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## **DCF says it has plan to reduce use of group facilities for children**

Jacqueline Rabe, August 5, 2011

The Department of Children and Families on Friday announced plans to reduce the number of children sent to live in large group facilities by up to 15 percent, saying congregate care "should be used sparingly and for the shortest possible amount of time."

"We are talking about children being cared for by a rotating shift of workers," said Josh Howroyd, a spokesman for the department. "The person who puts a child to bed should be the same person serving them breakfast."

On any given day, the department has about 1,400 children living in a group settings--about one out of every four children in foster care and one of the highest rates in the country. Reducing placement in congregate care is one of the goals in the 1991 consent decree that came out of a federal class-action lawsuit filed by children's advocates.

The plan released Friday by DCF says the agency will take steps over the next five months to significantly reduce, if not completely eliminate, the practice of placing about 220 of the state's youngest abused and neglected children in group homes.

"We will not place children ages six and younger in congregate care, except under a very few exceptions that I will authorize personally," DCF Commissioner Joette Katz wrote in the report. "Children ages 12 and younger are to be served in family settings and returned from congregate care to family settings."

"This is long overdue," said Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy. "This is a great first step to getting children living in more appropriate settings."

But some of the private providers who have already witnessed decreased support from the state in recent years are not as enthusiastic.

"A lot of programs have closed because the system is moving out of using congregate care. It's horrible because these programs are great and necessary for many children," said Bill Martin, the associate executive director of the Waterford Day School that houses about 70 children in DCF custody and provides services for hundreds more during the day at its 350-acre campus.

Terry Edelstein, president of the Community Providers Association, said she is concerned about how this plan will impact the care of children.

"What we have now is a state that is not meeting the needs of its children. Providing better care doesn't mean decimating one system," she said. "We are looking for an opportunity to be included in the shift instead of them just saying, 'Thank you, your services are no longer needed.' Unfortunately, I think there is an element of that going on."

Katz, who identified reducing the use of congregate care as a priority when she took the job earlier this year, has actually already closed three congregate care programs, including one run by Waterford Day School.

"It's unfortunate," Martin said. "I don't see our programs as congregate care. I see them as getting abused or neglected children the professional services they need before they are thrown into a stranger's home who is not trained to deal with that baggage."

The closing of three congregate care programs will save the agency about \$1.8 million this year, and another \$1 million could be cut from group homes if the state employee unions don't approve the concessions package currently being voted on. Savings from the reduction in congregate care will be used to better fund foster and community-based services, the report says.

It costs the state 10 times more to keep children in group homes than to reimburse foster families, and notes that states such as New York and Maine have saved millions a year by reducing use of congregate care.

"Increasing numbers of youngsters will be served more appropriately and less expensively in their own families, in other family and kinship settings, and in their own communities," it says.

While applauding the plan, Stone said the key will be how the department follows through.

"The philosophy is great," she said. "Now we just need to see how over the next several months it gets implemented."

Howroyd agrees.

"We are addressing this on multiple fronts," he said, noting significantly increasing the number of foster families and keeping more children with their families is essential. "We are certainly holding ourselves accountable."

This reduction will not alone get the department out from the years of federal oversight that resulted from the class-action suit, but Howroyd said it will get the state closer to meeting many more of the 22 requirements.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which is advising DCF on this plan, released a report last year explaining how congregate care reductions impacted New York, Maine and other states.

"A congregate care initiative can turn the tide, providing the momentum that is necessary for true transformation," it said.