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Foster Care: Lagging up the hill

Last updated September 20, 2007 4:36 p.m. PT

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It is hard to make quick time going uphill on K-2, Everest or the other Himalayan peaks. The state Department of Social and Health Services seems to be facing a similar climb in trying to carry its foster care system to a higher level.

With progress lagging, the state and plaintiffs in a foster care lawsuit are headed back to court. We think that represents an opportunity to help focus the state on top priorities in a still-struggling foster care system and spur politicians to stronger support for the improvements.

By any measure, the state has a lot left to do, despite what appear to be rather impressive changes. In 2004, when the state finally settled the Braam foster care lawsuit (named after a young plaintiff), the state committed itself to sweeping improvements of a very underperforming system. As state Rep. Ruth Kagi noted, the settlement created 54 benchmarks. And the state is undertaking other improvements as well.

The plaintiffs want a new court order to make the state live up to its promises. An oversight panel has had to push for improved compliance plans. The court may want to say more.

Kagi makes a good point for the court to consider: The state might benefit from clear guidance on where to focus its efforts. Priorities make sense, as long as they don't become an excuse for the state to ease up. Foster care in the state was so bad for so long that a complete overhaul must remain the urgent goal.

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