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## **Foster-care system meets some goals, fails others; attorneys to challenge state in court**

**By Maureen O'Hagan**

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

In one of the most comprehensive surveys of its kind, Washington foster parents gave the state Children's Administration passing grades in a variety of performance measures. But in several key areas, the agency is falling far short of court-mandated goals and is in jeopardy of being hauled back in front of a judge.

The survey, released today, was conducted as part of the 2004 settlement of a class-action lawsuit by foster children who had been bounced from home to home, who had been placed in inappropriate settings, and who hadn't gotten required services. The settlement created a series of benchmarks for the Children's Administration to meet over seven years.

But this morning, the plaintiffs announced that in November they plan to ask a judge to order the agency into compliance. That would renew litigation in the case and reopens the possibility that a judge could hold state officials in contempt for failing to live up to the agreement, or that a judge could yank control of the foster-care system from DSHS.

"We are going back to court because children are still being harmed while in the state's care," Tim Farris, an attorney for the children, said in a statement.

Cheryl Stephani, assistant secretary of the Children's Administration, said contrary to the plaintiff's viewpoint, the foster parents' responses show the state is meeting the settlement benchmarks in five out of eight areas covered by the survey.

"The survey is more than just numbers on a scale — it represents the opinions and input of those who take care of our most important assets — Washington children," Stephani said in a statement.

On the positive side, more than 86 percent of caregivers said they received adequate training; and nearly 75 percent said they received adequate support and information from the state, and that any medically fragile children in their care received appropriate medical assistance.

Among the more alarming findings is that foster parents reported that over 60 percent of the children in their care did not receive the required monthly face-to-face visit from a caseworker. In fact, 17 percent of foster children didn't receive a single visit in 2006, according to the survey respondents.

In addition, the surveyed caregivers said that protective measures were met for less than 45 percent of

sexually aggressive or physically assaultive children. Only about half of foster children get more than two monthly visits with siblings.

Although it wasn't related to any of the benchmarks, the survey takers noted that of 3,800 phone numbers for foster parents and relative caregivers included in the random sample, nearly 1,000 were disconnected.

However, the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University, which conducted the survey, said it was impressed by the number of caregivers who agreed to participate in the survey, which took more than 30 minutes to complete, on average. The number of respondents — more than 1,200 — made the data very reliable, the researchers said.

"We now have an independent survey that validates a positive and strong partnership we have with foster parents and relative caregivers," Stephani said. "The results also tell us where we can improve."

*Seattle Times staff reporter Jonathan Martin contributed to this story.*

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