

DYFS aims to put roofs over its kids' heads

36 million dollar effort will provide housing for client families

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

February 17, 2004

Child welfare officials will spend \$36 million over the next five years to provide safe and affordable housing for families under their care, state Department of Community Affairs Commissioner Susan Bass Levin said yesterday.

Hundreds of parents and foster families would benefit under the plan, which is one element of a top- to-bottom overhaul of the troubled Division of Youth and Family Services.

The reform package, estimated to cost about \$125 million in the coming year, is expected to be formally announced tomorrow by the Department of Human Services. The far-reaching package includes hiring more caseworkers to reduce caseloads and expanding drug treatment for foster families.

"The plight of children in the DYFS system is well documented," Levin said. But one overlooked problem in these children's lives, she said, is how the lack of safe and affordable housing in New Jersey often disrupts families by keeping them apart.

"The goal is to make sure the child has a safe place to live. Every child is entitled to that," Levin said.

The housing plan includes:

A \$5 million home improvement fund to rehabilitate homes where foster children live, or where children supervised by DYFS with their biological families live. An estimated 250 homes would be repaired, based on an average of \$20,000 in improvements.

A \$1.5 million rental assistance fund serving approximately 100 families under DYFS supervision. The state would sign a contract with a landlord, who then would make Section 8 vouchers available to renters. Section 8 vouchers provide up to two-thirds of a family's rent, which averages about \$800 a month.

A \$5 million home ownership loan program for about 50 families with poor credit histories who are adopting or obtaining legal guardianship of a child through DYFS.

A \$6 million loan pool to encourage the construction and management of group homes and other housing for 60 to 100 teenage foster children preparing for adulthood. DYFS will provide half of the money for this initiative

An \$8 million fund to encourage homeless shelter operators to build permanent housing for as many as 180 families. The money would train people who run emergency housing programs to assemble long-term housing projects. The

money also could be used toward construction costs.

A \$6 million fund to help domestic violence victims find a place to live after they leave a battered women's shelter. As many as 300 families would receive money to pay the security deposit and the first month's rent at apartments they lease. The fund also would provide help paying the rent for as many as 100 families.

A \$1.5 million pool targeting three depressed neighborhoods that serve a high concentration of children monitored by DYFS. The money, spent over five years, would be used to make repairs at nearby parks, install street lights, or replace a house's crumbling porch. A local nonprofit or municipality would administer the effort.

The programs will be paid for with existing funds provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as well as the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, Levin said. "We can start right away," she said.

The state is required to develop a reform plan to comply with a settlement it reached eight months ago with a child advocacy group that sued DYFS for violating the civil rights of foster children.

The state's plan must get the approval of the plaintiff, Children's Rights Inc. of New York, as well as a panel of national child experts who will critique the document. If the panel rejects the plan, attorneys for Children's Rights may go to federal court and ask a judge to impose the changes they seek.

One affordable housing advocate cautioned that housing assistance alone won't end a family's problems.

"You can give a dysfunctional family a place to live, but if you don't work on the dysfunction, a year later you still have a dysfunctional family," said Sandy Accomando, chief executive officer for the Apostles' House, a nonprofit that runs a shelter, a food pantry and housing programs in Essex County.

"There has to be someone doing in-home case management, someone who will help people negotiate the system -- welfare, DYFS, the courts," Accomando said.

For 20 years, Apostles' House has provided in-home assistance to families at risk of losing custody of their children to DYFS.

Levin's plan, Accomando said, is a "very good first step. ... The fact that they understand housing is an integral part of a family's stability is very encouraging."

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State to take the wraps off mega-plan to reform DYFS

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO Star-Ledger Staff February 18, 2004

A sweeping plan that would commit an unprecedented level of state funding to reinvent New Jersey's system of protecting abused and neglected children will be unveiled today as state officials attempt to end decades of mismanagement at the state's child welfare agency.

The plan proposed by Gov. James E. McGreevey and acting Human Services Commissioner James Davy is expected to commit an additional \$125 million in the coming year to revamp the troubled Division of Youth and Family Services, assailed for the past 13 months over a series of high-profile tragedies.

State officials are expected to add 1,100 employees to drastically reduce caseloads and create 2,200 new drug treatment openings for drug-addicted parents. Foster parents and relatives who act like foster parents will be paid more, and get their own caseworker.

The plan must convince a panel of national child welfare experts that state officials are capable of fixing an agency that has rebuffed past attempts at reform.

The five-member New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, court-appointed to monitor DYFS reforms, must decide within the next 30 days whether the plan is both ambitious enough and realistic to enact. If the panel rejects it, a child advocacy group that sued DYFS may go back to U.S. District Judge Stanley Chesler in Trenton and ask him to impose needed changes.

"We are confident one way or another the child welfare system is going to be reformed," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Child Rights Inc., the advocacy group that sued the state. "The important lesson here is one way or another, a state that runs a child welfare agency as badly as New Jersey is going to have to turn its system around either voluntarily or involuntarily."

Five years ago, Children's Rights Inc. filed the lawsuit, *Charlie and Nadine H. v. Gov. Christie Whitman*, accusing DYFS of trapping foster children in a mismanaged bureaucracy that puts them at risk. The lawsuit stalled until last January, when Newark police discovered the battered body of 7-year-old Faheem Williams, a child whose case file DYFS closed without investigating a charge of physical abuse.

The McGreevey administration settled the lawsuit in June and promised to develop a comprehensive plan to fix what it admitted was a "broken" system.

While some of the key elements of the plan have emerged, there has been little information on how the state is going to pay for the reforms, noted Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, an advocacy group in Newark.

McGreevey and the Legislature must invest in DYFS while grappling with an estimated \$4 billion shortfall for the

budget year that begins July 1.

"Clearly this is going to take some big bucks," Zalkind said, who feels that the state must disclose right away "how much money they need now and where it's going to come from."

"This will be a critical issue," Zalkind said.

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DYFS plan calls for wide-ranging changes to stop abuse

By TOM BELL

The Associated Press

2/18/2004, 4:44 p.m. ET

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — State officials unveiled a long-awaited plan to fix New Jersey's troubled child welfare system, emphasizing closer and more frequent contact with the children who are under the supervision of the Division of Youth and Family Services.

The reforms, once in place, should put an end to years of agency problems that have contributed to several nightmarish deaths and the abuse of other youngsters under the state's care, officials say.

The nearly 200-page report calls for new procedures for handling cases, expanded social services statewide and increasing the size of the work force that serves New Jersey's most troubled families.

"It reinvents child welfare in fundamental ways, from the front line to the commissioner's office; from the case work with families to the system's relationship with neighborhoods and communities; from accountability to the provision of resources," the report said.

Gov. James E. McGreevey and other officials introduced the plan at an afternoon news conference Wednesday.

"For too long we failed," McGreevey said. "This plan sets us on a corrective course of action."

The plan calls for the hiring of 1,500 new DYFS workers over the next 2 1/2 years and for boosting by 25 percent the \$420 stipend foster families receive monthly for each child.

It would also create forensic investigator positions so that all cases of child abuse are probed within 24 hours. Under the current system, caseworkers do the investigating and they aren't done quickly enough, officials said.

Significant portions of the funding would also go toward social programs in an effort to help families at risk of needing DYFS services. Those programs would include substance abuse treatment, mental health services, housing assistance, and aid for victims of domestic violence.

"It's a preventive model that keeps children from coming through DYFS' door in the first place," said James Davy, newly appointed Department of Human Services commissioner.

State officials also want to recruit 1,000 new foster homes by June 2005, and make an effort to keep children in their own neighborhoods and schools if they are taken from their parents.

Children's advocates had mixed reactions. They generally praised the state's ambitions, but questioned whether parts of the plan were detailed enough.

The improvements will cost the state \$125 million in the next fiscal year and \$180 million in fiscal year 2006 at a time when the state is faced with budget problems. McGreevey said the increased expenditures for DYFS would come from the general budget and not from a specifically created tax increase.

The state was required to produce the reform plan under terms of a lawsuit settlement reached last year with the New York-based child advocacy group Children's Rights Inc.

Marcia Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights, said she found the plan to be "ambitious and comprehensive." But she criticized the state for not being specific enough in how its goals for change would be reached.

"What I'm concerned about is that it does not at this stage have sufficient specificity to let us have confidence that the state knows how it will accomplish these goals," Lowry said. "It needs a lot more at this point."

The New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, an independent oversight body established as part of the lawsuit settlement, now has 30 days to review the plan and either approve it or reject it. The entire settlement is being overseen by a federal judge.

Steve Cohen, the head of the panel, called the plan "ambitious." But he said Wednesday that the panel would give it more scrutiny and hold public hearings next month in Newark and Camden before deciding whether to approve it.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, praised the fact that the plan was backed by funding, but said she had concerns over accountability. She was also worried about the section on management and how new workers would be supervised as all the changes take place.

"You need experienced levels of supervision," Zalkind said.

Davy dismissed the doubts.

"We will get this done. This is not an option," said Davy, who led the plan formulation effort. "Everything in this plan will get done."

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Plan To Reform DYFS Would Cut Caseloads Significantly, Boost Help to Foster Families, Increase Substance Abuse Programs

DHS Acting Commissioner Calls It an Historic Effort to Rebuild New Jersey's Children's Services

Caseloads of Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) workers would be dramatically reduced to among the lowest in the nation, the monthly rate for foster parents would be increased by nearly 25 percent, forensically trained investigators will respond to all allegations of abuse or neglect within 24 hours, and millions will be poured into the creation of a vast array of local support services for at-risk families, under a plan submitted today by the Department of Human Services to the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel.

DYFS will be completely re-engineered so that it concentrates only on safety, wellbeing and permanency of children who have been abused and neglected while two separate divisions will be created to focus on children's mental health services and child abuse prevention, according to the plan. Moreover, the plan calls for an unprecedented level of cooperation and partnership with local communities to lift up struggling families, before they become part of the DYFS caseload.

To accomplish the ambitious goals set forth in the plan, the Department of Human Services would add nearly 1,500 new staff at DYFS over two and half years and would load millions of additional funding into community-based substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence and housing services, requiring the added expenditure of \$15 million this year, \$125 million in fiscal year 2005, and \$180 million in fiscal year 2006.

"I am very optimistic about this plan," said Governor James E. McGreevey. "It touches on all elements of the child protection system. I made it quite clear that I was dissatisfied with the state of our child welfare system, and we needed to make drastic structural changes like the ones outlined in this plan."

"This is the day that we begin to put the never-ending crises behind us and seize the opportunity to reinvent ourselves as an outstanding agency committed to protecting children and healing broken families," said Department of Human Services Acting Commissioner James M. Davy.

"Today we advance a revolutionary vision that sets in motion events that will forever change the lives and health of countless tens of thousands of New Jersey's children for generations to come. Together with our partners in the community, we have developed a blueprint for the future of children in New Jersey that is ambitious, specific and complete," he said.

The plan, entitled "A New Beginning: The Future of Child Welfare in New Jersey," was submitted as part of the June court settlement of a class action suit filed on behalf of foster children by Children's Rights Inc. in 1999. Five weeks ago, the Governor's Office negotiated a 30-day extension with the court-appointed Child Welfare Panel and the

plaintiffs, when the plan was obviously not going to be ready to meet the deadline. At that time, Lisa Eisenbud, the Governor's Deputy Chief of Management and Operations stepped in as the chief architect of the plan.

The plan outlines major changes in the areas of recruiting, retaining and supporting resource families; programs for adolescents; use of institutional programs; case practice; expanding core services; community partnerships; the workforce, accountability and quality assurance.

Jerry W. Friedman, executive director of the American Public Human Services Association applauded the scope of the plan.

"We are pleased that the plan addresses important critical markers of success including increased staffing with on-going training and building on local community resources and partnerships to deal with complex child welfare issues," he said.

"Of critical importance, DHS has recognized the value of resetting the organizational culture and the role of accountability and continuous learning in this rapidly changing environment."

Melvin D. Miller, president of Legal Services of New Jersey said, "This plan represents the most important and comprehensive new vision for child welfare in New Jersey in the last 30 years with many critical proposed initiatives. While we still have some recommendations for enhancements in areas where we think it does not go far enough, we very much look forward the state to secure its implementation."

The plan calls for the hiring of 1,463 new DYFS staff between now and the end of fiscal year 2006. The new hires would be made up of: 1,000 direct care employees and 463 support staff.

"One of the fundamental problems of this system has been that caseloads were simply too high," said Davy. "That leads to bad decision making, mistakes and failures in the system."

Under the plan, two new types of caseworkers would be created: child protection workers and permanency workers. Child protection workers would specialize in investigations of child abuse and neglect, receive special forensic training and would be limited to a caseload of eight new investigations per month. Permanency workers would provide the ongoing services to children and families and have a maximum caseload of 15 families or 10 children in out of home placement.

Other Elements of the plan include:

Foster Care/Resource Families

Resource families, that is foster families, adoptive families, kinship families are a cornerstone of a successful child protection system. More aid and support must be provided to existing resource families and more resource families must be developed. The plan calls for:

- Increasing foster care rates and other supports to foster families. The rates paid to foster and kinship families would be equalized. Currently kinship families in which children are placed with relatives receive \$250 per child per month, while foster parents rates range

from \$420 to \$500 per month depending on the age of the child.

- In addition, over the next two years, all rates would be increased by a total of 25 percent making the New Jersey rate 100 percent of the United States Department of Agriculture standard of costs to raise children in the urban Northeast part of the country.
- Recruiting at least 1,000 new resource family homes by June 2005
- Hiring resource family workers, a new group of workers who will work out of district offices and be responsible for recruitment, training support, home studies and providing ongoing support for up to 35 resource families from the same geographic area.
- Streamlining the process of becoming a resource family from 12 months to 90 days from application through training and licensure
- Focusing attention to recruiting families for special needs and difficult to place children
- Establishing a resource family recruiter in each DYFS office.
- Allocating \$1 million annually for home repairs
- Setting up a 24-hour Resource Family Hotline

Expanding Core and Preventive Services

Some of the major factors connected with child abuse and neglect are: substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, lack of housing and health care services. The plan calls for increasing resources in these areas:

- The Department of Health and Senior Services Division of Addiction Services will move to the department to facilitate and coordinate delivery of those services to DHS clients
- As the first step of a five year initiative, \$10 million was included in the current fiscal year budget to treat drug- and alcohol-abusing parents who are involved with the state child welfare system. The funds will be used to create 862 new treatment slots, including outpatient, long term residential, and assisted partial care beds for drug- and alcohol-abusing parents who are in danger of losing their children. It is estimated that the influx of treatment dollars will serve about 2,500 families in the coming year. The \$10 million boost in funding for DYFS-involved parents represents a 33-percent increase in the roughly \$30 million spent each year to provide addiction services through various DHS divisions, including DYFS, Mental Health Services, and Family Development, which oversees public assistance programs.
- At the end of five years, a total of \$58 million will be invested to expand these substance abuse treatment services providing an additional 2,300 slots across various types of treatment.
- Peace: A Learned Solution (PALS), a program to help children heal from the effects of domestic violence will be added to four counties next year and expanded to all the state's

counties over four years. The program provides assessment, child care, summer camp, education and therapy for the non-offending parent

- Community based mental health services will be expanded to serve about 4,000 families by February 2005. An additional 75 treatment homes will be added to by June 2005 to accommodate the needs of children stepping down from congregate care. The Division of Child Behavioral Health Services will be established in the Office of Children's Services and have responsibility for children's mental health services.
- The department will continue to phase out fee for service health care coverage for will be for foster and adoptive children and aggressively seek to enroll children into HMOs.
- Through collaboration with the Department of Community Affairs a homeless prevention program will be established for DYFS families; permanent affordable renting housing will be established; more Section 8 housing will be made available and a fund will be initiated to develop housing for youth who are too old for DYFS services.

Reforming Case Practice

- Creating a centralized hotline for the reporting of child abuse and neglect. This will establish consistency in the handling of cases.
- Separating the investigative function from the casework function and dedicate some staff solely to investigating allegations of abuse and neglect. Those workers, child protection workers, would receive training in forensic interviewing, gathering and maintaining evidence and extensive use of risk and safety assessments – their target caseload is 8 new cases per month.
- Initiating an investigation and seeing the child in less than 24 hours.
- All investigations must be completed within 60 days
- Comprehensive face-to-face safety assessments must be done on children at the beginning of our involvement with them and at important milestones following that.
- Assessments will be built into home visits and occur monthly
- Investigators will turn a child's case over to a permanency worker if out-of-home placement is required.
- Permanency workers will have a 15:1 caseload ratio.

Delivering Prevention Services through Community Partnerships

To address this issue:

- Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships will be created and directed by the Office of Children's Services, within DHS

- The Department will lead a renewed statewide focus on prevention, working with corporations, foundations, local communities and other state agencies to make prevention a priority
- The Department will double the size of two highly successful prevention programs catering to youth and families, the School Based Youth Services Program and the Health Families Program
- The Department will create and fund a dozen Community Collaboratives over 24 months. These Collaboratives will steer the provision of local, community programs for at-risk families and children.
- Community Developers will be hired within each DYFS Office to facilitate local service connections

Reducing Inappropriate Reliance on Institutional Settings

- All children at risk of or in institutional placements like juvenile detention, shelters and psychiatric hospitals will be assessed and placed in the least restrictive setting able to meet their needs
- The Division of Child Behavioral Health Services will move one third of the children – a total of 450 children -- now in congregate care, such as residential treatment centers, group homes, shelters, detention facilities to family like, smaller settings.
- During 2004, the system will identify and step down 150 children who are currently in congregate care to family or family like settings with community supports
- Over the next two years, 80 percent of the children in out-of-state placements will be moved back into state programs
- By January 2005, children in detention, psychiatric centers and shelters waiting for appropriate placement and children in congregate care waiting for discharge will have case managers responsible for assisting with their transition to step down placements.

Adolescents and Youth Transitioning Out of the System

Older teens and young adults have been a difficult group for DYFS to serve and frequently end up in inappropriate settings, like congregate care, because the system has not developed the appropriate resources to serve them.

To address this issue:

- Adolescent Workers, with particular affinity and training for dealing with adolescents, will be in every office. Every child 13 years of age or older will be assigned an adolescent worker and permanency worker

- All casework employees will be trained will be trained to build trusting relationships with adolescents
- Resource Families Willing to Foster and Adopt Adolescents will be recruited trained and supported
- Adoption will be vigorously pursued for children until their 13th birthday
- Contract with Community and Faith Based Organizations to provide case management for adolescents until they reach 21 years of age
-

Pursuing High Quality Accountability and Continuous Improvement

The current system lacks a coherent quality improvement system leading and as a result system changes occur only in response to crises and data analyses are done for compliance evaluations and rarely lead to meaningful system frequently.

To address this issue:

- A culture of quality improvement will be established in DYFS through regular staff meetings , at all levels, which establish continuous quality improvement as a priority
- Working with community stakeholders, quality improvement committees will develop consumer satisfaction surveys, report cards, and develop program improvement plans
- Create a performance based contracting system

Skill building, staff development and supports will be enhanced

Frontline staff are critical to the success of this reform effort and to the health and well-being of New Jersey's families. Their work should be valued and they should have all of the support, training, supervision and equipment they need to do their job.

To address this issue:

- A NJ Child Welfare Training Academy will be established in April 2004 in collaboration with national training experts and the NJ academic community
- The entire DYFS staff will be trained in Structured Decision Making, a state of the art safety and risk assessment protocol, over the next three months
- Training on Entire New Practice Model will begin immediately
- Supervisors will be trained to be coaches and mentors to front-line staff
- Data Case Situations and Critical Incidents will be used as Learning Tools
- Such supports as Incentive Programs, Crisis Response, Counseling for critical incidents, and

Staff Support Days will be implemented

Full copies of the report are available at the DHS website, www.state.nj.us/humanservices.

State to spend \$320 million for DYFS overhaul

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

February 19, 2004

Star-Ledger Staff

The McGreevey administration announced an ambitious plan yesterday to reverse "a generation of neglect" at the Division of Youth and Family Services, one that will cost \$320 million over the next 2 1/2 years.

The historic blueprint for fixing widespread failings at the child welfare agency -- required under the settlement of a lawsuit against the state -- envisions a hiring blitz of nearly 1,500 new employees and a \$58 million commitment to treat more drug-addicted parents.

It also promises to revolutionize the state's approach to child welfare by setting limits on the number of children a caseworker may supervise, sharply reducing the number of children living in shelters and institutions, and giving foster parents their own caseworkers.

"We will get this done," acting Human Services Commissioner James Davy promised. "Everything that is set forth in this plan will be accomplished."

Left unsaid in the 200-page report is how Gov. James E. McGreevey intends to pay for the plan. "A New Beginning: The Future of Child Welfare in New Jersey" calls for an additional \$15 million in immediate spending, and a \$125 million hike for fiscal 2005, which begins in July. For fiscal 2006, DYFS' annual budget will increase by \$180 million, or 35 percent, to \$700 million.

McGreevey said yesterday the money will come from general revenues, despite a projected \$4 billion deficit. No new taxes will be raised to pay for the plan, he said.

Funding the plan "is not an option -- this is a necessity. I have told the state treasurer this is required," McGreevey said at news conference in Trenton.

"Today, with Commissioner Davy's leadership, we're taking a lion's step forward in addressing the profound structural deficiencies of the system that arguably could never succeed," the governor added. "Now with this plan, we are building towards success, a standard of quality, and a commitment toward child welfare services in the state."

The state will have to offer more than its word, said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights Inc., which sued the state for violating the rights of foster children and agreed to a settlement that required a reform plan.

"What we are concerned about is the lack of specificity in the plan, and about how they are going to get from where they are," Lowry said. "This is an agency that is barely functional. Simply saying they want to do these things doesn't mean they will be able to do them."

Still, Lowry gave Davy's team high marks for the plan's vision. "This is as wide-ranging a reform plan as I have ever seen in a child welfare system, with as significant commitment of resources as I have ever seen," she said.

Assemblyman Louis Greenwald (D-Camden), chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, said he hadn't seen the proposal but was taken aback when he heard the price tag.

"I do not believe every time you have a problem you throw money at it. Use existing dollars to make a system better," Greenwald said. "This money must be tied to results -- show me how the money is going to be used and what are going to be the tangible results for the safety and welfare of these children."

Under the administration's plan, virtually every aspect of DYFS operations will change, affecting every person employed or supervised by the agency.

The work force, decimated by layoffs in the 1990s and regularly depleted by high turnover, will grow by 1,463 positions, including 1,000 direct-care staff. Nearly 200 of these front-line workers will have the newly created job of assisting foster parents obtain their training and licensing, and any assistance they might need taking care of children. The other direct-care workers will either investigate abuse allegations or supervise children.

The plan embraces a caseload "cap" -- an idea previous administrations had dismissed as too expensive and unworkable. Employees who supervise children will be "capped" at 15 families. The average caseload now is 42 families.

Employees who investigate child abuse and neglect will do nothing else, and will be "capped" at eight new cases a month so they can complete their work on each case within 60 days. Foster parent support workers will supervise a maximum of 35 families.

The caseload limits "take my breath away," said Hetty Rosenstein, president of the Communications Workers of America Local 1037, which represents DYFS workers in northern and central New Jersey. "For more than 10 years we have worked on this. It's very gratifying."

Rosenstein's chief concern last night was that Human Services officials are "trying to do too much too quickly. ... I think they need to spend the year hiring and stabilizing the work force."

Walter X. Kalman, executive director of the New Jersey chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, said the state could have been more aggressive on one front: encouraging DYFS staff to become licensed social workers. A bachelor's degree in any subject is the only requirement for someone applying to DYFS be a caseworker.

The plan sets a goal of having 40 percent of managers and 35 percent of caseworkers become licensed social workers with advanced degrees by 2008. Kalman called that "appalling," adding: "That means there are practically none here now."

But Kalman also found things to like in the plan. As a foster parent, Kalman said the state's intent to consult with foster parents and assign caseworkers to help them navigate the DYFS bureaucracy gave him "some real hope. ... Up to now, foster parents have been simply a hotel and not a part of the treatment team."

Foster parents will get a lot of attention under the reform plan.

Instead of waiting 12 months to get trained and licensed, most foster parents would be able to complete the process within 90 days by January 2005. Their monthly stipend, now an average of \$420 a month per child, would rise to \$792 by 2008. Relatives or "kinship care" homes would be paid the same as traditional foster parents, a sizable bump up from the \$250 a month per child the state provides such homes now.

The state also set a goal of adding 1,000 more foster families by June 2005, reversing a downward trend. Last year the state licensed 623 new foster homes, while 753 homes closed for various reasons, the state report said.

Instead of warehousing teenage foster children in institutions and group facilities, DYFS would search more rigorously for foster and adoptive families until the child turns 16. The state no longer will automatically drop teenagers from the foster care caseload when they turn 18 unless the child requests it.

The state also proposed creating a division outside DYFS that would focus on preventing children from entering the system, by working with community agencies.

"The new Division of Prevention and Community Partnership would finally provide help for troubled families before children are hurt," said Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of an advocacy group, the Association for Children of New Jersey.

But Zalkind said the plan fails to call for "reforming civil service and strengthening the division's supervisory capabilities."

"While we agree the state must provide more support to caseworkers, DYFS management must be able to more easily remove workers who are failing to do their job," Zalkind said.

Davy turned the plan over to the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, an independent oversight body established as part of the lawsuit settlement. The panel has 30 days to review the plan and either approve it or reject it.

The DYFS reform plan can be read online (<http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/>).

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Every time we pass those golden arches or inhale the intoxicating aroma of coffee and donuts, we must remember that hungry child.

BY LINDA VAN FOSSEN February 20, 2004

He begged for a Big Mac -- or maybe a Happy Meal -- even a donut from Dunkin' Donuts.

She declined.

When he found half of an old dirty cookie in her glove compartment and swallowed it, she agreed not to tell Miss Vanessa, his foster mother.

An emaciated child was afraid and hungry. He implored a "safe" adult -- his caseworker from the state agency charged with ensuring his care -- to feed him.

She declined.

Then this Division of Youth and Family Services worker documented Bruce Jackson's hunger, her refusal, his fear. That is not a system failure; that is a person failure. It is a metaphor for depraved indifference.

For more than a year, the people in New Jersey have been appalled by the horrific abuse and neglect documented in stories about children under the auspices of DYFS. Again and again, bureaucrats and politicians have insisted on their dismay and talked about revision and reform -- new policies, new procedures.

Committees and panels were formed.

Lawsuits were pressed.

People postured and promised.

Trenton spoke -- Gov. James E. McGreevey; Gwendolyn Harris, then the human services commissioner; Colleen Maguire, then the deputy commissioner, among the voices. The children in New Jersey waited.

We sighed with relief when DYFS declared that the safety of 14,000 children had been investigated and assured. It wasn't true.

Children waited. Deadlines passed.

Some people feed stray cats when they appear on the porch. I even read an article about one good Samaritan who feeds raccoons in the neighborhood. But a hungry child asked for a burger and the DYFS caseworker declined.

Thirty-eight times, adults, charged with the responsibility of the children's safety, had the opportunity to rescue the four starving Jackson brothers living with their adoptive parents in Collingswood. Bruce, the oldest, who is now 19, made his first plea to his caseworker in 1994.

Every time we pass those Golden Arches or inhale the intoxicating aroma of coffee and donuts, we must remember that hungry child.

Save the whales and black bears.

I brake for animals.

This product was not tested on animals.

Ban abortion and stem cell research.

Save the rain forests.

Where's the outcry for these children?

Do we need a bumper sticker?

Linda Van Fossen is the executive director of the Counseling Centers for Human Development in Cranford, with satellite offices in Monmouth and Ocean counties.

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Still reason to worry about DYFS reform Star-Ledger Editorial 2/22/04

Through the years, there have been many plans for reforming the Division of Youth and Family Services. Most were a waste of time, money and paper.

But the latest, announced just this past week, is the best yet. It attacks the problem and envisions spending the needed money. We can have hope that it will do something none of the others did: get the job of protecting children done.

It is not easy reading, but there is no way it could be. The horrors of the past year have made it clear that drastic repairs have to happen. We cannot have a child protection agency that has not consistently been able even to keep kids from being starved or killed. The roll call is tragically familiar:

Faheem Williams, dead at 7 after DYFS closed his family's case prematurely; the four Jackson boys, suffering years of malnutrition while DYFS workers made regular visits to their house; dozens of abused and neglected foster children, whose plight was revealed only because a lawsuit by Children's Rights Inc. pried open DYFS's files.

The state plan for DYFS envisions changes that should make a significant difference, such as hiring more personnel and giving them better training and supervision. The new and improved staff is supposed to have more services and foster homes to work with. Those promises, though, are where other reforms stumbled.

Some of the text is amazingly specific about the problems that endanger children, including substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness and homelessness. There are details, including budgets and time lines, that you will not find in reform plans of the past. That is commendable.

However, those details make long stretches of vague social work-speak stand out in disappointing contrast. Clearly many things were not figured out in time to meet the court-ordered deadline.

The plan was part of the settlement that ended a Children's Rights Inc. lawsuit against DYFS. That is the blessing and the curse of this reform effort.

A council of experts, appointed by the U.S. District Court, will review the document. The state is pretty much obligated to implement what the experts approve. That means the Legislature is obliged to write the check for the job: \$125 million in the new state budget, \$325 million over time, even though no one in Trenton will say where the money will come from.

If the state shows the kind of stinginess that thwarted previous attempts to set DYFS right, the court could take over control of New Jersey's child welfare agency.

Social work experts have tended to swing between two extreme positions when it comes to agencies like DYFS. One says put kids in foster care, then get them adopted. The other says save the families, find a way to mend them and keep the children at home. That second theme runs through the new DYFS plan.

The plan says the safety of children comes first, but it also says that including families in decision-making will be the primary instrument driving DYFS's work and that every attempt will be made to keep kids in their own neighborhoods.

All kinds of families get involved with DYFS for all kinds of reasons. But cases of abuse and neglect and cases of families affected by substance abuse lead in a sad circle. If parents were capable of making good decisions about their kids, DYFS would not be involved in the first place. Family inclusion is certainly a goal to work toward. But the driving force? That is something to handle with extreme care.

We worry what happens when hundreds of green, newly hired caseworkers go forth with those directives buzzing in their ears and run into a family like the Jacksons. At a family decision-making meeting, relatives, church members and friends would have sworn that everything was just fine with the boys.

We worry that some neighborhoods are toxic places, filled with crime and violence and the artifacts of poverty, including the drug abuse that affects so many of the families DYFS works with. We worry that it may not be safe in many cases to leave a child in close proximity to an abusive parent or one who is angry that DYFS removed a child.

We worry about policies that will ask foster parents to mentor birth parents and be more intimately involved in efforts to reunify families -- even as the foster parent is asked to go through clearance for adoption and stand ready to raise the child if the reunification effort fails. Will that make it easier or harder to recruit foster families?

We worry that the new DYFS is being built on new policies, processes and systems. As necessary as those things may be, much of what went wrong in the Williams case, the Jackson case and others was a basic failure of judgment that ignored policy, logic and common sense.

That tendency, often repeated and seldom corrected, is what has to change. There is no way to judge whether it will happen until what is on paper is put into action.

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Hope on the horizon? Star-Ledger Sunday, February 22, 2004

After a tragic year for children, a promise to make things right

After a year of horrific child-abuse cases and a lawsuit challenging the state on behalf of foster children, the McGreevey administration has come up with what some have called a historic plan to completely overhaul the state's child welfare system.

The plan, put forward last week by acting Commissioner of Human Services James Davy, calls for hiring 1,500 new caseworkers, a \$58 million expansion of drug-rehabilitation services for addicted parents and additional payments to foster parents and family members who act as foster parents. The price tag: \$320 million over the next 2 1/2 years. Will that be enough to turn around what the administration has called "a generation of neglect"?

Davy, a close aide to Gov. James E. McGreevey, thinks so. He believes the proposed revamping of the Division of Youth and Family Services will guard against the horrors that have rocked the agency: Faheem Williams, the dead child locked away in a basement near two starving siblings; the Jackson boys, severely malnourished while living in a home DYFS visited regularly, and dozens of foster children whose deaths and suffering were documented in a suit brought by the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc.

The plan is required by the state's legal settlement with Children's Rights. Davy talked about the details with Joan Whitlow, an editorial writer for The Star-Ledger.

How will the state pay for this?

As the governor said, we put forward the plan and the plan has a price tag. It will be part of the budget the governor submits to the Legislature next week. I'm not really involved in the day-to-day discussions as we come down to crunch time on the budget.

But New Jersey is having budget problems. Money is tight. Is it fair to say no one knows how this is going to be paid for?

I am extremely confident that when this budget goes before the Legislature next week and the governor delivers his budget message, there will be a budget that includes the proposals that I've set forward in this plan and it will have sufficient revenues to support the overall budget and this plan.

What if the Legislature decides New Jersey cannot afford this?

We have a moral imperative to do this. For too long, New Jersey neglected to put the proper resources and the necessary attention into protecting its children. And look at what we got: a system that was badly broken, dysfunctional and did not serve the children of this state.

How can you be certain the funding and the commitment will be there when another governor is in office and someone else is running DYFS?

We are working under the auspices of the federal District Court, a settlement agreement that incorporates a panel of experts who are going to be with us whether it is this administration or another one. They will be working to make sure the requirements of the settlement are met.

What happens if the requirements are not met?

I think the federal court could just take over the administration of child welfare in New Jersey. You could have a judge appoint someone to take it out of the hands of the governor and the Legislature and say, "This will be done." That is the fine line we walk here.

After years of failed reform and all of last year's horror stories, why should people believe that you can pull this off?

It would not be right for me to ask for trust right now. I'm just asking for partnership. I want people to work with us on this. I want people to see us working step by step, building block by building block, taking down this system and rebuilding it from the bottom up and building a whole brand new system. My goal by the time we are done is to have a child welfare system here in New Jersey that is the best anywhere.

What are you going to do to make sure things happen, as described and on schedule?

There is a strong monitoring element to the plan. We have a whole quality assurance piece that goes to ensuring that everything we are talking about gets done the way it is supposed to get done.

We will have a special unit of quality assurance that is doing case reviews and auditing offices. This unit will be reading files and doing quarterly reviews and monthly reports. And when they do a quarterly review they will not only talk to the caseworkers, they will talk to the families to make sure what is in the case file actually occurred. There will be double checking and triple checking.

Will you be able to tell if things are breaking down across the board? In any office? Because of some caseworker or supervisor?

When we have the SACWIS (Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System) up and running, that should also provide red flags and early warning signals. We are instituting a central screening unit so that, if things are not happening according to the time line laid out, those things should pop up right to the attention of the DYFS director, so he can get in touch with the district office and go right to where that case is.

We are also putting into place an ongoing program of face-to-face safety assessments.

And the quality assurance is not just for monitoring. It is also there to point out problems so we can we modify and

adjust to continually improve the case models.

In the Jackson case, DYFS did not know the kids were not getting medical checkups. How will the new system prevent that kind of thing?

We are expanding the six-month case review where a case reviewer will sit with the worker, the foster family, the child if the child is of school age, and the birth family if they are still involved and rights have not been terminated. So, every six months, there will be a review that includes the medical records, the educational records and a review to see if the service goals are progressing. If it has been six months since a child has had a medical exam, that would be scheduled for the coming six months, so a child would have an annual physical.

Your plan emphasizes something called the family team meeting. How does that work?

We will be using family team meetings to drive every important decision made around the family. For example, if you've got a case that is open and you are considering removing the child from the home, we don't want our workers making a decision in a vacuum anymore.

You cannot have 4,000 people out there all individually deciding what they want to do and what they think is best. They have different levels of expertise, and also they may not have full knowledge.

We will bring together not only our worker and the people we identify -- a counselor, a teacher -- but the family may say, "I would like Aunt Jane there, or grandma needs to be there." If the child needs to be removed, there is a discussion about whom the child should stay with. If there need to be monitored visits with the parent, we discuss who is the best person to do the monitoring.

How would that have worked in the Williams case, where the mother might have brought in the same friend who was caring for the boys when they ended up in that basement? Or in the Jackson case, where family and church members were all saying the kids were fine?

In the Williams case, if you had a family team conference, you would have other agencies at the table to ask, "What is going on with Faheem? Why isn't he going to school? Why isn't he here? Why isn't he there?"

And family team meetings do not mean the family makes the decision about what happens. They participate in the information gathering as we try to make the right decisions. If mom says, "I want my kid to stay with my aunt," it does not end there. There are discussions about whether that is the best thing. There is a background check on the aunt. If Sherry Murphy (who became Faheem Williams' guardian) had been brought up as a possible caretaker, the background check would have eliminated her.

Your plan also emphasizes keeping kids in their neighborhood, even finding foster families in the neighborhood. Is that going to work in cases where a child's problems are rooted in that neighborhood? Could that policy put

the child or the foster family in danger from an abusive parent living close by?

Our primary job is safety. You look at the circumstances of every case individually. If circumstances call for that child to be placed somewhere other than the neighborhood, you look at that.

But the preference is to keep the child in the neighborhood. We are working with the community to define and inventory and catalog and understand all the services available locally. In addition, we are providing a new array of core services that we intend to focus in on each particular neighborhood.

In the Jackson and Williams cases, what services would you offer and how would you have focused them?

In the Williams case, it would start with the family team meetings and closer monitoring of the situation. But what array of services would have been focused on either one of those cases?

We have to identify and map services at the local level. But we will be providing new services in the areas of domestic violence and substance abuse. We are expanding mental health services and we're also providing housing services to families. I don't know which of those particular services would have been brought to bear in that particularly situation -- perhaps the mental-health services, perhaps the substance-abuse services.

In the Jackson case, until someone said, "These kids are in trouble," none of those services could have clicked on.

What about this reorganization is going to make certain someone does that part of the job?

That was an aberration. That was a case where the kids were already adopted. There are nationwide issues around the role of the state after a child has been adopted.

There were some clear issues (involving the caseworkers) that, because we are still pending legal action with personnel issues, we cannot really get into.

Under this new model, when they go out to do a monthly visit or when they place a foster child, they are required to see every child in the home whether they are adoptive kids or birth children. And we are going to look at every room in the house and make sure the utilities are working. That was not part of the protocol before.

You are increasing the stipend for foster families -- you call them resource families now. You will also ask that foster families take on a greater role working with and mentoring birth families. You are going to license foster families to be ready to step in and adopt if DYFS decides family reunification will not work. Isn't that asking a lot?

We are saying we would prefer that foster families adopt. We are going to encourage that. But there are some people who just want to foster children and not be adoptive parents, and we are not going to discourage that.

We are going to take foster parents from wherever we can get them as long as they are good, decent people. They are our most valuable asset. We need more of them.

Aren't you concerned that this expanded role might scare off some potential foster families?

We are doing a lot of things to make it easier for them. The base stipend for foster parents is now \$410 and it will go to \$513 next year and gradually increase over four years to \$792.

We are streamlining the licensing process and we are providing foster families with a resource family worker who is going to be their support, their arms and eyes and ears, who will help them navigate through systems and processes that may have frustrated them in the past.

It will no longer take a year or more to become a foster parent; it will take 90 days.

Ninety days and you can be sure that home is a safe place for a child?

We are absolutely making sure we are doing it safely. We are doing the appropriate background checks, making sure they have the appropriate training.

You are also working with the Department of Community Affairs to provide money to fix up a house or subsidize rent for foster families. Aren't you afraid some people might sign on for the wrong reasons? After all, the Children's Rights suit revealed that DYFS once placed a child with a homeless man.

That was just wacky.

But it happened. Are you not afraid someone might say, "I want to go to the top of the list for subsidized housing, so I'll go get a foster kid?"

They are going to be involved in the licensing process before they get to that point. We will look at their situation, we will understand what their background is, what their financial condition is, whether they can take a child and adequately care for that child.

If they need a little bit of assistance to help them, we will work with them to provide them with housing assistance.

Some 33 percent of DYFS families are affected by substance-abuse problems. How are you addressing that?

We are creating additional treatment options with additional funding to serve 10,000 families by the time this plan is done. And we are introducing performance contracting. When we enter into a contract with a treatment provider -- or any kind of provider that does business with DYFS -- there are very specific outcomes that we want and expect. We will be tracking and monitoring that.

So part of the substance-abuse plan is making sure the dollars are not just flowing out the door. If that contract performance is not being met, either we will figure out a way to get the provider to comply with the performance we want or we will move on to another contractor willing to provide that service.

How will you juggle bringing in new people, training the ones you have and reorganizing they way they all work - at the same time you do everything that is on your plate already?

One day at a time. We work hard. We will have a project management plan that will lay out step by step what each new step of the way requires. The training will have to be sequenced: Train your supervisors and train your workers and train your new workers. It is a lot like building a house.

Protecting children usually comes down to one person making the right judgment at the right time. How do you make certain that happens?

We are going to make sure we have quality supervision. Where we have supervisors, we are going to retrain supervisors; where we have new supervisors, we provide the training. The training component of the plan is very comprehensive. We are going to be training everybody in this organization, but particularly supervisors.

At the same time, through that training and new systems of communication and the flow of information, we intend to give very clear directions to people on how they need to do their job. People won't be out there freelancing.

Will you have to take on the Civil Service System or change things, like the fact that the same union may represent both caseworkers and supervisors?

Things need to change and the unions understand that. I think they are a little nervous because we are totally redefining the role and responsibilities of the caseworkers and the supervisors of other higher level supervisors. We're changing jobs and job descriptions. So they are a little bit nervous right now because things are changing for them. But everybody is going to understand what their jobs are and what their roles are.

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N.J. unveils broad plan to fix DYFS

By Mitch Lipka and Troy Graham

Inquirer Staff Writers Feb. 19, 2004

TRENTON - The image of a ragtag crew of stressed-out workers too willing to break up families would be scuttled in favor of a more functional, family-friendly operation under an ambitious and costly plan presented yesterday by New Jersey to overhaul its failed child-welfare system.

A series of high-profile cases over the last 13 months - involving starving children, a foster child delivering meals to a corpse, and the body of a boy who was supposed to have been seen by a caseworker - have brought the state notoriety that officials are eager to put behind them.

"This is the day we begin to put the never-ending crises behind us," acting Human Services Commissioner James Davy said.

Nearly 1,500 workers would be added to the Department of Human Services alone over the next three years. Added costs for just that department, which contains the beleaguered Division of Youth and Family Services, are projected at \$321.5 million over the next three years - a price tag some legislators are bristling at.

DYFS's current budget is about \$500 million. Additional costs for other state departments involved in the overhaul were not included in the cost estimates.

"For too long, we failed," Gov. McGreevey said. "Today, we match the strength of our plan with the legitimate outrage of our rhetoric."

The 191-page plan was formally submitted to the state Child Welfare Panel, which has 30 days to review it as part of a lawsuit settlement with the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc. The panel, which will be holding a public hearing on the plan in Camden on March 3, can approve it, reject it, or - most likely - ask the state for specific changes to make the report acceptable.

The plan was delivered to the panel a month after it was due. Both Human Services Commissioner Gwendolyn Harris and Deputy Commissioner Colleen Maguire were forced to resign when it became clear that the proposal and required changes were not coming quickly enough.

The state's efforts will remain under the auspices of a federal court judge for at least the next 31/2 years, after which the state can ask for judicial oversight to end.

New Jersey's plan calls for extra efforts to keep families together and to deliver help to families before problems escalate rather than wait for crises.

"It's a very impressive plan," said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. "It clearly recognizes that New Jersey is taking away too many children."

DYFS Director Edward Cotton agreed.

"If we can keep a child safely at home, then that's our preference," he said.

Substantial investments and changes are proposed for worker training, foster care, adoptions, substance-abuse treatment, housing subsidies, mental-health care, and medical care.

The plan calls for capping the number of families under the supervision of a caseworker at 15. Some caseworkers still have more than 50 open cases at a time.

Workers who investigate abuse and neglect claims would be specially trained and would be expected to look into those cases within 24 hours and complete their reviews within 60 days. Those investigators would be separate from workers who provide services and support to families. Workers now do both functions.

Union officials, long at odds with the state over massive caseloads, were pleased to see a major change is in the offing.

"Anytime you're spending \$125 million on child-protective services, you're serious," union leader Hetty Rosenstein said.

She blamed oppressive caseloads for many of the system's failures. Capping them will allow workers to perform their jobs better, Rosenstein said.

"The caseloads need to come down and stay down," she said. "They're huge."

A change expected to be made quickly is the creation of a 24-hour statewide child-abuse reporting hotline with a widely publicized toll-free number. Currently, more than 30 phone numbers can be used for making such reports, depending on where and when the call is being made.

The plan also calls for adding 1,000 new foster and adoptive families by June 2005. Currently, hundreds of children who are taken from their homes are placed in group homes and shelters because of the lack of available foster homes.

Recognizing the roles of substance abuse and domestic violence on the caseload DYFS deals with, the plan calls for major increases in both prevention and treatment in both areas.

A medical director would be hired, the number of families getting substance-abuse treatment would triple, the number of nurses on staff would more than double, and children living in adoptive and foster homes would be enrolled in HMOs. Also, an awareness campaign on domestic violence would be launched, and added housing opportunities would be available for victims.

"This is an ambitious plan and deserves very careful scrutiny," panel chairman Steven Cohen said.

New Jersey's wake-up call came a little more than a year ago when 7-year-old Faheem Williams was found dead in a Newark basement. He and his two starving brothers were the subject of an abuse complaint that was closed without the boys having been seen by a caseworker.

His death stoked outrage that led the McGreevey administration to negotiate with Children's Rights to settle its the four-year-old lawsuit over the mistreatment of children in foster care. The settlement dictates near- and long-term steps the state must take to remedy its child-welfare system.

"What's important about it to us is that it's very comprehensive," Children's Rights executive director Marcia Lowry said. "It's as extensive a reform package as I've seen."

She said she was concerned that the plan did not have enough detail or specificity about how the goals are to be attained.

Lowry said she was pleased with provisions to move children more quickly to adoption, impose caps on worker caseloads, and limit the number of foster children in one home, among other measures. But she worried about "how much thinking has gone on behind the scenes as to how they'll actually get it done."

Even in the months following the settlement, plans for change were sidetracked by the discovery of the four starving adopted Jackson brothers in Collingswood. DYFS workers had steady contact with that family for a dozen years and ignored agency rules, which allowed problems with the boys to go undetected.

Others who participate in or watch New Jersey's child-welfare system were largely impressed with the scope of the changes in the proposal. What remains in question is whether state officials have the staying power to pull it off.

"We'll be watching," said Cecelia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey.

The plan, she said, looks good.

"It's very broad-based," Zalkind said. "It's backed up by money. This is definitely going to be an issue for the legislature."

Indeed, some legislators already are balking at the big price tag.

To some extent, because the state risks having a federal court judge step in and order change, New Jersey has little choice but to follow through, and McGreevey - who has more authority in this area than any other governor in the nation - said he would make the plan work.

"We're going to get this done," he said. "We'll be a better people and a better state for having accepted this challenge."

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Wanted: 1,500 new workers for N.J.'s troubled child agency

Associated Press Posted on Sat, Feb. 21, 2004

TRENTON - New Jersey's child welfare agency intends to hire about 1,500 additional workers over the next two years to step into the state's most troubled homes and help abused and neglected children.

While you might think the demanding, emotionally taxing jobs would be tough to fill, the agency actually had a surplus of applicants for openings last year.

And James Davy, newly appointed commissioner of the state Department of Human Services, said he doesn't expect any trouble in filling the ranks this year.

Davy said qualified people in the social work field would be attracted to the state Division of Youth and Family Services now that an overhaul of the agency is imminent.

"I don't suspect it's going to be all that hard," Davy said. "A lot of people are saying, 'I want to be on this train. I want to get on board.' If you have any interest at all in this field, this is where the convergence is."

The jobs would be mostly caseworkers and others who have direct contact with DYFS clients. The positions, which require a bachelor's degree, have a starting salary of \$37,648, which rises to \$41,199 after one year.

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Editorial: Fixing DYFS Posted on Sun, Feb. 22, 2004

Legislators say the darndest things

The state of New Jersey presented a thick plan last week for the extreme makeover that the Division of Youth and Family Services so badly needs.

If all of the pieces fall into place - and stay in place - it could be the most comprehensive overhaul ever of a state child-welfare agency. Moreover, if the plan works as promised, the thousands of children and families with DYFS cases could see their lives improve dramatically.

The problem is with all those darn ifs. That's where Gov. McGreevey, with key officials at his side, needs to stand taller in Trenton than he has tended to do. Doing right by New Jersey's abused and neglected children will require unrelenting leadership.

Mind you, state government did not draw up this extensive, costly (\$321.5 million over three years) plan voluntarily. It flowed out of a federal lawsuit's settlement, which was hurried by the well-publicized horror at a case in which Faheem Williams, a child in state custody, died.

Remember how 7-year-old Faheem's body was found last year in a Newark basement after DYFS closed an abuse complaint without ever visiting him or his brothers? Remember this year's case of four brothers found malnourished in their adoptive parents' Collingswood home, even as a DYFS worker visited foster children in the same family?

That multimillion dollar figure doesn't seem outrageous when measured against the huge problems that contributed to DYFS' failures.

The changes that should come are overdue: Caseworkers would be joined by nearly 1,500 new hires to reduce a staggeringly high caseload that just about ensures some children will slip through the cracks.

Stipends for foster parents and relatives caring for kin would jump. Changes would take root in child-protection philosophy and practice: more emphasis on preventive services, such as substance abuse treatment for at-risk families; caseworkers and managers working together more closely; involving communities more.

This plan should not be considered complete. A more detailed blueprint needs to show how these fine ideas on paper will become practice.

Measurable benchmarks - largely missing from the report - are a must to gauge progress and hold the state accountable. Shay Bilchik, president of the Child Welfare League of America, said he is so impressed with the proposals that his organization stands ready to help New Jersey with crafting benchmarks.

But more detail isn't the only ingredient needed to turn DYFS around.

How about having a legislature that seems actually to care about abused children?

Assembly Budget Chairman Louis Greenwald (D., Camden) sounded like someone trying to change the subject when he said, "I think the system is fundamentally flawed, and throwing more money on a failed system isn't the answer to these kids' problems."

What about spending money to revamp that system, Chairman Greenwald? If legislators won't pony up more funds now for DYFS - after scandals that have shamed the state worldwide, after a federal court has required New Jersey to do so - when will they?

New Jersey, it is sadly true, anticipates as much as a staggering \$5 billion hole in its budget next year. And cuts in previous years leave little room for shifting funds from one pot to another.

But McGreevey and legislators have no choice but to find the money, thanks to that federal lawsuit settlement and a court-mandated independent watchdog panel. The governor, following a path all too well trod by Christie Whitman, is talking about borrowing massive amounts so he won't have to spread massive pain, or run the political risk of raising

taxes.

McGreevey, legislators and state residents need to insist that the new dollars produce a new DYFS. But they also must be realistic about how fast change can happen. A strong management team of acting Human Services Commissioner James Davy and DYFS Director Edward Cotton is now in place and ready to proceed.

The pace will seem too slow. But the reform plan shouldn't be scuttled if next month or next year, another horror story of a child under DYFS' care garners headlines. No child-protection system, especially one in the throes of great change, has a perfect record.

McGreevey should get high marks for this reform plan. But plans on paper represent only a first step forward. Now, the hardest work begins.

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N.J. Division of Youth and Family Services Time Line

Posted on Thu, Feb. 19, 2004

August 1999: Children's Rights Inc. sues New Jersey over how children in foster care are being treated.

January 2000: A U.S. District Court judge rules children in state custody have a right to be protected from harm.

March 2002: The case gets class action status.

Fall 2002: The state decides to continue to fight the lawsuit.

January 2003: Faheem Williams is found dead in Newark after DYFS closed an abuse complaint involving him and his brothers without visiting the boys.

March 2003: Settlement talks begin.

June 2003: The state and Children's Rights settle, with the state agreeing to wide-ranging changes to the child-welfare system enforceable in federal court.

October 2003: The state announces it has visited 14,000 children to check on their safety as part of the settlement agreement. It was later revealed by the Office of the Child Advocate that hundreds, or more, of those visits didn't take place.

December 2003: Human Services Commissioner Gwendolyn Harris resigns.

January 2004: State fails to meet Jan. 20 deadline to submit plan to Child Welfare Panel and gets 30-day extension. Deputy Commissioner Colleen Maguire, architect of the reform plan, resigns. James Davy, an aide to Gov. McGreevey, is appointed acting commissioner.

February 2004: Child Advocate Kevin Ryan releases report on the case of the four starving adopted brothers from Collingswood and highlights continuing problems at DYFS. Plan due to Child Welfare Panel.

March 2004: Public hearings to be held in Camden and Newark. Child Welfare Panel decides whether to accept, reject or send back the plan for changes.

Every six months after plan is put in place, the Child Welfare Panel is to issue monitoring reports on the state's progress.

The panel is due to be in place for at least 18 months after the plan is approved. Any time two years after that the state can ask the court to end its involvement. Children's Rights, if it determines the need, can oppose such a request.

Key Recommendations of the DYFS Report

Investing in reform

Spend \$321.5 million over the next three years overhauling the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). Includes hiring nearly 1,500 workers and increasing payments to foster parents by 25 percent.

Staffing

Create two separate caseworker positions:

Child protection workers

- Will investigate abuse/neglect allegations within 24 hours of receiving the report.
- Will be assigned no more than 8 new cases a month.
- Must complete investigations within 60 days.
- Staff will work weekends and evenings to aid families.

Permanency workers

- Will work with no more than 15 families or 10 children in out-of-home placement.
- Caseloads will be assigned geographically, so staff can develop expertise in neighborhoods.
- Permanency workers will be assigned to each case for the life of that case.

Child safety

Abuse hotline

- DYFS will create a 24-hour toll-free abuse hotline staffed to handle Spanish-speaking calls and linked to interpreters to take reports in 130 languages and from the hearing impaired.

Safety assessments

- Will be conducted every six months.

Reducing institutionalization

- DYFS will move 450 children in group homes and shelters to smaller, family-like settings.

Working with older children

Adolescents

- Every child 13 years or older will be assigned a specially trained adolescent worker, in addition to a permanency worker.

Non-minors

- DYFS will contract with faith-based organizations to assist children who age-out of foster care without being adopted, until age 21.

Foster parents

- Recruit 1,000 new foster and adoptive parents, called "Resource Families," who will be trained and certified within 90 days.
- Dramatically increase rates paid to Resource Families and relatives caring for children.

Removing a child from the home

- When a child is taken from his biological family, DYFS staff will stay with the child through the process, bringing clothes, toys, medical and school records to the new placement.
- Placements should be close to home, allowing children to remain in the same school.
- Siblings should be placed together in homes speaking the same language as the children.

Preventative planning

DYFS will invest in programs to combat substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, lack of housing and poor physical health.

Specifically:

- \$58 million over five years on substance abuse treatment programs for parents.
- \$10 million over five years on services for children from homes with domestic violence.
- \$1 million a year to rehabilitate homes of at-risk parents or Resource Parents.
- \$12 million a year for child behavioral health services.

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Pa. success a guide for DYFS plan

Allegheny County's system, once broken, is now a model.

By Troy Graham and Mitch Lipka Inquirer Staff Writers Feb. 22, 2004

PITTSBURGH - When New Jersey's top leaders introduced their long-awaited plan to fix the state's child welfare agency last week, they pledged to turn a system that has become a national embarrassment into a national model.

Although promises of change have gone unfulfilled in the past, the family-friendly and neighborhood-oriented philosophy unveiled Wednesday in a 191-page plan has been tested before - and has been proven successful.

The child welfare system in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County - often touted as a national model - adopted a strikingly similar approach eight years ago, pulling that agency out of a long tailspin of bad management and controversy.

Marc Cherna, director of Allegheny County's Office of Children, Youth and Families, said that most children were better off with their birth parents, who often are capable of caring for children if given some help. If children must be taken from the home, they should stay with relatives. And, if adoption is the only option, a home should be found quickly.

That philosophy, and many of their methods, could soon become policy in New Jersey, should the state's ambitious plan win approval and funding.

"That New Jersey is doing a complete about-face and coming to where [Allegheny County] is, shows the whole new mindset," said Richard Wexler, the executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. "No two places will be alike. The most important thing is the outlook."

Some observers of the New Jersey plan said it lacked specifics, but child welfare experts said the state should look to Allegheny County to see how these theories have turned around another moribund agency.

"I really hope they're successful," Cherna said last week. "I'm convinced that's the way to go."

Cherna spent 13 years at New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services before taking control of a debt-laden Allegheny County system, which includes the city of Pittsburgh, in 1996. Although he shied from critiquing his former employers, he acknowledged the similarities between Allegheny County's past and DYFS' present.

DYFS has suffered from years of failures and child deaths that eventually forced the state to settle a lawsuit filed by the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc., leading to the court-supervised reform package.

Eight years ago, Allegheny County had similar woes, culminating in the death of a child, which forced out the last director.

"There were numerous reports blasting the agency," Cherna said. "There was no public confidence."

Caseworkers, he said, had taken an "us versus them" approach toward parents, holding to the traditional notion that children are kept in troubled homes only at the expense of their safety. Cherna disagreed, instituting a program that views parents not as villains, but as victims - of poverty, ignorance, alcoholism, drug addiction.

"It was extremely radical. None of this stuff had been done," he said. "This place was a disaster."

DYFS has fostered a similar reputation for quickly yanking children out of homes, overloading the foster-care system. The plan says the agency must change its culture "from one in which we see ourselves as dictating to or judging the parent to one in which we understand that the parent is our most important initial resource."

"If you pull them out of a marginal home and put them in a marginal foster home, what's the benefit?" Cherna asked. "A lot of times we can do more harm than good."

In unveiling the DYFS plans, director Ed Cotton echoed that belief.

"If we can keep a child safely at home, that's our preference," he said. James Davy, acting commissioner the Department of Human Services, which includes DYFS, says "foster care is our last resort."

To keep children at home, parents often need help. Allegheny County provides an array of services to struggling parents, from help with job hunting, housing and transportation to addiction counseling and a 24-hour mobile mental-health unit.

All those services are available in each of the agency offices, which are situated in various county neighborhoods.

DYFS has also pledged a more neighborhood-oriented approach by assigning workers to small geographic areas. The agency has promised to dramatically increase services, such as domestic-violence and substance-abuse prevention, and housing and medical aid.

Of the children taken from homes in Allegheny County, 60 percent are placed with relatives, who are trained and paid like any other foster family. The goal for most is to return to their birth parents.

Each regional office has an administrative judge who hears cases several times a week for foster children.

At a hearing last fall in North Hills, a working-class Pittsburgh neighborhood, Judge Mark Cancilla heard a report about

a mother addicted to drugs whose six children were placed with their grandmother.

The mother had been in rehab and found an apartment, but she did not have any furniture.

"When I talked to her, she said she's not ready to have the children back," the social worker said. "She's in school and looking for a job. She's trying really hard."

Cancilla agreed that she was not ready, but he stressed that reuniting her with her children was the goal. The hearings are about accountability, for the system and the parents, Cherna said.

"It puts pressure on us to do our job and on the parents to get their act together," Cherna said. "If they don't, it becomes pretty evident."

Cotton and Davy said the new DYFS would seek to place foster children with their relatives or, at the very least, keep them close to their neighborhoods, schools and friends.

"Studies have shown that children placed with kin are more likely to go home and more likely to go home safely," Cotton said.

If they can't go home, "we must move to adoption without delay," Davy said.

Cherna views adoptions as "a failure in the system." But, if children must be adopted, they should have homes waiting for them. All but 20 children in Allegheny County's adoption process are living in the homes that will eventually adopt them.

"Judges don't like to create orphans," Cherna said.

The results of his approach have been remarkable. The number of children in foster care has gone down from 3,300 to 2,300, with half coming into the system as troubled teens, not as children likely to be raised by the system. The backlog of adoptions has dropped from 1,600 to 450. And Cherna has found his approach, with fewer children in foster care, to be cheaper.

"We're not looking to save money," he cautioned. "We're looking to spend it better and keep families together."

Both Davy and Gov. McGreevey said last week that they could not turn DYFS around without help from outside community groups. In Allegheny County, Cherna also has leaned heavily on the community.

He enlisted a local law firm, which has done free legal work for close to 800 adoptions.

He created a foundation with the help of Pittsburgh icons like the Heinz Endowments and aluminum giant Alcoa Inc.

They pay into a fund, and Cherna takes requests to the foundation board.

Many of the services provided to parents come from contracted agencies, such as the Urban League, which have representatives at the regional offices. Cherna also taps dozens of outreach programs, such as Gwen's Girls, run by a former Pittsburgh police commander.

New Jersey's Davy said that the agency must also work to "keep children from coming through DYFS' door in the first place."

Cherna has relied on outside help to meet that goal as well. His office helps fund 32 family-support centers and after-school programs in housing projects that are largely run by parents and community members.

In North View Heights, a community of low-slung public-housing buildings perched on a Pittsburgh hillside, a basement has been transformed into a thriving after-school program.

The neighborhood has been hammered by the usual maladies: drugs, crime, fatherless households, and latchkey kids. Before the after-school program, there was little for children to do.

The program is run by Patricia Bagley, a resident and "community mother" who is helping raise a second generation of children.

"You know these people care about these kids because it's their neighbors," she said. "It kind of gives you more sense of pride in your community... because you're helping to rear these children."

The system is far from perfect, Cherna is quick to admit. With 20,000 children passing through the system each year, mistakes are unavoidable.

"All this stuff is judgment," he said. "The key to child-protective services is that it's a community responsibility. People want to put this on government, but government can't take care of kids."

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