

Welfare Watch - January 09, 2009 - Permanency is Immediate Focus

Like the long balloons that are twisted and turned to make balloon toys for children, DHR is facing the squeezing of its balloons with its limited resources. These are resources that will become even more limited if the budget recommendations for cuts to the Department continue to be implemented. The latest has to do with permanency.

In November, the Plaintiffs in the Kenny A. consent agreement reported that they had released their [Period V Monitoring Report](#) which covered the State's performance during the first half of 2008. Their report painted a mixed picture of progress. Visitation compliance by caseworkers and decreasing maltreatment was the good news. This good news is a result of the investments that DHR has put in additional resources for caseworkers and their training. Repeated maltreatment while children were in care also has continued to come down.

The bad news of this report is that permanency for foster children continues to be a problem. The Plaintiffs believe that it is taking much too long for children either to be reunited with their families or find permanent adoptive homes for these children.

DHR has taken immediate steps to address this bad news. They are partnering with the Casey Family Programs to strengthen DFCS' ability to find permanent homes for the most difficult of these long term foster care cases. Some of these cases have been on DFCS' caseloads pre-Kenny A Consent Decree. We know that the longer a child is in foster care, the harder that it is to find a permanent home for that child. The older the child, the more difficult it is to find permanent homes.

Mark Washington, DFCS' new Assistant Commissioner, was brought in last month to address some of these problems. He has a strong background in home and community based programs. He also has a strong relationship with Casey and a strong history of working with the community. He will focus with them on the problems of permanency within DFCS. "Different solutions work for different children," Washington said. "But our goal is a lifelong connection for every child. We look forward to working with private providers to help make that connection."

New Release by DFCS.

New effort begins to find permanent homes for more foster kids

December 17, 2008

ATLANTA (GA) – As part of an effort to help Georgia's foster children make a "lifelong connection," the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Family and Children Services (DHR DFCS) is partnering with a nationally-renowned private foundation that specializes in helping child welfare agencies find permanent homes for more children.

Seattle, Washington-based Casey Family Programs is investing several million dollars over the next few years to strengthen DFCS' ability to find permanent homes for some of its most difficult child welfare cases. Children who are older, have developmental disabilities or behavioral illnesses, or who belong to large sibling groups often face serious obstacles when trying to find permanent homes. Casey has a track record for helping states develop best practices that overcome these barriers.

"Permanency is something we've always done," said Mark A. Washington, DHR assistant commissioner who oversees DFCS. "Since 2004, we've helped more children find a permanent, loving home. But the reason some of these youth are still not home is that there are major road blocks for them. Now we're

building new bridges. Working with Casey, we've developed an attack plan that targets each case and finds a solution for permanency."

DHR began its partnership with Casey in spring 2008 to identify strategies for placing more foster children in permanent homes. Later, DHR and Casey escalated their work to help DHR settle a legal dispute on December 11 with Children's Rights Inc. While that agreement begins with foster children in Fulton and DeKalb counties, DHR expects to apply the "permanency" strategies it was already developing with Casey throughout Georgia. Those strategies emphasize several options for foster children, including reunifying them with their existing families, placing them with relatives or legal guardians, or finding them adoptive homes.

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DHR is working with Casey Family Programs to conduct case reviews, called "Permanency Roundtables," to determine the specific barriers a particular child faces to a permanent home solution. The Permanency Roundtable is a Casey best practice that unites child welfare case workers with other stakeholders to create a comprehensive strategy on a case-by-case basis. In addition, Casey is helping DFCS hire "master practitioners" – highly skilled workers whose sole focus is examining permanency strategies for youth – and create reporting measures to track efforts. DHR is also establishing a Permanency Unit that coordinates efforts to find more permanent solutions for more children.

DHR's latest efforts build on years of work to transform Georgia's child welfare system. Since 2004, DHR has added new case workers and reduced the number of Georgia children in foster care by 21 percent. Each year, more children leave foster care than enter it. And children are spending less time in foster care than before (in 2003, the average stay in foster care was 22 months before permanency. Today, the average stay is 19.9 months). Five years ago, a child seeking adoption waited 44 months on average to find a new home. Today, the average wait is about 38 months.