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Connecticut DCF Still Failing Children: Those Lost In The System Are The Best Examples Of Why This Agency Needs Federal Oversight

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What a crass move by the Rell administration to pretend that things are going so well that it no longer needs a federal watchdog to keep an eye on the troubled state Department of Children and Families.

DCF, a \$900 million state agency, continues to fail to protect the most vulnerable children. But Commissioner Susan Hamilton, who spent valuable time and taxpayer dollars in a failed effort to convince a judge to release DCF from federal oversight, tells me that "the case has outlived its usefulness." Hamilton might want to explain that to the lost children of DCF. Here are a few of them:

Jane was 13 when she came to DCF after sexual abuse and physical neglect in her family's home. Her parents' rights were terminated and she ended contact with her biological family. Jane had suicidal thoughts, depression and was unable to settle into a DCF foster home. She longed for a home that would adopt her so she could lead a "normal life."

Jane is among the DCF children described in affidavits filed in federal court by lawyers from the Center for Children's Advocacy. Unable to find a home for Jane, DCF sent Jane to an out-of-state residential treatment center, where she has no connection to friends, her former schools or anyone from her home state. Not long ago, Jane told her lawyer that she "wished" she had "never disclosed the abuse, because things just got worse."

Because it has failed to find enough foster homes, children such as Jane are sent to expensive, out-of-state facilities. Currently, DCF places 475 children in residential facilities, with 285 of these children sent out-of-state. The department is hundreds of homes behind its agreed-upon goals for new foster homes. "These children are in many instances disconnected from family and community and their treatment/placement situation clearly warrants additional support beyond the monthly minimum visitation standard and communication that currently occurs," the most recent report from the federal court monitor states. This is the monitor DCF wishes to be free from.

Michael is an 8-year-old who told his lawyer that "maybe if you put my picture on fliers and post them on telephone poles, someone might see it, and decide they want me and will take me home." Instead, Michael has bounced between foster and group homes since he was removed from his mother and six other siblings. At one point he was sexually abused in an adoptive home and ended up in another foster home, which not long ago returned him to DCF.

The federal monitor that Gov. Rell opposes recently found that "the most significant barrier" to getting children such as Michael out of a group home for young children is the lack of foster and adoptive families.

"The foster home gridlock is the most serious issue. It affects absolutely everything," Martha Stone, lawyer for the Center for Children's Advocacy, told me. "Picture this child who is all of a sudden pulled away from his home and brought to an office full of grown-ups and sits there all day [only to] be told there is no place for us to put you," Stone said. "We have kids in safe homes ... congregate care group homes. Some of them are 6 or 7 years old."

Dawn is another DCF child. Now 15, she has been in DCF care since she was a young girl and she now lives in a residential treatment facility. She has no contact with her parents. The only adult she had a close relationship with was recently laid off. Recently, she told her lawyer that she wants to live somewhere "small."

Then there's Rondell, recently turned 18 and in state care for seven years, who was given the choice by DCF to enroll in a residential substance abuse program for older men — or go to a homeless shelter. He fled, returning to the home he was removed from in the first place.

These and other children tell their lawyers that they feel lost in a system that has forgotten them. Things are not supposed to get worse once DCF steps into the life of a child. Jane, Michael, Dawn and Rondell are still out there, waiting for DCF to do a better job.