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N.J. earns praise for advances at DYFS

Report cites progress, but says work remains

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A federal monitor says the court-mandated effort to revamp New Jersey's child welfare agency was "focused and productive" the first half of this year, but stresses "the system does not consistently function well" and the job is far from finished. In a report released yesterday, the monitor praises the state for bolstering the work force at the Division of Youth and Family Services.

In the first six months of 2007, the Department of Children and Families taught more than 5,000 people how to use a new computer tracking system designed to make sure children at risk don't fall through the cracks. It also exceeded goals to reduce how many cases social workers carry.

At the same time, monitor Judith Meltzer, deputy director of the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, fretted over the departure of two top managers who oversaw training and children's mental health services during this period. Workers also told her they still struggle to find drug treatment, housing and in-home counseling services that can keep troubled families together.

"The Department's work in this monitoring period has been focused and productive," according to the report. "Many promising strategies have been introduced. ... Despite the many accomplishments ... the state's child welfare system does not consistently function well and the urgency of the reforms remains. (The department) has a lot of hard work ahead." Meltzer said lawmakers should keep investing to sustain the reforms. The state has dedicated \$481 million since 2004, including \$55 million this year. Federal oversight continues until at least 2012.

Gov. Jon Corzine yesterday affirmed his support, saying, "My administration remains committed to its responsibility to ensure the protection of these young people." He suggested child welfare reform may be exempt from his recent edict that Cabinet members cut their budgets 20 percent next year.

"There are areas throughout the budget that cannot be reduced due to contractual, constitutional, or legal limitations," Corzine spokeswoman Lilo Stainton said. "We will take all these mandatory expenses into account, including with the Department of Children and Families."

The report noted that more than 80 percent of the 46 offices at DYFS reported workers supervise an average of 15 families and 10 foster children -- a goal of the reform. It praised the state for continuing to shore up an agency hobbled for years by turnover, spotty training and supervision, and a lack of technology.

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But Melzter noted it will take "a couple of years" for the nearly 400 caseworkers hired earlier this year to get "real experience in the field to do this job effectively."

The state agreed to reform four years ago when it settled a civil rights lawsuit on behalf of foster children with Children's Rights, a national advocacy group.

"The Department of Children and Families is now where it is supposed to be under this massive, court-ordered reform effort, and Commissioner Kevin Ryan and his team deserve a great deal of credit for the work they have done," said Susan Lambiase, associate director of Children's Rights. "Unfortunately, too many children in New Jersey have yet to feel those improvements in their daily lives, so it is critical (the state) remain focused on the long-term goals."

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director for the Association for Children of New Jersey, said the state is "making good progress" but the monitor's deadlines to improve foster children's health care seem "unambitious."

The monitor gave the state four years before 95 percent of foster kids must get dental exams twice a year. A requirement that all children with behavioral problems undergo a mental health assessment won't kick in for three years.

Meltzer said the deadlines are "ambitious and fair, based on my experience (on) what it takes to get resources up and running. ... The trick ... is to balance the sense of urgency with the absolute necessity to plan for the change so (the system) can handle it."

The report may be found at www.cssp.org.

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