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2ND ROUND REPORT

Federal monitor: DCF reforms on track, but much more must be done

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 10/23/07

BY MICHAEL RISPOLI
GANNETT STATE BUREAU

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TRENTON The state Department of Children and Families has been "focused and productive" in working to improve New Jersey's child welfare system during its second round of evaluation, said a federal monitor's report released Monday.

The 71-page report, which measures the department's progress under a July 2006 settlement reached between the state and Children Rights Inc., a New York child advocacy group, said the state "fulfilled and often exceeded the expectations" set by the agreement.

"Many promising strategies have been introduced, which will need to be consistently translated into new practices and accessible services on the ground for the department to succeed in its mission of fundamentally changing how it works with children and families in New Jersey," said the report, published by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, based in Washington.

Judith Meltzer, the federal monitor who reviewed the agency, said that although there have been many accomplishments, "The state's child welfare system today does not consistently function well.

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"Some people think the reform is moving too fast, and others think too slow, and both views have some truth to them," Meltzer said.

A February 2007 report yielded similar results an overall fulfillment of expectations with more remaining ahead. The current monitoring period, aimed at building a strong infrastructure, lasts until December 2008. The next phase will monitor the agency's progress, and Meltzer said she expects it to last until 2011 or 2012.

Kevin Ryan, commissioner of the state Department of Children and Families, said he was "encouraged" by the results.

"We have a long way to go, but we are on the right track," Ryan said.

Gov. Corzine said, "While we have turned a critical corner in meeting the requirements of the settlement agreement, we recognize that there is more to do."

One new strategy highlighted is SPIRIT, a statewide automated child welfare information system aimed at eliminating the fragmented case management across the state and centralizing abuse and neglect complaints. Meltzer said 5,000 Division of Youth and Family Services' staffers have already been trained on operating the system.

The report, however, conceded launching such a system is an "enormous undertaking," and said "constant attention will be required over the next several months" for the system to reach its potential.

Susan Lambiase, associate director of Children's Rights, praised the report and said it was "critical that DCF remain focused on the long-term goals of this settlement and step up its efforts to implement Phase II of the reforms."

Two other new components of the reforms include establishing a "child health unit" in all DYFS offices and introducing a new case-practice model.

The report deemed successes for the department in reducing caseloads for workers, increasing the ratio of supervisors to workers and training and maintaining workers. The department also is on pace to meet its goal of 1,400 adoptions by the end of 2007, with 634 adoptions finalized as of June 30.

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