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**Despite Some Gains, Most Foster Care Benchmarks Still Unmet:**  
Multiple Placements Decrease, Little or No Improvement on Most Other Indicators

Today, the Washington State Department of Social And Health Services released the second round of comprehensive statistical foster care data showing its performance on annual benchmarks in the Braam Implementation Plan. The benchmarks were set by the Braam Panel, which consists of five national child welfare experts, after working closely with the Department, Plaintiffs' attorneys, and stakeholders.

Although the Department's data indicates it has failed to meet the vast majority of the benchmarks it was required to reach by June 30, 2007, the Department did show improvements in a few key Braam areas, including reducing the number of placements experienced by children in care over the last two years. The Department also has increased foster home retention—the proportion of licensed foster homes still active after their first year of caring for a child. Unfortunately, this improvement has been offset by the increase in the number of children coming into foster care, which is far outpacing the gains in foster home retention or recruitment. This has resulted in a consistent decline in the average number of placement options available for each child. “Reducing multiple placements is a central goal of this effort,” noted Casey Trupin, staff attorney at Columbia Legal Services, one of the agencies that represent the Plaintiff children. “The gains should be applauded, but the data released today indicates a crisis that may be deepening. Movement in other key areas is critical to ensure that the gains are sustained and that reduced placement changes do not come at the expense of safety and long-term well-being.”

Attorneys for Plaintiffs note other key data which shows critical shortages in services to and support of foster children—most notably, in the area of monthly visits to foster children. It is universally accepted that regular visits to foster children are essential to a child's safety and placement stability. However, these important visits are not being required, accomplished, or even measured by the Department for most children in care. Likewise, initial timely screening of children's health and education needs is still being done in less than half of the cases, despite a longstanding law and federal standards calling for this practice. The Braam benchmarks mirror the priorities in a significant number of laws passed by the Legislature over the past decade.

Other key areas where the Department continues to fail include a decrease in the number of siblings being placed together, with a majority of siblings not receiving twice-monthly visits with



other siblings as required by Braam. The report also shows a continuing struggle to reduce the incidence of foster kids running away, but a decrease in the average number of days children were on the run. Other areas where the Department appears to be making gains include an elimination of the following practices: placing children in mental health facilities that are not designed to care for children, placing children overnight in DSHS offices or in hotels unsupervised by Department staff.

“We’re pleased that there is some positive news in the area of placement stability,” commented Bryn Martyna, attorney with the National Center for Youth Law in Oakland, California. “However, our excitement has been tempered by the failure to make progress and continued problems in so many other important areas that affect the health, safety, and well-being of children in foster care.”

Plaintiffs’ attorneys have indicated that the release of the benchmark data will not prevent court intervention, but will affect the scope of Plaintiffs’ request. “We’re hopeful that the Department, the Governor, and the Legislature will take immediate action to address these ongoing concerns,” noted Trupin. “However, we cannot take the chance that this will not happen, and we believe court intervention continues to be necessary to protect children in care.” The Plaintiffs’ return to court is scheduled to take place in the next month and will focus on the most egregious failures by the Department. “Our return to court is intended to ensure that promises made are promises kept. We have no intention of derailing the positive work being done by the Panel or the Department,” stated Trupin.

The Plaintiffs’ concerns about inadequate services and a lack of resources were underscored by the Department’s workload study, released last week, which noted that significant new resources were needed to address the finding that “current staff efforts are falling short of [Childrens’ Administration] expectations of basic practice.”

*The Braam Panel was convened several years ago as a result of the settlement in the Braam vs. State of Washington - a lawsuit brought on behalf of thousands of foster children in the state of Washington who had been bounced from home to home by the foster care system. In February of 2006 the Panel released its Implementation Plan, which set out a definitive plan for reform over the next five years. The plan requires changes in six key areas that affect children’s lives in the foster care system. For more information, see [www.braamkids.org](http://www.braamkids.org).*

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