

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 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 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 service 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 Gloucester, Mercer and Essex Counties.

Paying \$738,000 over the next six months to a company called Social Work 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 allow 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 DY 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 give 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 need to 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 that's what needs 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 are 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 160 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 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 10,000 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 set up 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

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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 Ochsner 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 court to force the state to comply 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.

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 cases 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 children, 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 were filed. 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 vary 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 meet 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 help."

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 or 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 January 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 2005.

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," the panel said.

state's plan encompasses the entire state, including Atlantic, Bergen, Burlington, Cape May, Hunterdon, Morris, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren counties.

Most important, the federal judge who approved the plan at a brief hearing yesterday described it as a "down payment" on the future 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 Resler 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 -

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 more experienced caseworkers, supervisors and managers as she began a training session in Newark last week, 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 under the new formula. She anticipated resistance from the more experienced caseworkers, supervisors and managers as she began a training session in Newark last week, probably thinking, why is someone telling me what to think? Why is someone implying I don't know how to assess families?"

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

Bob Danzig bounced through five foster homes after being abandoned by his alcoholic parents before his file landed on the desk of 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 Danzig as 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 up. 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 complete 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 complimentary 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, I find 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 that will make families safer or foster care an option of last resort. None will be emulated by other states.

