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OLYMPIA -- Today lawyers for foster children in the Braam versus Washington case have filed a motion in Whatcom County Superior Court for enforcement of some provisions of the settlement agreement reached just over three and a half years ago in their foster care class suit lawsuit.

"We are disappointed with this back-to-court strategy, which ignores the steady progress we are making to keep foster children safe from abuse and neglect," said Cheryl Stephani, assistant secretary for Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children's Administration (CA). "We have an obligation to protect all vulnerable children who come to the attention of child protective services, not just those who are in foster care."

The Braam settlement agreement focuses only on the 10,000 children in the foster care system or other out-of-home placements at any given time, but workers are responsible for thousands more children in this state. In 2007, Child Protective Services received almost 76,000 referrals of abuse or neglect which spurred investigations involving more than 42,000 children.

This is why the governor requested and the Legislature approved significant investment to improve CA's response time for reports of abuse and neglect. Under a mandate by Governor Chris Gregoire about 95 percent of child-abuse and neglect complaints are now addressed within 24 hours if the child is in imminent danger, and 72 hours in non-emergency cases. Faster response times have resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of repeat child abuse cases.

In addition, more than 400 positions for CA have been appropriated over the last four years. The last 95 workers likely will be hired by the end of May, if the governor's request is approved by the Legislature. The additional caseworkers also have helped lower the individual caseload, allowing social workers to provide better service. Their caseload has gone from 26 clients per social worker to 21.

"We agree with the Braam Plaintiffs that monthly visits of children by social workers is very important," said Stephani. "Although we have not yet met the target, we are working on a plan that establishes monthly visits for all the children in out-of-home placements by September of this year."

Stephani emphasizes that children are being seen by workers. Nearly 80 percent of children under state supervision but living with their parents are receiving monthly visits from their social worker. This is up from 56.4 percent in September 2006. Since April of 2007, monthly visits are required for children under six, placed in unlicensed relative care. About 73 percent of those children are visited monthly. Before April of 2007, 62 percent were visited.

CA's Child Health and Education Tracking (CHET) screenings are improving. Washington is one of the few states in the nation to do such intensive up-front assessments, which comprise of the worker gathering records and information to develop individualized service plans to meet a child's medical needs and improve school performance.

While 47 percent of eligible children have been screened within 30 days of placement, many more have been screened within 90 days. For fiscal year 2007:

- 66 percent were screened within 45 days of placement.
- 73 percent within 60 days of placement.
- 79 percent within 90 days of placement.

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