

State expecting mixed marks on child welfare system fixes

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO Star-Ledger Staff January 27, 2005

With the first report on the court-mandated child welfare reforms due next month, Human Services Commissioner James Davy yesterday predicted the state would be praised for completing a record number of adoptions and reducing workers' caseloads, but criticized for problems running its new child abuse hotline and for failing to open a training academy.

Ticking off some of the past year's accomplishments -- such as hiring 500 new front-line workers to reduce crushing caseloads, and completing nearly 1,400 adoptions, 36 percent more than 2003 -- Davy concluded at a Trenton news conference: "Our hard work is starting to pay off with demonstrative results."

One prominent child advocacy organization sharply questioned his assessment.

The Association for Children of New Jersey issued a report questioning whether the child abuse hotline is dismissing calls that should be investigated. It said the number of new child abuse investigations dropped by 45 percent between July, when the hotline debuted, and December.

"This raises serious concerns over whether the state is screening out cases that should be investigated or assessed for child welfare concerns," the association's executive director, Cecilia Zalkind, said.

State officials blasted the association's report, claiming the 45 percent figure is erroneous and based on incomplete data.

"For some time, data entry has been running several weeks behind, so it takes time before the data is reliable and usable for the kind of comparison ACNJ made," Davy said. "In several weeks, when data input catches up, you will probably see little difference from prior months."

The state's progress in remaking its child welfare system is being monitored by the New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, five national experts appointed in 2003 under the settlement of a class-action suit filed on behalf of foster children. The panel is to issue its first progress report to U.S. District Court Judge Stanley R. Chesler in about four weeks, said Steve Cohen, the panel chairman.

Cohen yesterday declined to discuss what the panel will conclude, but indicated it will be a mixed review. He confirmed it will include the state's failure to open a training academy for child welfare workers, as required under the settlement, as well as the struggle to properly run and staff the hotline.

"We have spent a lot of time (at the hotline) and we have a follow-up monitoring visit next week," Cohen said. "They've hired additional staff and gotten new management, but we don't have a judgment about what that adds up to yet."

An official from Children's Rights Inc., the national advocacy group whose lawsuit prompted the court oversight of DYFS, agreed the state has made mixed progress.

"No training academy yet is a huge let down, as is having no training director," said Susan Lambiase, associate director of Children's Rights. "With all of those caseworkers and tons of new policies, getting staff properly trained with state-of-the-art ways of doing things is very important."

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2004 adoptions set a record for the state

Social workers' caseloads were also cut, foster care officials said.

By Kera Ritter Inquirer Staff Writer Jan. 27, 2005

The Division of Youth and Family Services has reached a record level of adoptions and decreased caseloads for caseworkers, two improvements that are part of overhauling the troubled New Jersey agency.

The state finalized 1,383 adoptions in 2004, up from 1,014 in 2003 and 1,266 in 2002.

Caseloads dropped to an average of 18 families per worker. Some caseworkers were carrying more than triple that number a year ago.

James M. Davy, commissioner of the State Department of Human Services, praised the adoption achievements at a media briefing yesterday to release the data.

"Giving children permanency in safe, loving homes is the ultimate goal of a child welfare agency," Davy said. "It's a good sign we're on the right track."

Davy attributed the increase in adoptions to improved relationships with foster parents and family courts, which make the final decision whether to terminate a parent's rights and release a child for adoption.

Nationwide, states have seen a dramatic increase in the number of adoptions since the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which set guidelines - including a timeline - for states to determine when a child could be placed for adoption.

Nationally, foster parents adopt about 61 percent of the children available for adoption. In New Jersey, that number jumps to 81 percent. DYFS officials expect more family members to adopt relatives' children in the next few years as caseworkers ask more relatives to become foster parents. The state saw a 35 percent increase in the number of relatives offering foster care in 2004, from 2,525 to 3,415.

The increase in the number of relatives providing foster care, 890, helped push DYFS past another goal in the reform plan: to recruit 1,000 new foster families by June 2005. Davy said the agency will try to sign up more than 1,000 families by the summer. The agency loses families each year after they adopt or decide they no longer want to be foster parents.

In addition to the strides made in adoption, the state hired more than 260 caseworkers last year, helping drop caseloads to an average of 18 families, or 33 children, a worker.

The agency's goal is to cap caseloads at 15 families, or eight for those workers who investigate claims of abuse or neglect.

But Davy cautioned that some caseworkers were still juggling burdensome caseloads.

"I don't want to mislead you," Davy said. "We still have some workers in the system with caseloads of 50 or 100. We're trying to get those cases down to a manageable level."

DYFS officials emphasized that, despite the progress, plenty of work remained.

Davy said that DYFS is still working to change the culture of the agency, to get workers to look at the whole picture of a child's well-being, ranging from safety to mental health issues.

The agency is working on problems with the statewide hotline that fields complaints about possible abuse or neglect, and about other child-related issues. The hotline went into effect in the summer and DYFS installed a new computer system in November. Data entry is backed up and the agency is in the process of hiring 18 additional workers.

The hotline receives about 19,000 calls a month.

Davy added that the agency has been slow to establish connections with community organizations.

"Remember, we're only six months into a five-year plan," said Kathi Way, deputy commissioner of the Office of Children's Services. "It takes persistence and diligence."

http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/Press-2005/DYFS_sets_new_adoption_record.htm

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Davy celebrates one year anniversary by visiting last DYFS office

Calls staff the solution, not the problem

NORTH BRUNSWICK— One year after taking office, Department of Human Services (DHS) Commissioner James M. Davy today visited the last of 32 local Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) offices and said the division's dedicated staff is the solution and not the problem with New Jersey's child welfare system.

"I have sat across from hundreds of DYFS staff and I can honestly say they are the key to reforming this system," said Commissioner Davy. "These are the people on the frontline – doing what I like to call 'noble purpose' work day in and day out."

Upon taking office last year, Commissioner Davy was faced with the formidable task of reforming the state's child welfare system. Through many late hours and countless weekends, central office staff rallied around his enthusiasm to draft a reform plan that has won praise from advocates around the country and more importantly the support and admiration of DYFS' 4,600 staff.

"How can we tell if our reform plan is working if we don't talk to staff?" explained Commissioner Davy. "For far too long, they worked without the proper supports - they deserve lower caseloads and more prevention services for families so they can do their jobs effectively."

Each week, Commissioner Davy communicates with the department's 21,000 staff by sending out a weekly email message. With each message, he informs staff of his travels and meetings so they can stay informed about what is going on. More importantly, the emails have provided a vehicle to share stories from the field on how the department and its staff have made a positive impact on someone's life.

"I encourage staff to tell me their success stories because what they do often goes unnoticed," said Commissioner Davy. "For many of our staff, it's not just a job but a calling."

What started with a simple visit last year to DYFS Atlantic City office, turned into a personal mission for Commissioner Davy to visit each of the 32 local DYFS offices around the state. In addition, he has also visited staff at the department's five psychiatric hospitals and seven developmental centers for people with disabilities. Commissioner Davy is also in the process of visiting several regional offices as well as community providers around the state.

"When I was with the governor, I never got the chance to leave my office," said Commissioner Davy. "Now as commissioner, leaving my office is the best part of my job because I get to meet people who truly make a difference in other's lives."

DHS Press Release, February 1, 2005

Report cites gaps in abuse probes

An audit found that a N.J. agency overlooked evidence. The state says it is trying to improve.

By Angela Delli Santi Associated Press Feb. 04, 2005

TRENTON - Even after a father acknowledged beating his foster child with a belt and had received repeated reprimands from state Human Services workers to stop harming the child, investigators still did not do enough to protect the child, according to a new report.

That was not the only lapse in judgment by investigators in the Department of Human Services unit charged with pursuing claims of abuse and neglect suffered by children in state custody. An audit by the Office of the Child Advocate released yesterday reveals continuing problems in the department's Institutional Abuse Investigations Unit (IAIU), which has been plagued with a history of poor performance.

In more than half the investigations detailed in the independent audit, the state failed to check its own child-abuse registry to determine whether complaints had been logged against adults in contact with children. In six cases out of 161 audited, people with a documented history of child abuse maintained contact with children, the audit shows.

"The IAIU is the main safety net for children who have been removed from their families," the state's child advocate, Kevin M. Ryan, said. "The audit reveals fundamental weaknesses within the IAIU. This is just not good enough for our children. No way."

The Child Advocate's Office audited 161 randomly selected files from the 1,613 cases that the Human Services unit accepted for investigation from Nov. 1, 2003, through May 31, 2004. The cases contain allegations of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect from children who had been removed from abusive households and had been living under state supervision in residential treatment, detention, shelters or foster care.

The audit found that the unit's decisions were "professionally reasonable" in three-quarters of the cases, a slight improvement over results of a similar audit conducted two years ago by a different agency.

And it found that the unit correctly verified 10 of the 161 allegations of abuse or neglect, including one instance in which a Human Services investigator doggedly pursued a case in which a school principal tried to cover for an aide who had slapped a student across the face.

In scores of cases, though, the audit found that workers bungled the investigations. The report, which did not identify the alleged victims or their caregivers, cites 11 instances in which auditors found evidence of abuse that the state investigators overlooked.

"It is important to remember that we are only a half-year into a five-year process to reform this system," Human Services Commissioner James Davy said in a statement yesterday. "These conditions didn't develop overnight, and it will take some time to correct them. But we will correct them."

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Faulty investigations still plague DYFS

Report says some with history of abuse are acting as foster parents

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

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The state's child welfare agency continues to place kids at risk with faulty investigations of abuse and neglect in schools, foster homes and institutions, a new report released yesterday by the Child Advocate's office concludes.

The report, which follows up on a 2003 review commissioned by a national child advocacy group, says workers at the Department of Human Services wrongly concluded nothing was amiss in about 22 percent of their investigations -- only a slight improvement.

It noted there was no improvement in an "alarming" trend of letting foster parents continue to raise children despite having a history of abuse. And the report said the backlog of incomplete child abuse investigations has skyrocketed.

"We expected to find much more improvement," said state Child Advocate Kevin M. Ryan said. "This is just not good enough for our children. No way."

The report centered on the Institutional Abuse Investigations Unit, the office within the Department of Human Services that probes reports of maltreatment outside a child's home. This includes about 13,000 kids under DYFS supervision who live in foster homes and state institutions, as well as reports of abuse or neglect of any kid in a day care center or school.

"The reason this is so important is (the unit) is the safety net for children removed from their homes and who really live in the care of the state," Ryan said. "They rely on the IAIU to keep them safe."

Ryan cited what he called some "unfathomable" decisions by the unit.

He said caseworkers warned but then exonerated a foster father who admitted he repeatedly beat the children with a belt. "The findings made no sense to us whatsoever," Ryan said.

He said he was mystified by an investigator's decision to conclude no abuse had occurred after a juvenile detention officer left a half-inch wound across a 14-year-old boy's throat.

The report found that the number of child abuse investigations that take longer than 60 days, the maximum allowed under state policy, skyrocketed more than 445 percent to 1,000 cases, from October 2003 to November 2004. Ryan said the backlog means kids are at risk for a longer time, and suggests serious short-staffing, poor supervision and inadequate training at the IAIU.

Human Services Commissioner James Davy acknowledged the report identifies "case practice issues in (the unit) that need to be improved." To that end, he said, 20 new investigators and case auditors will be on the job by next month, bringing the total numbers of employees to 52.

Davy said a team of veteran child welfare employees also will be dispatched to focus on reducing the backlog, which exploded after the news broke in October 2003 about four adopted boys found starving in a foster home in Collingswood. The publicity heightened awareness about child abuse, prompting many to report suspicious acts.

"These conditions didn't develop overnight, and it will take some time to correct them. But we will correct them," Davy said.

The Child Advocate's report is a follow-up to a critical study commissioned by Children's Rights Inc. in 2003 as part of a federal lawsuit alleging the state's child welfare system harmed the children it was supposed to protect. The lawsuit led to a settlement that produced a five-year reform plan of DYFS.

That 2003 report, which found the unit's decisions were "professionally unreasonable" 25 percent of the time, prompted vows from state officials to add staff, improve training and supervision and reduce caseloads. The latest report shows a 22 percent rate of "professionally unreasonable" decisions.

"Nothing has changed," said Susan Lambiase, Children's Rights associate director, who called the latest report "alarming and appalling."

Noting the state is required to submit a plan to a court-approved monitor next month describing how the unit will improve, Lambiase said the Child Advocate's report "calls into question how serious they are about reforms in the settlement agreement."

The report says one in four foster parents accused of maltreatment had been accused before, and nearly half of the complaints turned out to be true. The findings were the same in 2003.

State officials warned of this problem last month. In a Jan. 3 memo to all DYFS staff, Assistant Commissioner Edward E. Cotton ordered them to "stop placing children with relatives, family friends, or others who have been named as substantiated perpetrators in child abuse/neglect reports," according to a copy of Cotton's e-mailed memo obtained by The Star-Ledger.

"When we remove a child from a parent's home, we are, in effect, promising that child something better for them," Cotton's memo said. "I believe the vast majority of you would be shocked by some of the situations brought to my attention regarding the placement of children in homes with violent past perpetrators."

The report also found state investigators failed to run a child abuse background check on 53 percent of the 199 accused people accused of abuse and neglect. Skipping such a basic step in any investigation "is a great concern," the report said. The 2003 study found investigators ran a background check on 68 percent of the people accused of abuse.

Davy said this is now less of a problem since July 1, when the new child abuse hotline opened. Call screeners now run child abuse background checks every time they take a complaint, Davy said.

The Child Advocate's report did praise some investigators for aggressively ferreting out evidence to prove a child had been harmed.

"In one case, an investigator thwarted an apparent cover-up by a school principal regarding a physically abusive aide who had open-hand slapped a child," the report said. The aide was fired.

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