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OUR VIEW

## State must act on foster-care system

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Our editorial board commented in 2004 that it shouldn't take a court order to fix Washington's broken foster-care system. But it did — as a settlement that year laid out dozens of desperately needed changes to the system.

Now advocates and lawyers say the state has not lived up to the promises made in the settlement and state officials agree. The lawyers are planning another court challenge.

We are disturbed the state continues to run such an expensive system so poorly, at the cost of the children in our society who need the most love and attention.

The lawyers who plan to file a motion against the state for not living up to its promises say the state has:

Completed timely health and education screenings in only 30 percent of cases, instead of the 90 percent required in the settlement.

Not cut the number of times new foster kids are transferred from one home to another.

Failed to decrease caseloads for caseworkers, and taken too long to raise the number of foster kids who see a caseworker once a month.

Some legislators say the settlement was too complex, and that policy makers have found it hard to decide which parts to do first. The secretary of the state Department of Social and Health Services told the Associated Press that a court decision that sets priorities would be helpful.

We find the attitude of inviting a lawsuit so someone else can help set priorities hard to swallow. We expected legislators and DSHS to live up to the settlement they signed three years ago. That it hasn't been done, and that officials are now hoping a judge will do it for them, shows a startling lack of leadership in Olympia on this issue.

Washington's foster-care system was in dire shape before the settlement. An auditor's report pointed out that caseworkers were inconsistent in responding to allegations of child mistreatment and providing services to prevent child abuse and that the system doesn't do an adequate job of providing foster kids permanent, stable homes or mentalhealth treatment.

Bellingham attorney Tim Farris filed the original suit in April 1998 on behalf of 13 foster children, alleging the state had not fulfilled its obligation to provide the children with stable homes. One of the children had lived in 43 homes.

Now, a decade after the suit was originally filed, the system still is not fixed. That is unacceptable. We call on Gov. Chris Gregoire, state legislators and DSHS officials to meet the requirements of the 2004 settlement and create a system that makes the welfare of foster kids a top priority.