



State of Wisconsin
Department of Health and Family Services

Jim Doyle, Governor
Helene Nelson, Secretary

DATE: September 25, 2006

TO: Representative Steve Kestell, Chairman and All Members
Legislative Council Committee on Strengthening Families

FROM: Helene Nelson, Secretary
Department of Health and Family Services

RE: Progress in Response to Legislative Audit of Milwaukee Child Welfare

I understand that you will be briefed by the State Auditor tomorrow regarding the audit of the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW) released in February, 2006. I would like to highlight progress and plans to improve BMCW services that have occurred since the audit.

The audit recognized the important progress that the Department has made in improving the lives of children and families in Milwaukee County. The audit also highlighted a number of challenges and issues we continue to address. Supporting the needs of vulnerable children and families is a key priority for the Department.

1. IMPROVED CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

BMCW performance of child protective services is operating under a settlement agreement approved by the Federal court and has implemented corrective action plans negotiated with plaintiffs' counsel to address provisions where full compliance has not been achieved. The Settlement Agreement provides specific standards involving the outcomes of our services to protect the safety of children and to reunite families where possible or find other permanent homes for children through timely, appropriate services. *We're happy to report that as a result of diligent efforts by BMCW and its partners, the State was recently released from a total of 10 enforceable provisions of the Settlement Agreement, by mutual agreement with plaintiffs' counsel that BMCW is in compliance with these provisions. We are in compliance with two additional provisions that BMCW is in compliance with these provisions, which we expect to be released from soon. Specific measurable progress is being made in other areas, as well, though we have not yet exceeded the Settlement Agreement provisions.* While there remains a need for more progress, this is a substantial step forward. We will continue to be accountable to the Court in other areas as noted.

2. REDUCED TURNOVER OF THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE

All interested and knowledgeable parties have agreed that high levels of turnover in child protective services workers in the private agencies contracted to serve families was a major concern. High staff turnover adversely may affect the quality, timeliness, and continuity of services to children and families. This concern was reiterated in the LAB report. Based on studies by national experts, we concluded that adjusting the pay schedule for these workers was one key part of reducing turnover, along with better education and training opportunities and a number of other supports for workers. *We're very pleased to report that turnover of the child welfare workforce in Milwaukee contract agencies has dramatically improved over the first six months of 2006. For example, the number of ongoing case management staff that had to be hired in this period was 19, compared to 73 in the first six months of 2005.* I would like to highlight, however, that continuation of the pay schedule improvements will require legislative approval in the upcoming biennial budget.

3. A COMMITMENT TO CONTINUING QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Our Department is engaging in wide-ranging efforts to continue to improve the quality and results of our services in many areas, such as:

- a) collaboration with DWD and other partners to serve families more holistically;
- b) significant restructuring of foster care licensing and adoption contracts and expectations;
- c) improvements in the safety services program where children remain with their parents rather than being removed to foster care;
- d) better medical care for children;
- e) increased emphasis on timely investigations and services in general;
- f) a formal process for quality of services reviews to strengthen child welfare practice on a case as well as system level.

4. STRENGTHENED BUREAU MANAGEMENT

The Department addressed all the specific financial and operational management recommendations of the LAB Audit shortly after the audits were issued. Also, we have just restructured BMCW with internal reallocation of positions to assure the capacity for ongoing effectiveness in managing performance of State staff and contract functions. We are also structuring contracts for 2007 with some different financial incentives and other expectations for private partner agencies to meet performance expectations.

5. ONGOING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PERFORMANCE

The Joint Audit Committee has asked for an interim report on audit progress by October 2, 2006 and a final report in February 2007. We will send a copy of the October 2nd report to your Committee. We will be happy to provide added information if you wish.

We are proud of the progress that BMCW and its partner agencies have made. We also recognize that there continues to be a need for improvement to give the best possible service to the children and families that we serve. Thank you for your interest.

cc: Joint Audit Committee