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Foster-care system still needs fixing

Once again the state's foster care system has come under the public's spotlight. This time, thank goodness, it's not a case of the death of a child or an outrageous case of abuse or neglect. This time, it's a new survey of foster parents that shows mixed success in improving the system. A separate lawsuit by child advocates is taking the state back to court for failure to live up to court-ordered improvements in the foster care system.

In recent months, there has been a lot of attention on the care of the state's most vulnerable children, and a lot of money has been thrown at the problem. But for all of that attention and all that money, little progress has been logged.

That prompts this question: When are Gov. Chris Gregoire and the state Legislature going to make wholesale changes in the foster care system? How many more kids have to die or suffer at the hands of their parents or caregivers before substantive changes are made?

Sen. Val Stevens' attempt to create a separate state agency for the Department of Children's Administration is looking better all the time because it would bring direct accountability for management of the foster care system.

Braam lawsuit

As part of the state's landmark settlement known as the Braam lawsuit in which 13 foster children sued the state for bouncing them around foster homes without adequate services, the state Department of Social and Health Services agreed to make a number of improvements. The settlement called for periodic assessments of the state's progress.

A recent survey of foster parents showed a serious lack of progress in key areas.

For example, Gregoire's administration once pledged that by October 2005 most foster kids would get monthly visits from state caseworkers — a key to preventing abuse.

Yet the survey found that fewer than 40 percent of foster kids are getting those monthly checkups, seen as crucial in preventing abuse. Even more troubling, critics of the state said that 17 percent of caregivers reported their foster kids hadn't been seen even once in all of 2006.

That's unacceptable.

Casey Trupin of Columbia Legal Services, one of the Braam plaintiffs' lawyers, said government leaders "simply cannot continue to break the promise they made to improve the lives of children in foster care." He also noted that those doing survey could not find 986 of the foster parents they tried to call using telephone numbers provided by DSHS. That is about one sixth of the caregivers.

Trupin is right to be concerned about the safety of children in foster care.

State's excuse

Once again the state's excuse is "give us more time."

Cheryl Stephani, head of children's administration, notes that the Legislature recently spent about \$4.6 million to increase the number of caseworkers. "The resources are coming. It's just not all here yet," said Stephani. "You can't snap your fingers and make it happen, as much as we'd all like that."

How many more years do they need, and how many more lives will be put in jeopardy in that period? Our kids deserve better.

The simple truth is, the courts could take administration of the foster care program away from DSHS officials. The Braam lawyers are building their case saying the state has fallen short by:

- **Completing** timely health and education screenings in only 30 percent of cases, instead of the 90 percent required in the settlement.
- **Failing to cut the number** of times new foster kids are transferred from one home to another.
- **Failing** to decrease caseloads for foster caseworkers, and taking too long to raise the number of foster kids who see a caseworker once a month.

If DSHS can't get the foster care system back on track, maybe the courts can.