samuel Allen, a 5-year-old autistic boy in Trenton who scalded himself while his mother was at work; Jmeir White, a 14-month-old who starved in Asbury Park; and 3-year-old Jibril Fuller, allegedly beaten to death in Irvington by his mother's boyfriend.

In each case, DYFS workers had worked with the families, investigating claims of abuse or neglect.

"The message, and I think it's an important and powerful one, is these are the human consequences of a very poorly performing child-welfare system," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of the Children's Rights Inc. advocacy group "The best thing would be if a child-welfare system could be fixed in a few weeks. Given how profoundly damaged this system was, it is going to take time for us to see the consequences."

The settlement last year of a lawsuit brought against the state by Children's Rights serves as the framework for the system's multiyear, \$321.5 million overhaul.

While those watching or involved in the overhaul said change could not happen overnight, at least four DYFS employees have been targeted for errors made in the cases. A worker and a supervisor in the Allen case have been disciplined, and punishment has been recommended for a worker and a supervisor in the Fuller case.

Workers missed opportunities in several cases to get help for families unable to cope, the report found.

In the Allen case, a DYFS worker did not verify the mother's claims that adults were watching her four children while she worked overnight. A 10-year-old was in charge the night Samuel died.

Plus, the report pointed out, services that might have helped the family are not available.

"The child-care, early-intervention and homemaker-assistance services that this single mother may have needed as she tried to raise four children, including a child with autism,... simply do not exist in New Jersey," the report said.

In the Fuller case, the report found, the caseworker apparently dismissed several opportunities to document what appeared to be obvious signs of child abuse, including findings by a doctor.

Workers in the White case accepted the mother's explanation for Jmeir's low weight and did not use medical consulting that was available to determine whether there was another explanation.

The report said plans to remedy problems with the system addressed most of the concerns raised by the deaths.

"We're at the very beginning stages" of the overhaul, said Laurie Facciarossa, spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services, which includes DYFS. "The funding's only been in place for five months."

Because so many new workers have been hired, she said, a more rigid system has been put in place to help avoid judgment errors.

Kevin Ryan, who heads the Office of the Child Advocate, said the report's findings were not an indictment of the changes but should be seen as greater reason to spur them on.

"This report is not a reflection of where DHS is headed and is certainly not a verdict on the child-welfare reform plan," the child advocate's review said. "The report reminds us of the mountainous challenges that confront the public leaders, staff and advocates whose work will define the success of reform."

DYFS needs to work harder to protect children in peril, Ryan said.

"In several of these cases, those efforts were just not good enough for the kids," he said.

One change that Ryan said he hoped would make a difference was the recent hiring of a medical director at DYFS to bridge the gaps between field-workers and the medical profession in identifying children at risk.

Ryan's report recommended that DYFS:

Verify child-care arrangements.

Identify all residents of the home and those who frequent it and their involvement in providing care.

Increase training of supervisors.

Require that staff with more than five years' experience review all decisions to close cases made by supervisors with less than two years of supervisory experience.

Better coordinate with medical providers and clarify the role of nurses employed by DYFS.

Instruct hospitals to refer all cases to the agency when babies have had no prenatal care.

Progress of Child-Welfare Overhaul

Reducing caseloads: The overall caseload was down from 68,454 in July to 61,987 in November.

The child-to-caseworker ratio in the district offices - where caseloads are highest - also went down, from 43 children per worker in July to

35 children (about 19 families) per worker in November. The target is

15 families.

More than 300 new frontline workers have been hired.

Tracking cases: In November, the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System was launched to help track cases and provide real-time status information to caseworkers.

Since July, all calls to the Division of Youth and Family Services go to a central hotline in Trenton.

Recruiting and supporting resource families: A June 2005 goal of recruiting 1,000 new foster families has already been exceeded.

Institutionalizing fewer children: There are 167 youth case managers in the state to help children with mental-health problems get proper placements and avoid improper detention.

The number of treatment homes has risen by 34, with a goal of adding 75 by June.

Medical care for children touched by the DYFS system: About half the approximately 8,000 children in foster care are in HMOs. The rest will be enrolled effective Jan. 1.

To Learn More

To view the full report by the Office of the Child Advocate, go to <http://go.philly.com/advocate>. For previous Inquirer articles on the problems within DYFS, go to <http://go.philly.com/dyfs>.

SOURCE: N.J. Department of Human Services

Revamping of DYFS going well, report says

The N.J. Child Welfare Panel gave a federal judge an early, hopeful look.

By Mitch Lipka Inquirer Trenton Bureau Dec. 16, 2004

TRENTON - New Jersey's efforts to overhaul its child-welfare system are mostly on target and on time, a panel overseeing the changes told a judge yesterday.

While the report to U.S. District Judge Stanley R. Chesler was termed preliminary, it largely painted a picture of success in the earliest stages of what is expected to be a years-long process.

"It's a little premature to say congratulations," Chesler said. "It's not premature to say there's hope."

The New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, a group of experts charged with overseeing the changes and advising the state, was not expected to report its findings on the first stages of the effort until February. But Chesler said he had wanted a progress report, particularly in light of the November resignation of Gov. Jim McGreevey, who had become a champion of the need to fix the system.

Funding for the first year of the planned transformation of the state system - regarded in recent years as among the most dysfunctional in the nation - began July 1.

State Human Services Commissioner James Davy assured Chesler of acting Gov. Richard J. Codey's commitment to

pay for and support the changes, which are expected to cost more than \$320 million.

Chesler warned the administration and Legislature that he would be paying attention as the state budget - and more than \$100 million for changes in the next fiscal year - is considered.

"I will be watching," he said, "and not with idle interest."

Chesler, through the panel, is overseeing the state's efforts as a result of a legal settlement with the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc. The group sued the state on behalf of foster children in 1999 and set specific deadlines for changes.

The lawsuit was settled last year, after the death of Faheem Williams, whose abuse and neglect case was closed although the worker had not seen him or his brothers, who were found starving in Newark.

Months after the settlement, the state changed the leadership of the overhaul following the discovery of the four emaciated Jackson brothers in a Collingswood home visited dozens of times by state workers who did not note the brothers' conditions.

The panel will oversee the changes for at least 18 months at the Department of Human Services and the new Office of Children's Services, which will be in charge of the Division of Youth and Family Services and three other divisions.

Starting in February, the panel is to release reports on the state's progress every six months.

Panel chairman Steven D. Cohen cautioned that even before the end of the year the state still had several deadlines to meet. The February report will give a detailed evaluation of the state's progress, he said.

Among the problems raised by the panel are not giving the Office of Child Services a distinct role or enough authority and delivering sometimes-contradictory plans for coming changes. It also questioned how the centralized abuse and neglect hotline is staffed and operated.

Some positive actions noted by the panel are the state's:

Hiring of a deputy commissioner and other managers to run the Office of Children's Services, an assistant commissioner for the new Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships, and a medical director.

Hiring and training of hundreds of new workers and supervisors, most of whom have been assigned to the high-need areas of Essex, Camden, Mercer and Passaic Counties.

Opening the centralized hotline for receiving child abuse and neglect allegations, which replaced a system that had dozens of telephone numbers operating from dozens of offices.

"It's worth noting here in court today that is not a trivial accomplishment," Cohen said of the state's meeting required deadlines so far. "Unfortunately, when systems have been broken for a long time... they often promise more than they can deliver."

Susan Lambiase, associate director of Children's Rights, told Chesler that she was "heartened" by the state's progress.

"We're saddened, of course, the reforms can never come quickly enough," she said.

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Man held in beating death of DYFS boy

State says agencies failed to act on hints

BY MARYANN SPOTO AND SUSAN K. LIVIO Star-Ledger Staff December 21, 2004

An Asbury Park man was charged yesterday with fatally beating his girlfriend's 5-year-old son while the boy was under the supervision of the state's child welfare system.

On two separate occasions the boy, Kedar Norris, said the man was hurting him, but his complaints were not taken seriously by either child welfare workers or police, authorities said. The child died in March.

The arrest of Royce Berry, 29, came four weeks after investigators in Monmouth County charged an Asbury Park couple with the starvation death of their 14-month-old son, who like Kedar was being monitored by the state's beleaguered Division of Youth and Family Services.

Berry punched Kedar in the stomach as a form of discipline, causing deadly internal injuries, First Assistant Monmouth County Prosecutor Robert Honecker Jr. said yesterday.

Berry was arrested at the Monmouth County Courthouse in Freehold Borough, where he had gone for a pre-arranged matter with DYFS officials, Honecker said. He was charged with aggravated manslaughter, and also with child endangerment for failing to seek medical attention that could have saved the boy's life, Honecker said.

"Royce Berry didn't seek medical treatment for the child because he knew what happened," Honecker said.

Berry, who married Kedar's mother the month after the boy died, was being held in the Monmouth County Jail yesterday in lieu of \$300,000 bail.

Kedar's injuries were so severe that he developed peritonitis -- an inflammation of the membrane that covers the abdominal organs. It was that condition, undiagnosed at the time, that led Kedar's mother, Netasha Smith, to bring the boy to his pediatrician in Neptune March 29.

The pediatrician called police when he found Kedar unresponsive. The boy was rushed to Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune, where he died later that day.

The peritonitis was detected after Kedar died, authorities said.

The boy was no stranger to emergency medical care. In the 20 months before his death, Kedar was treated at hospitals or by doctors for five separate injuries that suggested abuse, according to a recent report by the state's Office of Child Advocate, an independent agency that monitors DYFS.

The advocate's report examined the state's involvement with a dozen children who died this year from abuse and neglect, to identify ways the agency can improve its supervision. The report noted that in Kedar's case, as well as others, there were superficial investigations and a lack of communication between agencies that saw the children.

"Even the smallest voices deserve justice, but I wish it had come to Kedar in the form of a safe and loving home, or a functional child protection system," state Child Advocate Kevin M. Ryan said yesterday.

Kedar's doctor never shared the boy's medical history with DYFS, the child advocate's report said. DYFS workers who investigated the family twice before Kedar's death did not take seriously the boy's own allegations that Berry had physically abused him. A police detective, called in to investigate one of the allegations, also dropped the case.

On two occasions, in November 2002 and May 2003, the boy said Berry had pinched his penis until he cried. The boy also said Berry stuffed a sock in his mouth and taped it shut to punish him in May 2003. Berry and the child's mother said the pinching was the result of an accident while play-wrestling, which they promised to stop. DYFS accepted the explanation.

In the days before Kedar died, Berry was watching three children, including Kedar, while Smith, 21, was at work at Jersey Shore Center, a long-term care facility in Eatontown. She brought Kedar to the pediatrician complaining the boy had been vomiting for two days and was concerned he had the flu, Assistant Monmouth County Prosecutor Peter Warshaw said. Peritonitis often causes flulike symptoms, Warshaw said.

For six weeks after Kedar's death, Monmouth County Medical Examiner Jay Peacock held off confirming an official cause of death until he received the results of toxicology and other tests, Honecker said. From July until yesterday, when Berry was charged, investigators were gathering additional evidence, which Honecker would not detail.

Honecker said Peacock ruled out accidental causes of death, such as a fall, and negated a claim that Kedar's brother, Kaleem Norris, had jumped on him.

Kaleem told investigators after his brother's death that Berry punched Kedar in the stomach, Honecker said.

"It was a form of discipline. He wasn't listening," Honecker said. "He was punished for not listening."

Neither Netasha Smith nor the pediatrician was charged in the death.

Berry and Smith have had a relationship for more than two years. They have a 2-year-old son together, Jaiden. Kaleem, who is now 4, is her son by Kedar's natural father.

The boys are now with a relative under DYFS care, Honecker said.

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Child-abuse hotline to get new manager and additional staff

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO Star-Ledger Staff January 14, 2005

Responding to complaints that a new child-abuse hotline doesn't respond quickly enough to reports of children in trouble, state officials have replaced the call-in center's manager and plan to increase its staff by half.

The centralized screening system has been struggling since its July 1 launch, and child-advocacy groups said last fall they were getting complaints that tips about suspected neglect or abuse were not getting passed on to child-protection workers. Some questioned whether operators were improperly screening out calls that ought to be investigated.

Last month, the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, a group of national experts monitoring the state's reform of child-welfare services under a lawsuit settlement, gave the call center poor marks. It told a federal judge there were problems with the hotline's "staffing levels, screening procedures, and timely and accurate transmission of reports" to abuse investigators.

The panel said it expected the state to fix the problems before it submitted its first formal progress report to U.S. District Court Judge Stanley Chesler next month.

The changes now under way include:

Adding 20 call screeners and supervisors as soon as possible to the 40 employees already assigned.

Hiring a new manager for the screening center, replacing Robert Clark, who was transferred Jan. 7 to the Ewing Residential Treatment Center, a group facility for older youth with behavioral problems where he worked previously. Assistant DYFS Director Leticia Lacomba is in charge until a permanent manager is found with experience running a hotline.

Retraining staff to convey "a sense of urgency" about the operation.
Recording incoming calls to improve employee training and evaluate performance.

Hiring a consultant to review a sample of 200 calls that did not lead to investigations of abuse or neglect. The consultant would review those decisions.

"This is the emergency room of our operation, and we need to act like that," said Deputy Human Services Commissioner Kathi Way. "We want to make sure there is a sense of urgency and people's calls are answered as quickly as possible."

"The changes look like useful ones to us," Steve Cohen, the child-welfare panel's chairman, said this week. "But until we go back there to visit, I can't say much more."

The state Division of Youth and Family Services launched the centralized call-screening system six months ago to replace a confusing list of 30-plus telephone numbers for reporting child maltreatment. Fielding all calls out of one shop would allow managers to spot trends and use uniform standards to define abuse and neglect throughout the state.

Almost from its inception, the hotline came under criticism.

"We continue to hear almost universal concern about how well (the hotline) is operating and protecting children," Lisa Eisenbud, director of the Child Advocate's unit that is monitoring DYFS reform.

"Many individuals in the field -- educators, principals, health care professionals and social service agencies -- are concerned about what is happening to calls that are not meeting the new definitions of abuse, and whether children and family are being referred for assessments," Eisenbud said. "We are glad to see they are recognizing they have a problem and have the flexibility to remedy it."

Screeners answer roughly 19,000 calls a month, said DYFS spokesman Andy Williams.

Ten percent of the calls lead to investigations into child maltreatment; 10 percent warrant a visit from a DYFS worker to help a family cope with problems unrelated to abuse and neglect; and 5 percent are referred to the Division of Children's Behavioral Health, Way said. The remaining 75 percent are follow-up calls, requests for information and inquiries unrelated to suspected child abuse.

The child-abuse hotline telephone number is (877) NJABUSE or (877) 652-2873.

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