

## **DYFS proposes a plan to cut cases**

The agency wants to reduce by half the number of families it serves. It also seeks to hire more workers.

Inquirer Trenton Bureau      By Mitch Lipka      June 09, 2004

TRENTON - Unable to cope with a growing load of cases involving staggering numbers of children, New Jersey child welfare officials yesterday proposed a plan they said would cut in half the number of families they are dealing with.

"This was the easy part," State Human Services Commissioner James Davy said. "Now we have to transfer this vision from paper to reality."

Dropping the number of cases each worker deals with - now an average of more than 40 apiece - is considered essential so that sufficient attention can be given to each child in the system. Although case limits vary by position, the plan calls for most caseworkers to have no more than 15 families to deal with and a total of no more than 10 children who are in foster care.

The Division of Youth and Family Services is working with 29,920 families - more than 60,000 children. Under the new plan, it needs to drop the number of families to about 15,000 by January 2006. The intention is to have most of the cases DYFS workers deal with be those involving abuse and neglect and to have the others sent to different social agencies.

State officials had delayed for a week the final submission of their plan to revamp the child welfare system because of concerns from an independent oversight panel that the reduction of cases wasn't going to happen quickly enough.

Members of the panel, who have been meeting with state officials, withheld their comment on the latest plan to reduce cases, pending a news conference scheduled for today. The panel will submit the \$320 million plan to a U.S. District Court judge, who can impose changes should the state fail to meet its goals.

The plan Davy announced yesterday includes:

Hiring 160 caseworkers who could start training in July, with 221 more to begin later in the year.

Dispatching 57 experienced social workers to offices that most need help with their cases - starting with Camden, Gloucester, Mercer and Essex Counties.

Paying \$738,000 over the next six months to a company called Social Work p.r.n. to review and close some 3,000 cases - each child constitutes a case - that are in their final stages.

DYFS used a team of supervisors to close more than 20,000 cases this year but still experienced a net gain because of how many cases were opened.

Limiting new cases

In addition to closing cases, DYFS is trying to limit the number of cases it takes on. DYFS director Edward Cotton said a centralized system of filtering incoming calls should reduce by 10 percent the cases that are opened.

Eventually, he said, plans for DYFS to work with a variety of community-based social service agencies should also help caseworkers focus on their primary mission: abuse and neglect cases.

In any given month, Cotton said, DYFS could field 6,500 new cases, of which about 3,000 are regarding a broad range of family problems - from mental health issues to truancy - that distract from the abuse and neglect cases.

Eighty-six workers will be added to deal with cases that belong in the mental health system rather than with DYFS caseworkers, he said.

Davy said the combination of initiatives should get the caseload where it needs to be.

New Jersey is compelled to develop and put in place a plan to dramatically alter how its ailing system operates. A lawsuit settlement last year with the advocacy group Children's Rights Inc. includes a framework for changes that gives supervisory authority to the panel of experts and allows a federal judge to step in where it is determined the state is faltering.

Waiting and seeing

Children's Rights executive director Marcia Robinson Lowry said that the state is headed in the right direction thanks to the panel's oversight, but that it remains to be seen whether the steps being taken to reduce cases will be enough.

"We need to know whether they'll be able to close cases at a rate that they expect to close them," she said. "They cannot get out of this mess without lowering caseloads."

Lowry said she expected the panel to keep a close eye on the state to ensure cases are being closed because they deserve to be, not just to shrink the numbers.

"This is really what has been one of the worst systems in the country," she said. "A lot of systems in the country will be looking to New Jersey to see if they can pull off this transformation. From our standpoint, we hope that they do."

A union official representing DYFS workers said he was pleased with the progress the state was making and the plan put forth by Davy.

"They're going to be hiring a lot of workers, which will, over time, significantly reduce people's caseloads so they can once again do very, very meaningful kinds of things," said Paul Alexander of Communications Workers of America Local 1034.

"We're hoping two, three, five years down the road we'll see a very different DYFS."

## **Child welfare agency announces plan to reduce worker caseloads**

By TOM BELL The Associated Press 6/8/2004, 5:52 p.m. ET

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — The state's child welfare agency intends to hire 160 new employees this month, another 221 over the next year, and bring in help from an outside firm, all in an effort to reduce worker caseloads.

The announcement Tuesday of the latest effort to cut the crush of cases at the Division of Youth and Family Services was made on the same day state officials submitted a revised plan aimed at reforming the troubled child welfare agency.

The \$320 million plan to fix DYFS was required under terms of a settlement reached between the state and a children's rights group that sued New Jersey to force change at the agency.

One key part of the plan is to reduce the caseloads handled by DYFS workers. The average DYFS caseworker is now responsible for the files of about 40 children, one of the highest rates in the nation.

"It's a precarious position that does not enable wholesale reform," said James Davy, human services commissioner.

The new caseload initiative follows other caseload-cutting efforts instituted by Davy since he took over in January.

Davy said a special project earlier this year resulted in the closure of more than 20,000 cases, but nearly that number of new cases were opened in the period.

In addition to the new hires, the state will pay a Pennsylvania agency \$738,000 over the next year to provide temporary social workers to help close cases. Davy said the firm will provide 50 full-time employees whose efforts will allow DYFS workers to focus on other tasks.

The goal is to close 3,000 cases over the next six months and to reduce caseloads for 95 percent of permanent workers to no more than 15 families per caseworker.

Davy said the caseload reduction initiative would begin in Essex, Passaic, Mercer and Camden counties, the areas with the most serious problems. It will be implemented in the rest of the state within 18 months.

"It's aggressive, but it's realistic," Davy said.

He said the caseload reduction plan was approved by the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, the independent body put in place to oversee the reforms as part of the lawsuit settlement.

The panel tentatively approved the state's plan to overhaul DYFS, but asked for a few revisions. The revised plan submitted Tuesday calls for the closure of the state's only public psychiatric treatment center for children by the end of 2005, and an adjustment of when specific goals and benchmarks of the reform effort are to be reached.

The child welfare panel was scheduled to hold a news conference Wednesday to discuss the revised plan.

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## **Oversight panel approves state plan to fix DYFS**

By TOM BELL      The Associated Press      June 9, 2004 11:31 AM

TRENTON, N.J. - The panel with legal oversight over the effort to overhaul New Jersey's child welfare system formally approved the state's reform plan in a letter sent Wednesday to a federal judge.

The New Jersey Child Welfare Panel had requested some revisions to the plan originally submitted in March by state officials. Steve Cohen, chairman of the panel, told U.S. District Court Judge Stanley R. Chesler that the state had met its requirements in planning to fix the Division of Youth and Family Services.

"The state's plan is ambitious and comprehensive, and it includes commitments of very substantial additional funding, without which it cannot be successfully implemented," Cohen's letter said.

State officials want the Legislature to approve \$320 million in spending over the next two years to implement the plan, which was required under the terms of a settlement between the state and a children's advocacy group.

Children's Rights Inc. sued the state to force reform at DYFS after years of problems at the agency that culminated last year with several high-profile cases where children died or were severely abused.

The child welfare panel was appointed as a result of the lawsuit settlement. The panel has the right to enforce changes outlined in the plan and can go to Chesler if it is not being carried out properly.

"The goal is to have a set of enforceable actions that are clear and concrete," Cohen said during a news conference

Wednesday.

Revisions to the plan praised by the panel included a clearer outline for the establishment of a new Office of Children's Services and an initiative announced by DYFS officials this week to hire more employees to reduce worker caseloads.

State officials also dumped previous plans to keep open the state's only public child psychiatric facility for children by agreeing to close the Arthur Brisbane Child Treatment Center in Monmouth County by the end of 2005.

Cohen said the panel intends to focus on certain parts of the state's plan as it is implemented. Those include ensuring proper leadership for the Office of Children's Services and at county levels, monitoring hiring efforts and developing better training programs for workers.

Hetty Rosenstein, president of Communications Workers of America Local 1037, which represents many DYFS workers, said reducing caseloads by hiring more workers is the key.

"The Division of Youth and Family Services will finally reach Child Welfare League of America caseload limitations, something for which this union has been fighting for 15 years," Rosenstein said.

The reform plan's broad goals are to base child welfare services in individual communities and to increase the number of foster families in the state. Officials also want to partner with other state agencies to focus on larger societal problems they said cause child abuse and neglect such as domestic violence and substance abuse.

"It is a comprehensive, logical and realistic blueprint," James Davy, human services commissioner, said of the overall plan. "This was the easy part. Now we have to transfer this vision from paper to reality."

## **DHS PRESS RELEASE: June 8, 2004**

### **Commissioner Davy Outlines Sweeping, Statewide Effort to Reduce DYFS Caseloads**

"Full-court press" plan would bring New Jersey 's caseloads to among the nation's lowest

Department of Human Services Commissioner James Davy today announced an 18-month plan to drastically reduce the caseloads of Division of Youth and Family Services staff and bring caseloads ratios in New Jersey to among the lowest in the nation.

The caseload reduction plan was submitted to the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel yesterday. It is a key part of the final draft of the child welfare reform plan that will be submitted to the panel today. The Panel is expected to approve the plan and submit it to the federal court tomorrow

"High caseloads are the source of many, many problems in the child welfare system," said Davy. "I felt we had to do something major, something comprehensive—like a full-court press -- to clear the path for reform."

Under the initiative, DYFS will hire 160 new caseworkers and begin dispatching "impact teams" of experienced social workers to offices across the state to help investigate new child abuse and neglect reports and close thousands of backlogged cases. In addition, DYFS will also contract with an outside agency to assist on the final work of cases already targeted for closing and to identify additional cases that could be safely closed.

Four counties – Camden , Essex, Mercer and Passaic – are scheduled to have every element of the reform plan up and running by January 2005. Camden , Essex and Mercer will be among the first counties targeted in the caseload reduction efforts, along with Gloucester , Davy said.

The plan announced by Davy today calls for hiring 160 new caseworkers in early July so they can be trained and

assigned to various DYFS offices to help reduce the caseloads of veteran workers. Another 221 caseworkers will be hired later in the budget year.

At the same time, DYFS will redeploy 57 experienced workers to serve on “impact teams” that will be dispatched to various offices statewide. These teams will relieve DYFS workers in two ways:

Some will be assigned to intake – investigating allegations of abuse or neglect – to allow workers in that office to focus on managing their existing cases. Others will work to close cases on children who appear to be safe yet whose case files remain open because workers have been unable to complete paperwork and other requirements.

DYFS will also contract with an outside agency, PRN, which has offices in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, to assist on the case closing initiative. The value of the contract is \$738,000 over the next year.

The agency will provide temporary social workers to relieve DYFS workers by conducting collateral contacts on cases; making visits to children whose cases were targeted for closure; and evaluating risk factors for children under supervision to identify additional cases that could be safely closed.

Davy stressed that PRN will work exclusively to close old cases that are lingering in the system.

“We began a special project early this year, paying workers and supervisors overtime to close such cases,” Davy said. “Yet, even as we closed more than 20,000 cases, we could not keep pace with the number of new cases that we opened. We must make a more concerted effort. And we must work on controlling the number of new cases.”

One measure that should help reduce the intake of new cases is the centralized screening center that is scheduled to open next month. Currently, calls during business hours are received and evaluated locally, and standards sometimes differ from one place to another, Davy said.

With centralized screening, all calls to DYFS will be evaluated using the same standards, and allegations that do not rise to the level of abuse or neglect will be referred to other agencies.

“For the past year, we have shown a tendency to open cases that would not have been considered before,” Davy said. “This has to stop. Opening these questionable cases does not protect children. It actually puts them at risk because the system gets bogged down and caseworkers cannot spend enough time working with the families who really need them.”

The Child Welfare Reform Plan is largely unchanged from a draft that was submitted in mid-May. The major additions are the plan to close the Arthur Brisbane Child Treatment Center by the end of 2005 and new timelines and benchmarks for achieving various goals.

The plan will establish caseload standards that are among the lowest – if not the lowest – in the nation, Davy said.

The reform plan also outlines sweeping changes to the entire child welfare system, such as:

Development of community partnerships to foster a network of child abuse prevention and family support services;

Expansion of, and increased access to, children's behavioral health services;

Better recruitment, retention and support of foster and adoptive parents;

A larger and better trained DYFS casework staff;

and A new case practice model that calls for trained forensic investigators to assess new allegations of child abuse and neglect, permanency workers to provide ongoing services to at-risk families, and two new categories of workers who will specialize in serving adolescents and supporting foster and adoptive families.

The child welfare reform plan calls for investigators to take on no more than eight new cases per month, or 12 cases total, while permanency workers should be supervising no more than 15 families, Davy said.

DYFS' office structure will also be reorganized, establishing 46 district offices that will be supervised by 15 "area" offices that encompass either a single county or a multiple-county region corresponding to the Superior Court vicinages. The first four area offices will open in January 2005 in Essex , Passaic , Mercer and Camden counties.

The goal is to achieve the caseload standards for 95 percent of the permanency workers in those four counties by June 2005. Interim benchmarks will be established as well. For example, the goal is to reduce the caseload for 95 percent of the permanency workers in those counties to 20 families or less by January 2005.

The second phase of the initiative will target Cumberland , Gloucester , Hudson, Middlesex, Monmouth, Ocean and Salem counties. In those counties, the goal is to reduce the caseload for 95 percent of the permanency workers by September 2005.

In the remaining 10 counties – Atlantic , Bergen , Burlington , Cape May , Hunterdon, Morris, Somerset , Sussex , Union and Warren – the goal is to reduce the caseload for 95 percent of the permanency workers by January 2006.

For investigators, the caseload target will be achieved statewide by August 2005.

## **Overseer endorses state plan on DYFS**

The Child Welfare Panel forwarded the proposed overhaul to a federal judge. Its next task is to detail goals.

By Mitch Lipka            Inquirer Trenton Bureau            June 10, 2004

The independent panel overseeing the effort to overhaul New Jersey's child welfare system yesterday endorsed the state's plans and forwarded them to a federal judge for approval.

"In our view, approval of the plan is an important milestone on the very long road to a system capable of assuring safety, permanency and well-being for New Jersey's children and their families," New Jersey Child Welfare Panel chairman Steven D. Cohen wrote to U.S. District Judge Stanley R. Chesler.

"The state's plan is ambitious and comprehensive, and it includes commitments of very substantial additional funding, without which it cannot be successfully implemented."

State officials have asked the Legislature for \$320 million over 2 1/2 years to pay for more staffing and training and other changes to dramatically alter a system regarded as among the most troubled in the nation.

DYFS is now working with more than 60,000 children from about 30,000 families, a volume that is overwhelming caseworkers. The plan endorsed by the panel includes quickly hiring hundreds of additional caseworkers and contracting with a firm to help close cases that have been dormant.

To bring caseloads to manageable levels, the state has set an 18-month goal of reducing the number of families it deals with at any one time to about 15,000.

Cohen said the panel intends to closely monitor the state's hiring and training. It is particularly important, he said, for the state to attract skilled, experienced managers to the main and regional offices.

To encourage a better-prepared, better-educated staff, the state's new hiring plan will include incentives for those with master's of social work degrees and require competency testing after each stage of training.

The key to getting DYFS's troubles under control, child welfare officials said, is significantly dropping the number of

children each caseworker must deal with.

The state intends to create a web of services to divert many kinds of calls that now come into the Division of Youth and Family Services - distracting caseworkers from their primary mission of investigating, and working to prevent, abuse and neglect.

Cases involving mental health issues and incorrigible teens, for example, should be handled elsewhere so child abuse and neglect cases are not lost in the clutter, state officials said.

Within the month, the panel expects to detail for Chesler a list of key goals the state must achieve or risk having the court impose change.

The panel, which advises the state and is overseeing the changes, was created as a result of a lawsuit settlement last year between the state and Children's Rights Inc. Children's Rights alleged the state was mistreating children in foster care.

Every six months, most likely beginning in February, the panel is required to issue a detailed monitoring report on the state's progress.

DYFS was involved in a series of embarrassing high-profile cases - from the child-abuse death of a Newark boy whose case was closed without being seen by a caseworker to the discovery of four starving adopted brothers in Collingswood whose home was repeatedly visited by caseworkers who didn't raise any red flags.

Over the last few months, DYFS and the Department of Human Services have worked to change their image - forcing out top leaders and hiring as commissioner James Davy, a longtime confidant of Gov. McGreevey's.

Davy has been regularly announcing changes to the system and innovations intended to change how the state treats the children in its care.

Yesterday, at the Center for Children's Support at the UMDNJ-School of Osteopathic Medicine in Stratford, Davy announced the commitment of \$1.5 million to determine the best medical and mental health treatment for abused children.

The money also will lead to an expansion of services in South Jersey for children who need mental health services.

State officials said nearly 8,000 children a year are victims of abuse and neglect in New Jersey.

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## **DYFS overhaul gets high marks**

### **Officials praised the newly approved blueprint for revamping the child-welfare agency.**

By Troy Graham                      Inquirer Staff Writer                      June 18, 2004

Everyone was effusive yesterday about the plan to overhaul New Jersey's troubled child-welfare agency.

Children's Rights Inc., the advocacy group that sued the state in federal court, called the plan "very aggressive, very ambitious."

The commissioner of the state Department of Human Services said it was "unprecedented."

A member of the expert panel that oversaw the process called it "a strong plan... with very high aspirations."

Most important, the federal judge who approved the plan at a brief hearing in Trenton yesterday described it as a "down payment" on the future of New Jersey's most vulnerable children.

"The question for all of us is whether or not in the future the government of New Jersey can deliver on the hopes and promises," U.S. District Court Judge Stanley R. Chesler said.

The package was part of a settlement last year between the state and Children's Rights, which contended that the state was mistreating children in foster care under the Division of Youth and Family Services.

DYFS was embarrassed by a series of high-profile cases - from the child-abuse death of a Newark boy whose case had been closed without a caseworker seeing him to the discovery of four starving adopted brothers whose Collingswood home was repeatedly visited by caseworkers who did not raise any red flags.

The overhaul plan was introduced in February. The panel of experts, created under the settlement, gave its approval last week and forwarded the package to Chesler.

State officials have asked the Legislature for \$320 million over the next 2 1/2 years to pay for more staffing and training, among other changes.

One of the most immediate goals is to alleviate a crushing caseload. DYFS works with more than 60,000 children from about 30,000 families. The plan calls for fast-track hiring of hundreds of caseworkers and retaining an outside firm to help close dormant cases.

But many of the principal players at yesterday's hearing acknowledged that many of the proactive and preventive changes could take years and span political administrations.

Associate director Susan Lambiase said Children's Rights was pleased with the progress, but pledged to join the expert panel in continuing to monitor the changes. If New Jersey fails to meet the conditions of the settlement, Children's Rights can take the state back to court.

"The big question is, 'Can they do it?' " Lambiase said. "There are a lot of deadlines and a lot of things they need to do."

## **Evaluation ordered in DYFS assault case**

By Denise Jewel      June 18, 2004

WOODBURY -- A judge ordered a woman who pleaded guilty to assaulting a Division of Youth and Family Services caseworker to undergo a mental evaluation after she stormed out of her sentencing hearing Thursday and began yelling in the hallway.

Three sheriff's officers had to escort Lois Pedrick, 41, back into the courtroom after she disrupted the assistant prosecutor's remarks by leaving the room.

"I'm really sick of the whole thing. I really am," Pedrick said after her lawyer and several officers told her to return to

the hearing. "I'm so tired of it."

Pedrick pleaded guilty to third-degree aggravated assault and fourth-degree simple assault in April for a March 2003 incident in which authorities said she attacked former DYFS caseworker Tracy Hilliker at Pedrick's home.

Superior Court Judge Walter Marshall Jr. called Pedrick's courtroom behavior "not appropriate" and ordered her to undergo an evaluation next week to determine if she is fit proceed with her sentencing and whether she is a danger to herself or others.

"I have some concerns as to whether Ms. Pedrick has the competency to understand the proceedings and what's going on here today," Marshall said.

Police arrested Pedrick at her home after she refused to speak with the caseworker, Tracy Hilliker, and slammed the door in her face. Pedrick then pulled open the door to Hilliker's car, threw her to the ground and shoved her against a fence, police reported after the incident.

"The victim did not fight back in this matter," said Assistant Prosecutor Vincent Malfitano, noting that Hilliker rolled up in a ball during the assault.

Hilliker, 28, was investigating a claim of child cruelty stemming from an incident reported by the child's school, police reported after the arrest.

Hilliker said Friday the incident forced her to resign from her position in January after a medical leave of absence. She filed a civil suit against Pedrick in March.

"I'm disappointed it's taking so long for the prosecution, but I do want it to be prosecuted properly," said Hilliker, who thanked the prosecutor's office for their work on the case.

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## **DHS PRESS RELEASE: June 30, 2004**

### **Centralized Screening of Child Abuse and Neglect Reports Debuts**

**July 1, 2004**

New Hotline, 1-877-NJ ABUSE, Established for DYFS Calls

The Division of Youth and Family Services will establish a call screening center and a new hotline for reporting child abuse and neglect tomorrow as an initial step in a sweeping reform of the child welfare system, Commissioner James Davy announced.

The call center will operate 24 hours a day, every day of the year, replacing local screeners at more than 30 DYFS district offices and the current after-hours and weekend hotline. About 40 screeners will staff the center on weekdays, assessing child abuse and neglect allegations from across the state.

"In the past, DYFS' response to a report might depend on who answered the call," Davy said. "The goal of this

centralized screening operation is to ensure that DYFS evaluates and responds to every report consistently and appropriately, wherever and whenever it happens.”

The call center also will allow DYFS to track every call that comes in, which cannot be done reliably under the current system. Better tracking will allow DYFS to identify trends, manage its caseload, and assess whether it is responding appropriately to child abuse and neglect reports.

The new hotline number – 1-877-NJ ABUSE (652-2873) – will begin operating tomorrow. Calls to toll-free numbers that serve the district offices and the current hotline will be redirected to the screening center. DYFS will initiate a campaign to publicize the new number this summer.

DYFS Director Ed Cotton has been personally training the screeners and supervisors who will staff the new center. About 40 screeners will be on duty weekdays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., the peak calling time. Overnight and weekend shifts will have up to eight screeners at a time.

Most of the screeners are veteran DYFS workers with experience screening calls at the district offices, the Institutional Abuse Investigations Unit, or the current after-hours hotline.

The screening process will be somewhat different, as the screeners will have clear, specific guidance on assessing reports. Eventually, they also will have access to a greater assortment of community-based programs to serve families without putting them on the DYFS caseload.

“For the past 18 months, the DYFS caseload expanded so rapidly we could barely keep up with it,” Davy said. “One of the reasons is that we were opening some cases that did not really warrant DYFS investigations. As a result, our workers were hard-pressed to give the proper attention to children who are truly at risk.”

Under the child welfare reform plan, each county in New Jersey will establish a community collaborative – an organization that will foster the development of programs to support families and prevent child abuse and neglect.

When that system is in place, calls about child welfare concerns that do not rise to the level of child abuse or neglect can be referred to a collaborative and then to a community-based service provider.

Meanwhile, DYFS workers will continue to respond to child welfare calls, assess the children’s safety and, when appropriate, refer families to services that already exist in the community.

“The system of referring non-abuse and neglect calls to community agencies will help keep kids safe,” Davy said, “because our investigators and caseworkers will be able to focus on children who are at risk of harm or who already have been abused or neglected.”

The new call center will open in an office complex outside Trenton, but will move to a new permanent location at DYFS’ Central Office building in downtown Trenton by September.

The centralized screening operation is expected to increase costs by about \$1 million this year, primarily to cover the cost of renovations and furniture and the campaign to publicize the new hotline number.

Last year, DYFS received nearly 89,000 calls alleging abuse and neglect or reporting concerns with children and families. That was a significant increase over prior years, when DYFS received an average of 78,000 calls a year.

## **Assessing families by the numbers**

### **DYFS retrains its staff in structured decisions**

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

July 06, 2004

Don't trust your gut.

That was the resounding message delivered to 2,800 employees of the Division of Youth and Family Services during a three-month retraining effort that wraps up this week.

No longer should caseworkers bear the full weight of making life-altering decisions, such as whether children would be safer living at home or in foster care. State officials said even intuition derived from years of experience should not be trusted when evaluating a family.

The new training regimen, called "structured decision-making," requires staff to grade families on a numeric scale in 20 categories. The caseworker will then tally the score to determine if children are at low, medium or high risk of harm, and get a supervisor's approval. The ratings are based on statistical research into characteristics of families that have been investigated for maltreatment around the country.

DYFS Director Edward E. Cotton calls the dramatic shift in casework "the most important element" of the entire court-ordered \$320 million plan to transform the agency.

More than 18 states and cities have adopted the same approach, including California, which inspired New Jersey's curriculum, said Chris Baird, vice president for the Children's Research Center. The Madison, Wis., research and training company holds a \$1.26 million contract to teach the technique to DYFS staff.

Some states still value the "consensus-based" approach, which favors clinical experience, intuition, and interviewing skills, according to a study by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. But actuarial systems, like structured decision making, are more reliable, the study found. They "can estimate future behavior more accurately than ... even decision makers who have had extensive clinical training."

Some child welfare experts familiar with the training call structured decision making a series of computer checklists and tally sheets that workers robotically complete, leaving no room for nuance.

"That's a criticism we hear very often," Baird said. "We don't think this replaces good social work, like developing a relationship with the family. This helps workers determine which cases they really ought to be putting efforts into, which families are most likely to abuse and neglect kids."

Revelations about judgment errors pressured the state to change how DYFS does its job.

The case of 7-year-old Faheem Williams, who was found dead in Newark last year after DYFS closed his family's case, riveted attention on the failings of the agency. It also pressured Gov. James E. McGreevey in June 2003 to settle a four-year-old lawsuit alleging civil rights abuse against foster children. Children's Rights, Inc. the national child advocacy group that filed the lawsuit, found DYFS had returned one in five foster children to abusive parents who hurt them again, based on a record review of 500 random files.

The independent panel named by the federal judge overseeing the lawsuit settlement supports the new, statistics-based approach, particularly now as DYFS plans to hire 1,450 new employees as part of its reform plan.

"You have a lot of people who don't have professional background coming in to do the work," panel chairman Steve Cohen said. "Just making sure they go through a standard process, and that a supervisor has to be part of the decision -- that alone is useful."

Mary Edna Davidson, dean of the Rutgers School of Social Work, agreed. "Police officers have protocols for what they have to do after a homicide or a robbery. The rookie may have to go through check lists and not get to the creative analysis part, but at least they'll get someplace because they have a guide."

But the method is not fool-proof, said Davidson, who stressed it should not take the place of caseworkers seeking

college degrees and licenses in social work.

Peg McCarthy, a social worker for 30 years and a Children's Research Center trainer, anticipated resistance from the more experienced caseworkers, supervisors and managers as she began a training session in Newark last week. "You're probably thinking, why is someone telling me what to think? Why is someone implying I don't know how to assess families?"

Some of that frustration flared up as the workers tried the new formula.

McCarthy asked the class to consider the plight of Molly Jones, a fictional, happy 8-year-old who has been hospitalized three times because her parents do not understand how to control her diabetes. On top of their neglect, her father was abused as a child, feels depressed, and owns a gun in a locked safe.

Using the numerical questionnaire, McCarthy and the majority of the class deemed the parents a level three -- a "moderate" risk to Molly. But Phyllis, a caseworker who declined to be identified, sensed greater danger.

"I want to move them to a high risk because she could go back to the hospital. She needs constant medical monitoring," the dissenting caseworker said.

McCarthy said no. The parents have agreed to a "safety plan" -- to seek help at the local hospital, and to monitor the child's blood sugar four times a day, as they should.

Heidi, another caseworker, challenged the instructor. "She could die."

"We ask you not to imagine what could happen," McCarthy said.

"Initially as you use these tools, you may be uncomfortable. ... When you trust the tool, it will take you where you need to go," she said. McCarthy added that workers and their supervisors will be encouraged to discuss scenarios that seem to demand "an override" of the protocol, and in certain cases, that will happen.

Workers leaving class said they generally liked the approach, although they couldn't imagine how they would have time to complete the required evaluations because their caseloads are still so high.

One worker said she liked it because "there was less chance of you making the wrong decision."

Ultimately, state officials expect DYFS to take on fewer investigations and thereby reduce its workers' caseloads. A new hot-line screening system, which began Thursday, set a higher standard for opening a case. Structured decision making should complement this effort, said Mary Carroll-Robertson, who is coordinating the program for DYFS.

"That's how we got into this mess," Carroll-Robertson said. "We took every case that came our way. This will make sure we are not involved in any cases we don't need to be."

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## **N.J. agrees to tough list for DYFS overhaul**

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

July 20, 2004

More than a year after Gov. James E. McGreevey promised to fix New Jersey's "broken" child welfare system, state officials agreed yesterday to a rigorous list of reforms they must implement or face sanctions by a federal judge.

The landmark agreement means most of the \$320 million reform plan that Human Services Commissioner James Davy

announced in March is now a legal commitment with a timetable for implementing it.

That plan includes recruiting 1,000 new foster families, hiring 1,450 more staff, and expanding family counseling and treatment services.

"This document is the most serious from a legal standpoint," Davy said. "It represents the core elements of the reform plan and measures our progress toward meeting our objectives. It's a very demanding document. It raises and sets very high standards of accountability. But the children of New Jersey deserve nothing less."

The state Division of Youth and Family Services agreed to the unprecedented scrutiny last June when it settled a civil rights lawsuit filed by a national child advocacy group on behalf of the 13,000 children in foster and group homes and institutions. The lawsuit alleged that DYFS was so poorly run, it was actually harming the children it was supposed to protect.

Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights Inc. in New York, the advocacy group that sued the state, predicted the agreement "will be an enormous benefit to children because it is so broad-based. It covers every aspect of the child welfare system."

Lowry credited the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, appointed under the settlement last summer, with drawing up a document "that makes us confident that the plan is going to get implemented one way or another -- hopefully voluntarily by the state, or by court action if necessary."

The panel of five national child welfare experts was created under the settlement to monitor the state's reform efforts and advise U.S. District Judge Stanley Chesler on New Jersey's compliance.

The agreement contains hundreds of requirements, but the panel gave priority to a handful of "building blocks ... which must be addressed in the short term in order to make the rest of the plan feasible," the panel said in a letter sent to Chesler yesterday.

Those priorities include a Sept. 30 deadline for appointing a deputy commissioner to oversee the new Office of Children's Services, which will manage DYFS, child mental health programs and a new community-based child abuse prevention effort. A plan to recruit 1,000 new foster parents is also due that day, but the state has until June 30, 2005, to find the families.

Other priorities include hiring at least 247 caseworkers by the year's end -- the latest wave of new staff to reduce the number of children each caseworker supervises. The state also must submit a blueprint for a DYFS training academy by the end of 2004, although the panel did not specify when the academy should open.

In addition, the state must by next year take steps to prevent "boarder babies" -- newborns abandoned or taken from their mothers -- from spending more than five days in a hospital.

Starting in February, the panel will release a progress report every six months, or sooner if it identifies "seriously inadequate progress at any time," according to the panel's letter.

Should the state fail to measure up to the goals, the panel can order the state to participate in a dispute resolution process, said panel member Judy Meltzer, deputy director of the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, D.C.

"We will work with the state to identify the areas where progress is stalled and see if we can come together to alleviate the problem," Meltzer said.

If those steps fail, she said, the panel would turn to the judge to enforce the agreement.

The judge could impose fines or order a takeover of the system, although "the notion of the panel was really designed to

make those things less likely," she said. "The focus is on the children and the reform."

Some people who closely monitor DYFS or are a part of the child welfare system offered mixed reviews of the agreement yesterday.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, a child advocacy and research organization in Newark, worried about the agreement's "almost exclusive focus on children in (foster care) placement, and not enough to address those children who are living with their own families under DYFS care."

Of the 68,613 children monitored by the state, 55,615 live with their families, while only 13,000 live in foster homes or licensed facilities, Zalkind said, citing June DYFS data. "Where is the system to provide services to those families?"

Hetty Rosenstein, president of Communications Workers of America Local 1037, representing DYFS workers in Central and North Jersey, said while she backs the plan conceptually, "it is going to be very difficult to meet these time frames. In many ways, this is too ambitious, even with the tremendous effort and will to do so."

Davy may share some of Rosenstein's concerns. He has asked Attorney General Peter Harvey to review the document he signed and seek "an informal clarification" from the judge, "making sure what they are requiring for me to do is reasonable." Some aspects of the plan involve family courts, for instance, which Davy pointed out "is a separate branch of government and beyond our control."

Davy admitted there were "some disagreements" with the panel about the court requirements, "but in the end, we got it done. We will meet all those deadlines."

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## **Panel details goals, dates for DYFS**

### **If the agency fails to meet them, it could return to court.**

By Mitch Lipka      Inquirer Trenton Bureau      July 20, 2004

More than a year after the settlement of a landmark lawsuit challenging New Jersey's child welfare system, the last piece in the legal jigsaw puzzle intended to lead to a well-functioning system was put in place yesterday.

A panel of experts overseeing the tearing down and rebuilding of the system gave a federal judge a detailed list of goals the state must achieve by designated deadlines or risk being hauled back to court.

"It's one thing to be acting in good faith, and it's another thing to actually be held accountable to what you've agreed to," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights Inc., the advocacy group that sued the state in 1999. "This will require that they deliver."

The 43-page document, submitted to U.S. District Judge Stanley Chesler, puts dates to goals specified in the voluminous child welfare reconfiguration plan approved last month.

At least one key goal, creating a 24-hour child abuse reporting hotline by Sept. 30, has already been achieved.

Others are far more complex: "revise and adopt policies regarding safety, risk and involvement with child protective services." Five courses of action are set out with deadlines beginning with revising policies by Sept. 30 to "substantially conforming" with them by Dec. 31, 2005.

Judith Meltzer, a member of the oversight panel, said if the state should be shown as failing to meet a goal, officials

would get a chance to rectify the situation before being put before the judge.

The panel will be overseeing the changes for at least 18 months at the Division of Youth and Family Services and the new Office of Children's Services that will be in charge of DYFS and three other divisions. Every six months, beginning early next year, the panel is supposed to release reports on the state's progress.

However, Meltzer said the panel is considering issuing an interim report in the fall.

At the foundation of the rebuilding, she said, are three things: hiring enough staff, training the staff, and employing an able management team to oversee the workers.

So far this year, the Department of Human Services has hired 160 caseworkers toward a total of 381 new workers authorized for this year as part of a \$125 million boost for child welfare programs. An additional 150 workers are supposed to be added by September 2005.

Human Services Commissioner James Davy said that while the negotiations to come up with the court-enforceable goals were sometimes intense he was happy with the result.

"We are committed to doing every single thing set forth in our plan," he said. "We wanted to make sure those things that we were going to be held accountable to... were right and made sense and were reasonable in every sense possible."

He said each of the four division chiefs under the new Office of Children's Services was, or would soon be, on the job. However, a national search is still under way to hire the head of Children's Services, who will serve as Davy's deputy.

The field has been narrowed by a search firm and interviews likely will be conducted in early August, Davy said. "We want somebody who is an expert in child welfare delivery systems - a team player," he said.

The panel, while observing the state's progress, will also continue to advise officials on the best ways to achieve the goals.

"This system has been allowed to deteriorate for such a long time... that it's going to take a lot of sustained effort to bring it into the shape where it's going to be able to protect children," Lowry said.

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## **Injured baby's fight for life leads to arrest of mother, too**

By Sam Wood      Inquirer Staff Writer      July 21, 2004

A 21/2-month-old Camden County girl remained in "extremely critical condition" yesterday at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia with serious brain injuries and a broken leg, authorities said.

They said the child, identified as Baby D.S., was beaten by her mother and thrown onto a bed by her father Friday afternoon after she would not stop crying at their Pennsauken home.

The infant bounced off the mattress and hit a wall, and the impact caused a clot to form on her brain, Camden County Prosecutor Vincent P. Sarubbi said.

The 18-year-old mother was arrested yesterday, accused of hitting the baby repeatedly in the face, causing her to bleed from her nose, Sarubbi said. When the baby did not stop crying, the mother bit her on an arm and a leg, he said.

The mother, who was not identified by authorities, was charged with aggravated assault and endangering the welfare of

a child. She was being held last night in the Camden County Correctional Facility after failing to post \$75,000 bail.

The infant's 17-year-old father, whose name was not released because of his age, was arrested Monday. He is accused of grabbing the baby by a leg, shaking her, and throwing her onto a bed, Sarubbi said.

The father was charged with aggravated assault and endangering the welfare of a child. He was being held at the Camden County Juvenile Detention Center in Blackwood.

The mother took the baby to the Osborn Family Health Center in Camden on Saturday morning. After examining the infant, clinic workers sent her to Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center across the street. Lourdes physicians then had the baby taken to Children's Hospital, where she underwent emergency brain surgery.

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## **State balks on list of fixes for DYFS**

### **It calls some mandates unenforceable**

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

July 22, 2004

In a move that children's advocates call a threat to New Jersey's commitment to improve its child welfare system, state lawyers asked a federal judge yesterday to free the state from sanctions if it fails to deliver on several components of a \$320 million reform plan.

On Monday, Human Services Commissioner James Davy agreed to a court-ordered list of changes for the Division of Youth and Family Services. Yesterday Deputy Attorney General Stefanie Brand asked U.S. District Court Judge Stanley R. Chesler to deem several items on that list unenforceable, arguing they are "outside the scope" of the settlement to a lawsuit filed on behalf of foster children.

The plan would revise New Jersey's child welfare system, which supervises 68,613 children. Of that total, only about 13,000 live in foster care.

Brand also objected to any requirements that involve other departments or branches of government, saying they are not under the control of the Department of Human Services. She requested a meeting with the judge to determine the state's legal obligations.

McGreevey administration officials insisted the request does not signal a change of heart.

"The governor's commitment to fixing DYFS and doing right by New Jersey's children is steadfast and unwavering," said Micah Rasmussen, Gov. James E. McGreevey's spokesman.

Rolando Torres Jr., the department's deputy commissioner for Regulatory and Legal Affairs, said the state remains "committed to meeting our obligations." He said the state wants to preserve its right to defend itself at a later date if the reform plan falls short and the state is challenged.

"There is a long history of litigation in consent decrees, and there are always speed bumps along the way," he said.

The move, however, stunned children's advocacy groups.

"This really makes me wonder about the depth of the state's commitment to fixing the system in a meaningful way," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights Inc. of New York. "This is a great disappointment." It was Children's Rights' civil rights lawsuit that prompted the settlement with the state.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, said she was troubled by the state's request.

"The spirit of the settlement ... has always been to advance beyond the narrow scope of the needs of children in foster care," Zalkind said. "Governor McGreevey promised a comprehensive approach that would ensure success in making children safer, after years of failed reforms. Now the state is seeking to avoid accountability for finally fixing New Jersey's failing child protection system."

Last month, Davy successfully lobbied for \$125 million in the current budget to launch the reforms, which include hiring 1,450 new staff members, replacing an outdated computer network, starting a training academy, expanding drug and mental health treatment programs, and recruiting 1,000 new foster parents.

On Monday, Davy, Lowry and a panel of court-appointed child welfare experts united behind a 42-page list of required improvements with deadlines attached. Under the settlement, the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel acts on the judge's behalf and has the final say on what is on the list. Davy had expressed concerns about the list to the panel last week, but the panel refused to change it. Those same concerns were aired in the lawyers' letter yesterday.

The state's attorneys argued that as Human Services commissioner, Davy cannot be held responsible for any reforms in other departments, such as the Department of Education and the Office of the Public Defender, nor for changes to the family court system and community social services agencies.

Schools and family courts are an integral part of the reform effort. The Child Welfare Panel expects judges to dramatically reduce the number of children sent to juvenile detention centers because there is a shortage of inpatient mental health treatment facilities. The panel also expects the state to "take all reasonable steps" to ensure the majority of foster children are registered in a school within 72 hours of leaving home, and to ensure youngsters get special education services.

Lowry said the state's lawyers are wrong to argue that the settlement can be enforced only in areas controlled by the Department of Human Services. She said the governor was named in the suit and can order state departments to work together.

"The governor is the ultimate defendant," she said. "They are taking a good hard look at what they promised before they were going to be held legally accountable. It seems they've decided it's too much now."

Child Welfare Panel member Judith Meltzer said she is puzzled by the state's resistance to the March 31, 2006, deadline for creating 18 "community collaboratives," networks of social service agencies serving DYFS families in a geographic area.

"This is a strategy the state endorsed in its plan to provide services to families and children. If they had not chosen that strategy, we would have looked for another, because those services are so badly needed," Meltzer said.

Meltzer also said there is precedent for state child welfare agencies to take responsibility for how family courts perform.

Sanctions against the state for failing to deliver on the settlement agreement could include the imposition of fines or having the federal judge take control of the child welfare system.

Judge Chesler was not available for comment yesterday.

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## **N.J. chafes at demands in DYFS overhaul**

### **It said a court document holds it accountable for too much. Child advocates expressed surprise.**

By Mitch Lipka

Inquirer Trenton Bureau

July 22, 2004

TRENTON - Just when it looked as if the overhaul of the dysfunctional New Jersey child-welfare system was humming along, a letter sent yesterday by the Attorney General's Office raised the prospect that the state is shifting away from cooperating and girding for a fight.

The letter takes issue with portions of a document - filed Monday in U.S. District Court - that spells out what the state can be held accountable for under a lawsuit settlement. The letter to the federal judge contends that the document holds the state accountable for things beyond its control, such as the actions of judges and the performance of the educational system.

The letter angered the head of the advocacy group that filed the 1999 lawsuit.

"It's really quite surprising and very disheartening," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights Inc. "It really makes me wonder how committed they are to reforming the child-welfare system."

The settlement last year created the framework for changing a child-welfare system that has had a series of embarrassing missteps as it deals with 60,000 children.

Talks to settle the suit, which accused the state of mistreating foster children and had been vigorously battled for years, began after the remains of Faheem Williams, a beaten and starved 7-year-old, were found in Newark early last year. He and his two starving brothers had been the subject of an abuse complaint that was closed although no one from the state Division of Youth and Family Services had seen them.

After the settlement five months later, state officials pronounced they would do whatever it took, no matter how much it cost, to right a system that had become one of the nation's most notorious.

Then, in October, the emaciated Jackson brothers were found in Collingswood. The four adopted brothers lived in a house that had been frequented by DYFS workers for years because foster children lived there. None of the workers noted the brothers' conditions.

The Jackson case and the state's admitted failure to live up to its commitment in the settlement to visit and evaluate the safety of all children in its custody led to the resignations of the Department of Human Services commissioner and her deputy.

But since Gov. McGreevey appointed James Davy to head the department in January, the often contentious relationship between advocates and the state had become downright harmonious. Promised changes began to take place, and acknowledgments of the system's problems were calmly aired.

In addition, the panel of child-welfare experts put in place under the settlement - who drew up the accountability document submitted to the court and are charged with overseeing the process for the court - gave the state added credibility among some of its biggest doubters.

Panel member Judith Meltzer said the letter was a surprise.

"We do not share or agree with the specific, substantive arguments made in that letter," she said.

The six-page letter, written by Deputy Attorney General Stefanie Brand to Judge Stanley Chesler, raises legal issues concerning a document that Davy had embraced two days earlier.

"The state is concerned in this case that many of the enforceable provisions substantially exceed the scope of the lawsuit, are outside the boundaries of what this court could order, limit the commissioner's flexibility to implement the plan, and are simply outside of the department's legal or practical control," Brand wrote.

Calls to Brand were referred to the Department of Human Services, where spokesman Andy Williams said the lawyer was simply seeking clarification from the judge and trying to preserve the state's rights in the event of a conflict down the road.

"All we're trying to do is set the ground rules for the future relationship," Williams said. "Jim Davy is certainly committed to doing everything that is in our child-welfare reform plan."

Meltzer said the disappointment over the state's objections would not get in the way of the panel's efforts to improve New Jersey's system.

"I don't think the panel views it is our role to get into a fight with the state on the legal arguments," she said. "We don't intend to let this get in the way of doing the actual work."

Meltzer also said she did not think the letter indicated that the state was trying to escape its commitment to fixing the system.

Lowry said the letter sent the panel the message that the state would mount a legal challenge if it failed to achieve some of its required goals.

"When they say that they don't want to be held legally accountable for parts of this and that they no longer want to accept what they agreed to... it makes me wonder," she said.

Another child-advocacy group expressed similar concerns.

"The attorney general can argue that the court can only enforce portions of the settlement that address the original allegations of the lawsuit," the Association for the Children of New Jersey said in a statement. "The spirit of the settlement, though, has always been to advance beyond the narrow scope of the needs of children in foster care.

"The state clearly recognized that without fixing the entire child-protection system, children in foster care would continue to be harmed. The state embraced principles that were much broader than the lawsuit's allegations."

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## **DYFS new hires hear hopeful words from one-time foster child**

By ANGELA DELLI SANTI  
Associated Press Writer

July 22, 2004, 2:43 PM EDT

TRENTON, N.J. -- More than 130 newly hired child welfare workers got a pep talk Thursday from a one-time foster

child who told them they have the power to change young lives, as his was turned around by a caseworker and a foster parent.

Bob Danzig bounced through five foster homes after being abandoned by his alcoholic parents before his file landed on the desk a caseworker who told him, "You are worthwhile." He later heard another life-changing mantra \_ "You are full of potential" \_ from a foster mother who recognized in Danzig the fragile ego of a child neglected.

"When a woman in authority says to a foster care kid, 'You are full of promise' \_ she gave me permission to grow. I never thought of growing before," he said.

Danzig put himself through college and went on to become CEO of Hearst Newspaper Group. He later built a motivational speaking business, whose proceeds he donates to children's charities. He waived his customary \$10,000 speaker's fee and appeared at the Division of Youth and Family Services training session for free.

Human Services Commissioner Jim Davy addressed the new hires first, proclaiming this "a very exciting time" because a blueprint for comprehensive child welfare reform is in place. More than 500 caseworkers will be added to the agency's payroll this year as part of the sweeping, court-mandated reforms.

"But today is about the tools of the heart and spirit," Davy said. "It's about seeing how you can touch the lives of people in very significant ways."

Danzig reinforced that theme: "You never know when you give your heart how indelible an impact you will have."

Incoming DYFS caseworkers receive 18 days of training before being assigned their first case, then are required to take eight mini-courses during their first year, said Dan Mills, the agency's training supervisor. Pre-service training includes sessions on diversity, ethics, abuse, neglect, safety and risk, he said.

Thursday's training session resembled graduate-school orientation \_ a group of young professionals being urged to succeed \_ despite pitfalls \_ by their caring, grandfatherly dean.

"You cannot do the work you are embarking on without a passionate conviction of the value in what you are doing," Danzig said. "You must feel the noble purpose in what you do. You must let that flow out to the people that are the beneficiaries of your choosing to be in this line of work."

Using humor and storytelling techniques, Danzig engaged his audience by reaching out \_ sometimes literally \_ grasping the hands or patting the shoulder of someone in a front row. The result: A standing ovation, plus all of the recruits lining up afterward for a complementary copy of Danzig's book, "Every Child Deserves A Champion," which he autographed for each one.

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## **A step backward for child welfare reform (Indiana)**

ANDREA NEAL      Posted on Tue, Aug. 24, 2004

INDIANAPOLIS – Deep into the Aug. 15 report of the Governor's Commission on Abused and Neglected Children is this ambitious if wildly naive "expected outcome": national recognition for Indiana as a leader in the area of child abuse and neglect prevention.

Pardon the skepticism, but that's not going to happen. There's no chance whatsoever that Indiana will become a leader in child protection reform. While some of the commission's proposals are necessary and overdue, such as increasing the number of caseworkers, none is groundbreaking. None ignites systemic change in the child protection system. None will make families safer or foster care an option of last resort. None will be emulated by other states.

“Basically, this report is the same old, same old,” says national reform activist Richard Wexler. “It’s a collection of failed ideas that will simply leave Indiana with the same lousy system, only bigger.” That’s not the kind of review that earns national recognition.

Nor was the article Monday in The Indianapolis Star reporting that Indiana is on the “radar screen” of Children’s Rights, an advocacy group that has sued 12 states in federal court to force changes in child welfare bureaucracies.

Children’s Rights understands that a 52-page report doesn’t bring reform. Such reports are legion and nothing ever gets better. We’ve had one blue ribbon commission after another and all said the same thing. Spend more money, hire more caseworkers, reduce turnover, train better. Did Indiana need a 15-month study commission to hear the same old, same old?

What the commission could have done, but failed to do, was identify successful models around the country and urge the resources to implement them. Instead, it proposed creating another bureaucracy: an Institute for the Prevention of Child Maltreatment funded to the tune of \$1 million a year. The institute’s purported purpose would be to coordinate research, disseminate “best practices information” and train professionals in new methodologies.

Talk about reinventing the wheel. There are already plenty of institutes around the country working furiously in this complicated area. Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform in Alexandria, Va., read the commission report with a fine-toothed comb and found only two of 32 recommendations that could be considered “best practices.” One is an “alternative response system,” already in place in two-thirds of the states and successfully piloted in Indianapolis, which summons community services to keep families together in low-risk situations. The other is mandatory appointment of a defense lawyer for families entitled to one, even if the families pleaded guilty to abuse charges.

Wexler sent reams of material to the commission as it studied the problem and is perplexed that the report doesn’t cite any of it or identify successful reform efforts around the country. Wexler lifts up New Jersey, Alabama and Allen County, Pa., as three of the best examples. Illinois, which experienced tragedies similar to the child deaths that prompted Indiana’s review, is another.

If the commission didn’t want to rely on Wexler, a somewhat controversial figure because of his steadfast promotion of family preservation over foster care, it could have found the same advice in more mainstream sources.

The January 2004 issue of “The Future of Children,” a policy review published by the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, highlighted successful reforms in Illinois, New York City and Santa Clara County, Calif.

As well-intended as the commission was, this is an instance when the best thing that could happen is to put the report on a shelf and let it gather dust.

“I think there’s a perception in some quarters that says, ‘Yeah, these recommendations may not be great but they’re a first step and then we can come back and do more.’ The problem is they’re a step backward,” Wexler says.

If Indiana simply adds more caseworkers to a system that doesn’t work, the system won’t work better.

There’s a saying in the business world: Know when to follow and when to lead. When it comes to child protection, it’s time for Indiana to follow.

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