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Alternate Headline:

DCF commissioner appointment a 'high priority' for Malloy transition team

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For two decades, the state has failed to meet the mandates of a federal court order to improve the way it cares for children in its custody, making Gov.-elect Dan Malloy's choice to head the Department of Children and Families a closely-watched decision.

"He has to get this right," said Martha Stone, one of the lawyers behind the class-action lawsuit that led to federal oversight of DCF. "Enough is enough. Let's finally fix this."

"This appointment is a very high-priority," said Malloy's chief of staff and transition team leader, Timothy F. Bannon. "Now that the focus is no longer on filling the [budget director] job, we have shifted to this."

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

"You can't change things overnight, but it shouldn't take 20 years to fix things... Many children still aren't getting the care they deserve," said Stone, who still represents plaintiffs in the lawsuit. Among the problems resulting from the lack of foster homes, she said, are the 300 children living in out-of-state facilities at any given time and infants living in large group settings.

"When Malloy chooses who will run DCF, hopefully they will be able to make progress pretty quickly," she said.

Malloy has said the problems at DCF stem from the lack of leadership and the state's inability to recruit and retain enough foster care parents.

"We just about need to change everything we've been doing... We have to change directions," Malloy said during the campaign after a federal judge rejected Gov. M. Jodi Rell's request to relieve DCF of federal supervision. Malloy said he agreed with U.S. District Court Judge Christopher F. Droney's ruling.

Three Connecticut governors have failed so far to reform the state's child welfare agency enough to end federal supervision. Now it's up to Malloy and whomever he appoints as the next commissioner to reshape the \$865 million bureaucracy.

Bannon said they have begun reaching out to potential candidates to replace current-commissioner Susan Hamilton, who announced the day before Malloy was elected she would resign at the beginning of the year.

"We have been focused on top-tier appointees who just haven't come out of the process in the past. They have been unsuccessful," Bannon said. "We are going to solve the problems at the root of that consent decree."

Stone said the constant turnover of leadership in DCF has been part of the problem.

"It's a revolving door," Stone said, noting that no DCF commissioner has lasted more than 3 years since federal oversight began. "We need real leadership."

The state's child advocate, Jeanne Milstein, is confident Malloy understands what needs to be done.

"He clearly understand the need for a new leadership team at DCF," she said.

Election 2010 - The Transition Human Services

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