



MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES
Maryland's Social Services Agency



PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release:

September 3, 2009

For more information:

Nancy C. Lineman

410/767-8944

nlineman@dhr.state.md.us

**BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES MAKING
PROGRESS IN KEY AREAS OF CHILD WELFARE**

BALTIMORE – The Baltimore City Department of Social Services (BCDSS) has the most children living with families and the fewest residing in group homes compared to other jurisdiction in the state, according to a court report filed last week by BCDSS as required by the decades-old *L.J. v. Massinga* consent decree.

The report also highlights progress BCDSS has made in facilitating a stable workforce; keeping caseload ratios for caseworkers below the national standard; opening a health suite; hiring a medical director and improving procedures for placing children in the best setting possible when they come into care. In addition, the number of children in foster care in Baltimore City has declined from 6,275 in July of 2007 to 5,100 in June of 2009.

During the past 18 months, BCDSS staff have embraced and implemented *Place Matters* – Maryland's comprehensive child welfare reform initiative. The over-arching goal of *Place Matters* is to find permanent families for as many foster children as possible. The reform effort is designed to safely reduce the number of children coming into care; reduce the length of stay for foster children; and place them in the most appropriate setting when they first enter foster care.

In addition to filing the required status report, the Maryland Attorney General's Office filed a request with the court to vacate the consent decree because of changes in the law since it was first entered. These changes include a recent Supreme Court case that imposes certain limits on a federal court's authority to enter or enforce consent decrees such as the decree entered in this case

“Some have the notion that a 25-year-old consent decree has resulted in progress for Baltimore City's foster children,” said BCDSS Director Molly McGrath. “But the dramatic improvements we've made in the last two years are a result of leadership, new direction and our unwavering commitment to finding permanent families for foster children.”

-- more --

McGrath has served as director since she was appointed to the position by Maryland Department of Human Resources Secretary Brenda Donald in September of 2008. Prior to being named director, McGrath was the chief operating officer at BCDSS.

Under McGrath's leadership, BCDSS hired a medical director in April of 2009 responsible for establishing and reviewing health plans for children in foster care. Over the years, child welfare advocates complained that BCDSS was not paying enough attention to the overall health of foster children.

"Now we've got a medical director and 15 staff who are solely responsible for making sure every child in our care has a health plan and that all caregivers know how to carry out the plan," said McGrath. Both Donald and McGrath intend to continue to implement reforms and demand the best possible services for foster children – with or without a consent decree.

The department continues to make serious progress in finding permanent places for children to live and reducing its historic reliance on group homes. Under *Place Matters*, BCDSS increased the number of finalized adoptions and both met and exceeded its adoption goals for the first time since 2002.

The department instituted new standard operating procedures to assist caseworkers in determining where and for how long to place a child coming into foster care for the first time. Since April, 97 percent of new foster children were placed with a family.

To foster higher morale among child welfare workers, McGrath and her leadership team have worked diligently to recruit and retain staff while also enhancing their training. As recently as 2008, 30 percent of the positions in the BCDSS child welfare division were vacant. Today, the department boasts full employment in that division and -- in the past six months alone -- 37 BCDSS employees were promoted into positions of increased responsibility.

McGrath has also made special effort to ensure that caseload levels are fairly and evenly distributed among staff. Under the consent decree, foster care caseworkers are permitted to have no more than 20 cases at a time. For the past 24 months, foster care caseworkers have had an average of 15.3 cases. Under the consent decree, caseworkers responsible for the intake of foster children are permitted to have no more than 14 cases at a time. For the past 12 months, intake workers have had an average of 7.5 cases.

"We continue to move forward," said McGrath. "We've done a lot – but there's so much more we have to do before we are satisfied."

The United States District Court for District of Maryland will hold a hearing on the legal questions regarding the validity of the *L.J. v. Massinga* consent decree raised by the Attorney General's Office on Friday, October 9 in the federal courthouse in Baltimore City.

###