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Foster care report finds mixed results for state

Benchmarks were established in 2004 lawsuit

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P-I REPORTER

The state received mixed grades Wednesday in an annual performance report on foster care. It reduced the percentage of children placed in multiple foster homes but fell short on monthly visits social workers make.

The report also showed that the Department of Social and Health Services has increased retention of foster care providers, even as the number children coming into foster care has risen.

In the 2007 fiscal year, the state placed 10,268 children in foster care, a 16 percent increase from 2004. The latest figures also show that 26.5 percent of foster children were placed in two or more homes in 2007, down from nearly 30 percent in 2005.

"We made gains even though we had increases in caseloads. That means we're stretching the workload," said Cheryl Stephani, assistant secretary of Children's Administration in DSHS. "That how hard the staff worked."

The report measures the state's performance compared with benchmarks it promised to meet in settling a class-action lawsuit in 2004. The benchmarks were set by the Braam Oversight Panel after thousands of foster children were repeatedly shuttled between foster homes without adequate services.

Stephani said the report needed to be viewed in a context beyond the benchmarks. Among improvements not covered by the report were an increase in out-of-home placements of children with relatives and a decline in repeated abuse and neglect cases.

A lawyer representing foster children in Washington agreed, to a point.

While the Braam benchmarks do not cover all areas of the state's responsibility, "it's the most comprehensive review of what they need to be doing in out-of-home care," said Casey Trupin of Columbia Legal Services. "To do some things well doesn't make up for doing badly on other things they agreed to do under the settlement agreement."

For several categories, the report relied on a comprehensive survey of 1,234 foster parents and relative caregivers that was released in September.

Among other findings, that survey indicated that 38 percent of foster children received monthly visits from caseworkers by the end of last year. Under the Braam agreement, 70 percent were to receive monthly visits by June 30, 2006.

The state is making visits at least every 90 days in about 90 percent of out-of-home placements, Stephani said.

Those visits are structured and cover the child's education, health, sibling relationships and other issues.

Beyond that, caseworkers might have unscheduled encounters with one foster child while visiting another foster child at school, for instance.

Counting those serendipitous "eyes-on-the-child" encounters, caseworkers documented seeing 60 percent of foster children as recently as last month, Stephani said.

DSHS officials seemed to view that measurement as more valid than the earlier survey, with a spokeswoman saying the survey was based on foster parent recollections and "did not rely on case files or a database."

Trupin defended the survey, calling it more reliable than "this data about 'eyes on the child' that is absolutely misleading -- it doesn't tell you whether a legitimate visit has taken place."

The state has the capacity to track the rate of monthly visits by caseworkers but refuses to do so, presumably to avoid liability, he said.

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