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Report Shows Improvement in Child Care in New Jersey

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By [TINA KELLEY](#)

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The [New Jersey](#) Department of Children and Families has done focused and productive work toward overhauling the way it serves abused and neglected children, but significant challenges remain, a federal monitor who is overseeing the system's court-ordered reforms said yesterday.

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From January through June, the state met or exceeded its goals in reducing caseloads, training workers and introducing a new computer system, said the monitor, Judith Meltzer. The department is also on schedule to meet its goal of completing 1,400 adoptions by the end of the year, and it licensed almost 1,300 new foster homes in the year ending in June, Ms. Meltzer said in a report.

But the report cited continuing challenges, including the inexperience of new caseworkers and the magnitude of two plans that have yet to be put in place. One would employ nurses in each local child welfare office, and the other would change the way cases are managed in an effort to increase the involvement of families with children in the system.

I am encouraged by this report from the federal monitor, said Kevin M. Ryan, the department's commissioner. We have a long way to go, but we are on the right track.

The report will be presented on Thursday to Judge Stanley R. Chesler of Federal District Court in Newark, who is presiding over the settlement of a class-action lawsuit brought by Children's Rights, a Manhattan advocacy group, on behalf of foster children in New Jersey.

Susan Lambiase, the associate director of Children's Rights, said the state was fixing the agency as a first step toward actually making things better for children in their daily lives.

One should start to see, by the middle end of next year, on-the-ground improvements for kids, she said. The department is doing what they're supposed to be doing so far, but it's no time to rest on their laurels.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey, said her group was pleased with the improvements in staffing and adoptions, and by the reduction of the notorious backlog in the unit that investigates charges of abuse of children in the state's custody.

In reality, they're not simply fixing the system; in many ways they're rebuilding it, she said, adding that the association was preparing a report about how long children remained in state custody, how often siblings were kept together and how often children were abused while placed outside their home.

This is still a fragile, volatile system, and the urgency for reform remains, she said. This effort has to be supported, and continue to be supported, especially with regard to funding, when Governor Corzine has proposed budget cuts across all departments.

In a statement yesterday, Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) praised the considerable inroads the department has made.

My administration remains committed to its responsibility to ensure the protection of these young people, and I know that Commissioner Ryan and his team will continue to work effectively with the monitor to guarantee all goals are met, he said.

Looking ahead, Ms. Lambiase said of state officials, "They've done a lot of hard work, and they've done it well, but the hardest part is still in front of them, unfortunately."

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