

Welfare Watch - January 21, 2009 - DHR Board Meeting

The Board of the Department of Human Resources met today. On the agenda were several items of interest to those who have a concern about the welfare of our children. DFCS gave a report on the status of child welfare in the state. After three years of consistent declines in child protective service cases, DHR has seen an 8.2 % increase in cases since July 2008. No explanation of this increase was given. The number of children in foster care remains relatively stable showing a 3.3% decrease. Georgia has a little more than 13,000 children in foster care.

"Child safety numbers" are an important part of this report. Two measures represent these safety numbers: (1) The recurrence of maltreatment of a formerly abused child and (2) the foster care re-entry rate. These safety numbers have been steadily declining and are well below national standards. The number of children who were victims of substantiated maltreatment that had a substantiated re-report of maltreatment within six months was 3.04%. The percentage of foster children who re-entered foster care from a previous placement within 12 months of the current placement was only 2.65%. This measure is at an all time low.

Georgia can be proud that these numbers are low even though more children than ever are being cared for in their homes and communities, leaving foster care earlier, and being reunited with their families. Tom Rawlings in his 2008 Office of the Child Advocate Report said concerning these numbers, ". . . these statistics strongly suggest that making the effort to keep children safely in their own homes is the right approach." These "safety numbers" are our checks of the system to make sure that our efforts are truly protecting children while keeping them in their homes and families.

We are watching these measures from DFCS to see what impact budget cuts will have on the Department. Furloughs, hiring freezes, and reductions in staff have just been implemented since September and the impacts on child welfare numbers are just being noted. We expect that caseload size, time to achieve reunification with family, adoptions finalized, and the number of children in foster care will be negatively impacted. After months of steady improvements in caseload size, we are beginning to see increases in DFCS caseloads.

The investment in quality practice over the last four years has realized real savings for the Department and improvements in care for children and families. We are hopeful that these improvements will not be compromised by budget cuts that are now being considered by the Georgia Legislature.

On another agenda item, the Board passed new regulations for Transition Care Centers for Medically Fragile Children (part 1, part 2 , part 3) and Residential Mental Health Facilities for Children and Youth (part 1, part 2 )an approved a Notice for a Public Hearing for rules for Hospital Rules and Regulations.