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First report card on DCF under Katz: Potential, but little progress

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The new leader of the agency responsible for the care of abused and neglected children in Connecticut has received her first report card, and it says that while the problems that have kept the troubled agency under federal court supervision for 20 years persist, there is reason to believe things may change.

"It is acknowledged that the new [Department of Children and Families] Administration has aggressively moved forward on a number of fronts," court-appointed monitor Raymond Mancuso wrote in his first quarterly report since Commissioner Joette Katz took over. "There is a genuine opportunity to complete the work envisioned many years ago to transform Connecticut's Child Welfare System."

But Martha Stone, one of the attorneys for the plaintiffs in the class-action "Juan F" lawsuit that led to the court supervision, said she's heard such optimism before. Eight commissioners before Katz have failed to reform the department enough to end court oversight.

"It's time for results," Stone said. "We support her philosophies, but we knew that in January. You have to ask, 'What have you seen change in February, or in March, in April, in May?' It's time for implementation."

"Her philosophy has not yet trickled down to the care of children," Stone said "You still have little babies in [congregate care] facilities. You still have workers not returning calls in 48 hours. There is still so much that needs to change now--today."

After stepping down from the Connecticut Supreme Court to take charge of DCF in January, Katz was given broad authority by the state legislature to reform the agency, which has 4,300 children in its custody and thousands more under supervision to ensure they are not being abused or neglected.

Mancuso's reports will ultimately determine if the state has met the 22 standards set by the court-approved consent decree. In the report card released Wednesday, Mancuso found DCF met just 16 of the 22 outcome measures. But he is not casting the blame on Katz for these shortcomings, at least not yet.

"These issues were not unexpected as they had been previously identified by prior Court Monitor Quarterly Reports," he wrote in his opening remarks.

Mancuso continued that Katz's initiatives might be what's needed to finally provide children quality care.

"A number of initiatives... hold considerable promise for addressing many, if not all, of areas of concern," Mancuso wrote.

Ira Lustbader of Children's Rights, one of the lawyers representing plaintiffs in the "Juan F" lawsuit, said while he is "thrilled" of the policy changes that have been made, he is not yet ready to celebrate.

"Quarter after quarter after quarter the same issues are there. There is no wonderment of what the issues are. The key is seeing traction and real progress," he said. "This is the most optimistic we have ever been about the leadership at DCF."

Jeanne Milstein, the state's child advocate, said she is trying to remain optimistic, but if she doesn't see real progress in the next quarterly report card then she will begin to worry.

"It is my expectation that we will see progress in the next report. It's not an option, we have to," she said.

Katz has said she believes it will take her one year for her to reform the agency enough to rid it of federal court supervision. In her statement at the end of her first report card, she said her changes are now taking shape.

"I can fairly comment that enormous changes have occurred and significant initiatives are underway," she wrote. "Although there is still a great distance to reach our ultimate goals, with families and communities, we expect great strides toward advancing the holistic well-being of children."

Human Services

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