

Child-welfare system flooded

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published July 5, 2004

Many judges say they are frustrated by the sheer volume of child-welfare cases they are expected to handle daily.

"There are too many cases to handle ... and that delays permanency" for a child, said retired Juvenile Court Judge Nancy Sidote Salyers, who is co-director of Fostering Results, a group dedicated to child-welfare reform.

This spring, Fostering Results, the National Center for State Courts and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges surveyed more than 5,100 judicial officers on child-welfare practices in their courts.

The confidential survey included more than 2,200 judges -- a remarkable response, Judge Salyers told a Capitol Hill press conference last week.

About 52 percent of judges agreed that the biggest obstacle to resolving placements for neglected and abused children was "overcrowded court dockets."

Judge Salyers, who once had 6,000 cases on her docket in Cook County, Ill., empathizes with her colleagues.

With 6,000 cases, she said, "how much time could I have spent with each individual child?"

Other top concerns for the judges were a lack of social programs for troubled families, ill-prepared social workers and lawyers, and insufficient time for each court hearing.

Fostering Results is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to the Children and Family Research Center in the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.

In May, another group funded by Pew Charitable Trusts issued a report calling for child-welfare courts to do a better job of tracking and moving cases.

Justices in the state Supreme Courts should work to improve state family court systems and invest more time and money in child-welfare training, positions and salaries, said the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care report.

Meanwhile, federal data find that 90 percent of children 6 and older who have spent at least one year in foster care "have positive views" of the people with whom they are living.

In addition, more than half of the children say they were placed in better schools and neighborhoods, said the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, taken by the Children's Bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The HHS survey involved 700 children, ages 1 to 15, and their representatives. More than 400 children were older than 6.

Sixty percent of children were in protective care because of parental neglect; the rest were in care because of emotional, physical or sexual abuse at home.

Fifty-eight percent of children said that even though they had been in care for a year, they believed they would live with their parents again.