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## DCF: Are the problems solved?

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Domenia Dickey was 10 years old and in fifth grade when the state Department of Children and Families removed her and her twin brother from the care of their mother.

For the next eight years, she lived in four different foster homes and in a group facility with 100 other children. She turned 18 last year, without ever having found a long-term family home.



**Domenia Dickey: Despite the odds, she's now attending college (Jacqueline Rabe)**

"I am not a bad kid. The worst thing I have been grounded for is being on the phone when I wasn't supposed to be," says Dickey, who now attends Housatonic Community College. "After a while you just get tired of the process and hoping someone will step up and want you."

It's stories like hers that DCF will have to contend with starting today, when it begins arguing in U.S. District Court in Hartford for an end to the court supervision under which it has operated for nearly 20 years.

DCF argues that it has made significant improvements over the years of court supervision and no longer needs to be monitored.

"Our system in no way reflects the conditions that existed 20 years ago and will not move backward," DCF Commissioner Susan Hamilton said in a statement.

"Because of the widespread and sweeping reforms in Connecticut's child welfare system since the original complaint there are no ongoing violations of federal law," DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt said.

But children's advocates are opposing the agency's request, saying that while DCF may have improved, it still fails too many children too often.

The latest quarterly report by the court-appointed monitor overseeing DCF cites both the state's continued lack of foster homes and the lack of medical and mental health treatment for too many of the 4,000 children in DCF care. Overall, DCF adequately met the needs of children in just over half the cases reviewed, the report said--a decline from more than two-thirds in the previous reporting period.

"Huge parts of the mandate are still not being met," said Martha Stone, one of the lawyers behind the 1989 "Juan F" lawsuit that led to court oversight of DCF.

Stone and other advocates argue, among other things, that even after two decades of court monitoring, DCF still fails too often to find stable homes for the children in its care.

Dickey was among 89 children who turned 18 last year and "aged out" of DCF custody without ever being adopted or permanently placed with a family. Advocates say that's because the agency fails to give foster parents the support needed to keep them in the system.

"DCF doesn't return phone calls. Calls for help are too often ignored," said Jeanne Milstein, the state's child advocate. "They are also not given accurate information about the child they are fostering so they are too often blindsided by the child's needs."

Stone agreed. "We recruit with the left hand while throwing them out with the right hand," she said.

One consequence of the shortage of foster homes is that more children are placed in group living facilities. The court monitor reported that nearly 1,000 children were in congregate homes in August, 447 of them on a long term basis. Dickey spent a year in such a facility in Hamden.

"The workers that are there 9 to 5 become your parents," Dickey said. "It's sad."

Two years ago, DCF agreed to add 850 foster family homes by April of this year to reduce the state's dependence on these congregate homes. So far, DCF has achieved less than half of that goal, the court monitor reported last week in its quarterly report.

DCF spokesman Kleeblatt points to more optimistic figures: The number of foster homes tripled over the past 20 years to 3,347 homes in November 2009.

Agency critics aren't impressed.

"As long as you have a foster care gridlock, it will continue to affect the whole system," Stone said.

### **Keeping families together?**

Two years ago, DCF took custody of Bob Lee's grandchildren from their parents-his son and the son's girlfriend.

"And that's where our nightmare began," Lee says.

Since then, Lee has seen his grandchildren just three times, despite his efforts to get custody.

"We are a home. We are family. We want them and are going crazy trying to get them back," he said, adding that a recent court-ordered physiological exam even recommended reunifications begin between the children and their grandparents.

But Lee said the caseworker's manager interprets reunification as monthly supervised visits, while moving forward with adoption proceedings for their current foster parents.

One of the court mandates from "Juan F" is that DCF search for relatives to adopt or foster the children when taken from their homes. That doesn't necessarily mean the relatives will be given custody, however. The court monitor's most recent report states that nine out of 10 times a search was completed, satisfying the requirement.

"The expectation is our workers will search for relatives when a case commences," Kleeblatt said. "The preference is to find suitable family members, but that's not always possible."

In Lee's case, he said DCF knows he would jump at the opportunity to take his grandchildren, but said he does not meet the requirement that the children have separate bedrooms.

"It's ridiculous," he said. "There is no flexibility. It just feels like we don't have any options."

Next month, Lee said his son is likely to lose all his parental rights in court, which opens the door for his grandchildren to be permanently adopted by their foster parents.

"I never thought it would get to this point," he said. "I feel like I have no rights."

Stone said Connecticut has one of the lowest rates in the country for placing children taken from their homes with biological relatives, saying there may be too many obstacles good family members have to overcome.

"Sometimes those hoops they have to jump through are good, sometimes they're bad," she said. "It's all about how it's implemented by the social workers. ... I do think the department does not do enough for reunification."

Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, said Connecticut's system is suffering because there are too many stories similar to Lee's.

"Relatives are safer and a better place for these children to live," he said.

When DCF investigates a referral, it winds up taking children away from their families at a much higher rate than the national average, Wexler says in his most recent report. "This is a huge mistake. Their families are their best resources."

But Kleeblatt says overall, the state has reduced the number of children in DCF care by 31 percent over the last six years - in December 2003 there were 5,882 children in care compared to 4,024 in December 2009.

"The rate of Connecticut children entering care per thousand is 3 compared to a national average of 4.1 - giving Connecticut one of the lowest rates in the nation," he said.

Human Services

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