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HEADLINE: CONWAY: POLICY ON CHILDREN FAILING;
STATE SENATOR SAYS MD. IS UNFAIR TO GROUP HOMES

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BODY:

The Maryland Department of Human Resources' new effort to place children in family settings rather than in group homes when their parents can't care for them "is not working," a state lawmaker said at a hearing Tuesday.

Sen. Joan Carter Conway, chairwoman of the Senate committee that oversees social services, also accused Human Resources Secretary Brenda Donald of unfairly putting private group home providers out of business.

Conway called Donald to Annapolis to answer questions about her Place Matters strategy, which has resulted in the closings of dozens of group homes. The Baltimore Democrat said "something is not right" with the new policy because so many group home providers are angry and some with years of quality service have been closed.

There are 1,100 children in group homes, down from 2,000 two years ago - a reflection of the state's changed policy. Though the agency can show steep declines in the number of children in group homes and in foster care, which is down by about 15 percent in the past two years, it cannot provide statistics showing that Place Matters has helped children, lobbyists for private providers said.

"We don't think the department knows what it needs," said Jim McComb, longtime director of Maryland Association of Resources for Families and Youth, who recently stepped down. "We believe the state has an obligation to determine whether what it is doing is helpful to children."

Shelley Tinney, the association's new director, said Donald has not shared any data about whether children who would have been in group homes under the former policy are now in stable situations. "We are hearing that these placements are not successful and that kids are bouncing from place to place to place," Tinney said.

Donald acknowledged that she does not have statistics about "placement stability" under the new policy, though she

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noted that it "was not good" in the years before she launched Place Matters. Her spokeswoman, Nancy Lineman, said the agency has been "fine-tuning" the criteria used to decide whether a child should return home, live with other relatives or be sent to a foster or group home.

In her presentation to Conway's committee, Donald said that decades worth of research has shown that children do better - in avoiding pregnancy, finishing school, staying out of trouble - when they are in family settings. Keeping children out of group homes, she said, is also "significantly more cost-effective."

The Department of Human Resources has stopped giving contracts to about 35 providers and is planning to pare its list of 99 group homes even more. The agency has revised its policies about them and no longer will place children under 13 in a group home or put any of its kids in places with those under Department of Juvenile Services supervision.

Dozens of angry group home providers who attended Tuesday's hearing said Donald has been dismissive of their experience and knowledge, which Conway agreed had been happening. "We just want to be partners," McComb said.

Pastor Alvin Gwynn, a member of a newly formed group advocating for minority-run group homes in Baltimore, said everyone agrees that the child welfare system has problems. "But group homes are being used as a scapegoat to fix this entire system."

He said the state is moving children out of group homes, which he said must meet rigid, state-enforced standards, and "dumping them into another system that has practically no regulations at all."

Conway said group home providers, and even some workers inside the Department of Human Resources, have been calling to complain over the past few months about the way the agency has shunted aside group homes.

Gwynn's group, Minority Operated Human Services Agency of Baltimore, accused Donald's agency of making race-based decisions about which group homes it will use.

Donald said the accusation is baseless and that the numbers speak for themselves. She said all 32 group homes in Baltimore, and 65 percent of the 99 in Maryland, are run by minorities.

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