

New man takes on state's toughest job

Davy's swearing-in is called good news for DYFS children

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

April 15, 2004

Gov. James E. McGreevey's longtime confidant, James M. Davy, took the oath yesterday as commissioner of the Department of Human Services, and the minister who swore Davy in welcomed him to the toughest job in New Jersey.

Delivering the opening prayer, Monsignor James A. Burke, formerly of Davy's home parish, St. Helen's Roman Catholic Church in Westfield, said no accolades could soften the reality that Davy "has been given the most thankless, difficult, massive, unforgiving, contentious, backbreaking and unrewarding job in New Jersey."

Yet the appointment, Burke said, is good news for the thousands of maltreated children whose well-being hinges on the dedication and skill of the department's Division of Youth and Family Services, the failing state agency that Davy promised to reform.

"Thousands ... in the DYFS system may not know it yet, but today they were blessed with -- in the finest sense of the word -- a godfather who honestly, honestly, God cares about them and about their families, and also their future," Burke said.

As acting commissioner since Jan. 10, Davy is already being credited by several lawmakers with bringing some stability to DYFS, an agency battered by scandals last year. He has begun hiring some much-needed relief for embattled front-line caseworkers and he has submitted a \$320 million blueprint that helped the state meet a court order requiring the agency be overhauled.

Davy's swearing-in was greeted with two standing ovations inside the General Assembly Chamber yesterday, where about 200 lawmakers, friends, associates and department employees gathered.

In addition to abused children, Human Services serves one of eight people in New Jersey who is poor, mentally ill, physically impaired or developmentally disabled. Disability advocates who attended Davy's swearing-in said they were impressed with his resolve to fix DYFS, and are patiently waiting for their turn.

"We have the confidence in him he will be able to serve all the needs of the Human Services community," said Tom Baffuto, executive director of the Arc of New Jersey, an advocacy group for people with developmental disabilities.

Baffuto noted that Davy last week urged the Senate Budget Committee to think about finding more than the 1 percent cost-of-living increase McGreevey has set aside for social service agencies that serve state clients with disabilities.

"He has spoken publicly on the issues we are facing. He is speaking publicly to groups that can hold him accountable. In three months' time, that's the most you can hope for," Baffuto said.

Marie Verna, director of consumer advocacy for the Mental Health Association of New Jersey, said "it would be irresponsible" for Davy not to focus on DYFS at this time.

Verna added that what's good for DYFS will ultimately benefit adults with mental illness. "There are data that say 75 percent of adults in the public mental health system were not protected as children," Verna said. "It is very clear there is a relationship" between the child welfare system and the mental health system.

After taking the oath administered by Supreme Court Justice Barbara A. Alito, Davy, 50, of Pennington, reflected on his nearly three decades of government service -- including 10 years as then-Gov. McGreevey's business administrator in Woodbridge.

Both Delmar and Davy noted the problems DYFS is currently facing are the culmination of more than 10 years of insufficient financial support, poor technology, overburdened workers and a lack of detailed procedures and guidelines.

The reform plan would attack all of those problems, according to Davy, who noted the approach has four fundamental obligations.

"Safety is our No. 1 job," he said. "We must assure the safety of the children under the plan, or we are not doing anything."

To achieve the "No. 1" goal, DYFS will establish a centralized process for case screening, hire additional forensic-trained investigators, seek more timely investigations, and conduct face-to-face safety assessments that will be "checked and triple-checked."

The second goal of the plan is to provide permanency for children by keeping foster care short-term by getting children moved back in with their parents as soon as possible.

"If a family situation falls apart, and a lot of you know it often does, then we'll be working for adoption right away," Davy said.

The third goal is to establish strong ties with community-based organizations -- schools, churches, non-profit service organizations -- to assure children have "what a child needs to grow."

The fourth goal, which Davy described as "the most exciting", is the prevention aspect of the reform plan.

"We have to find a way as a society and as a state to up front help families" before DYFS involvement is necessary," Davy said.

Claiming that substance abuse is at the "core" of 80 percent of DYFS cases, Davy called on many of the service organizations in attendance to work to help parents in order to possibly negate DYFS involvement or, when needed, let the DYFS workers focus on the needs of the children.

Michael Cudemo, communications director for Tri-County Community Action Partnership, which operates the Center and hosted the event, estimated between 30 and 40 schools, churches and social-service organizations attended.

Kate Myers, attorney with South Jersey Legal Services, a non-profit that provides legal advice and representation for impoverished people, was encouraged by Davy's visit and the charisma he displayed.

"I think that it is great that he is taking such a

The children need these savings. Over the next two years, each of whom chairs his chamber's budget committee, to find a way to fund a solid reform proposal put forth by James Davy, the new commissioner of the Department of Human Services.

Expect Davy to make a strong case at a hearing today before Greenwald's committee that the DYFS request for \$15 million in the next fiscal year can be well spent.

A DYFS that did its job well might have saved the life of Faheem Williams, whose body was found beaten and strangled in a Newark basement. It might have spared Bruce Jackson and his brothers from severe malnourishment in their adoptive home. These cases were not impossible to monitor.

These children and others have had their sufferings compounded because the political will to overhaul DYFS was lacking. Does that will now exist, at long last, after all the high-profile tragedies of recent years? This budget proposal is the test.

Lawmakers should remember that public outrage over the incidents isn't the only force pushing needed changes. It requires better training and more front-line staff. A lawsuit settlement requires DYFS to do better by the state's children.

If lawmakers don't come up with the bucks for this court-mandated plan, a judge might order it - at a cost that could be far higher than the current price tag of \$320 million over two years. (Think: Abbott v. Burke. Years of procrastination on that school funding equity case cost both students and taxpayers much.)

That's why lawmakers best serve taxpayers by taking control of the DYFS project now. That's why Bryant and Greenwald should make good on recent, conciliatory remarks that they will work with Davy in implementing the plan. Greenwald last week told The Inquirer: "I don't think anyone would deprive these children of a dime."

Then why has the legislature been churlish so far, approving only \$7 million instead of the requested \$15 million to jump-start reforms this year? Chalk much of it up to poor planning and lousy politics by the McGreevey administration. When the plan was rolled out, it lacked key benchmarks for accountability. Legislative leaders like Greenwald had not been briefed on the plan as it took shape.

But botched politics should not trump fixing DYFS. To shortchange these reforms is to endanger children whose needs we do not yet know.

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Washington Area Study Reports Harsh Consequences for Child Abuse Victims

Press Release Source: The Center for Child Protection and Family Support

WASHINGTON, April 20 /PRNewswire/ -- According to a new study of individuals who work with children from Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, more than two thirds (69%) of the respondents believe that victims of child abuse are likely to perform poorly in school and are likely to drop out. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of these respondents also anticipate that sexually abused teenage girls who run away from home are likely to become involved in prostitution. These findings are based on an exploratory study of Washington, DC-area metropolitan service providers who deal daily with children and families.

The findings on practitioners' perspectives on the alarming consequences of child victimization were released today by the Center for Child Protection and Family Support at a one-day regional conference on child victimization designed to help parents, professionals, and policymakers understand the scope and depth of child sexual abuse and to develop effective strategies for helping its victims.

More than four-fifths (85%) of the professionals

Kedar lived with his mother, Netasha Smith, her boyfriend, Royce Berry, and two brothers, 3-year-old Kaleem Norris and Jaiden Berry, 19 months. Jeff Norris and other sources familiar with the DYFS report said caseworkers visited the family in Asbury Park twice since November 2002, after Kedar first told his Head Start teacher that Royce Berry had abused him.

Norris and others said Kedar first reported that Berry had punched him and squeezed his penis when he didn't obey. In May 2003 the boy again told his teacher -- with his father present -- he had suffered similar abuse; Jeff Norris said

DYFS overhaul hailed here

ready to take on a full caseload, he added.

"Even with a special project to close cases, we're opening as many as we close," Williams added.

In January, DYFS oversaw 46,985 children, and now they track 65,235, even though they've closed thousands of cases this year, he said. Case-workers often have more than 40 children in their care.

In February, Gov. McGreevey announced an ambitious plan to overhaul the division. The plan includes an infusion of an additional \$320 million over the next 2 1/2 years.

He pledged to reverse a "generation of neglect" and rebuild an agency that made national news several times last year after police found the body of 7-year-old Faheem Williams in a plastic bin in a locked basement room in Newark. Bruce Jackson, who at 19 weighed 45 pounds, was found foraging through a neighbor's trash for food in Collingwood. Both families had a history of DYFS visits.

But the recent news has sparked a new round of internal and external probes, including a review by the independent Child Advocate's Office.

"I'm greatly worried by this recent death," Advocate Kevin Ryan said. "I think getting the training academy up and running has to be a top priority."

Changes at DYFS were sparked by a federal lawsuit filed in 1999 by Children's Rights Inc., an advocacy group that forced reforms in New York and other states. The suit charged DYFS was poorly managed, overburdened and underfunded, putting children at risk. The legal matter was settled in June, and DYFS officials were forced to create a long-term plan, to be reviewed by an outside panel of child-welfare experts.

"It's not unfair to expect the state to act in due haste to prevent these tragedies from happening," said Brian Siasen, associate director of Children's Rights. "They need to be very, very careful in planning for the long-term over-haul, but they also need to pay attention to the most immediate and dangerous situations. Politics has to cut through all of that and they have to act with all due speed."

Staff writer Tom Troncone contributed to this story.

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Four of the 13 children who have died this year from suspected abuse or neglect were allegedly killed by their mothers or boyfriends -- one more than in 2002 and 2003 combined, Davy said.

"It seems clear that this risk has not been taken seriously enough -- not in the community, not by the children's mothers and not by those of us in the child welfare agency," Davy said during a news conference in Trenton to announce the new policy. "That changes now."

The 13 suspected child abuse deaths so far this year puts the state on track to match or surpass the 37 recorded in 2002, Davy said Andy

DYFS workers had been alerted in each of the three cases.

In Monmouth County, prosecutors are investigating the March 29 death of Norris as a homicide. He died of blunt trauma to the abdomen, according to police reports.

DYFS workers had seen the boy in November 2002, and again in May, when he complained that his mother's boyfriend beat and sexually abused him, but officials closed the case, sources and family members told Gannett.

Irvington police have arrested the boyfriend of the 3-year-old child who died April 13 after the man allegedly beat him for hours. DYFS had opened an investigation into the case in January.

Essex County officials have charged a 38-year-old Newark man with beating 9-year-old Agee Anderson after the girl broke his fish tank. She died April 18. DYFS had visited the family five times since 1992.

Lawmakers recently approved \$15 million to add 158 DYFS workers this year, and to retrain 3,000 employees.

DYFS workers go into homes to check on reports children may not be receiving proper care.

Children's Rights Inc., an advocacy group, sued New Jersey in 1999, charging DYFS had been badly managed, overburdened and underfunded, putting children at risk. The state now has to implement a reform that will be reviewed by outside experts.

DYFS wants a word with boyfriends

The deaths of four children are attributed to paramour cases. The agency is acting to ensure that warning signs are heeded.

By Mitch Lipka Inquirer Trenton Bureau Apr. 29, 2004

TRENTON - With four of 13 suspected child-abuse and neglect deaths in New Jersey this year attributed to boyfriends of the children's mothers, the state is making so-called paramour cases a higher priority.

The four deaths this year surpass the three in 2002 and 2003 combined, Human Services Commissioner James Davy said yesterday as he announced that such cases would be considered "high risk."

Citing some questionable judgments made by Department of Youth and Family Services workers in at least one case, Davy said a policy being drafted by DYFS Director Edward Cotton would help ensure that warning signs are not missed.

"It seems clear that this risk has not been taken seriously enough - not in the community, not by the children's mothers and not by those of us in the child-welfare agency," Davy said. "That changes now."

The new designation of these cases means the parent and the paramour must be interviewed separately and the child should be interviewed separately outside the home. Also, law enforcement and medical experts should be automatically contacted regarding the cases and frequent visits to the home would be made.

Cotton said the policy also applies to stepparents who have not had a long-standing, stable relationship with the child. A stepparent who has been involved in raising a child for more than five years would not be subject to the policy, he said.

A main concern about boyfriends is their lack of a bond with children who are not their own, Cotton said.

DYFS overhaul hailed here

these cases they have to reach everyone in the organization. The status quo is not good enough here. Obviously we have a good blueprint for long-term reform of the child welfare system. But we cannot wait for all of those things to occur before we see improvement.

"We need to get better now. There are 65,000 children under our watch, and we must refocus on protecting them

Optimism on DYFS overhaul remains, despite slow progress

Staffing and caseload problems linger. N.J.'s plans for changes at the agency are due to a judge in June.

Inquirer Trenton Bureau By Mitch Lipka May. 03, 2004

TRENTON - A year ago, critics of the Division of Youth and Family Services expressed shock that a handful of caseworkers were dealing with 100 or more cases at a time.

In the year dedicated to transforming the troubled Tc10:05 oy lunl

under the state's blueprint for change, even critics remain hopeful. New Jersey will become a model for child welfare.

"No one is going to argue they're not making a good-faith effort," Alexander said. "... I have to believe, if we work enough and long enough, we can get over the hump here."

What may seem like a slow pace is necessary because of the enormity of the task, many say.

"You can't move such a huge system in an instant," said Esaid De Gironimo, president of the National Association of Social Workers' New Jersey chapter.

Walter Kalman, the chapter's executive director, would like to see the state work harder to get experienced social workers on staff. DYFS is overwhelmingly comprised of workers without degrees in social work.

"The person with no experience and 30 days' training isn't going to solve [DYFS's staffing problems]," Kalman said. "We all want properly trained people in the jobs."

DYFS struggles with turnover, continuing to lose staff as it tries to add staff. Kalman, himself a foster parent, said he has had five caseworkers in the year and a half with his foster child. Most have quit the agency, he said.

Alexander said most workers quit because they are overburdened.

Over the next two years, DYFS plans to add about 1,000 caseworkers. Alexander said that perhaps in 18 months workers will notice the difference.

DYFS director Edward Cotton agreed that lower caseloads sought under the reform plan won't be reached until 2004. And, he said, the first group to go through the academy will be the supervisors, not the trainees.

"We have a lot of staff and not many trainers," he said.

Well-trained supervisors, Cotton reasoned, would help guide a large but largely inexperienced staff. He said the applicant pool has been good, and a concerted effort is being made to hire those with experience.

While the Gloucester County situation is extreme, it is indicative of the battle to right a ship that has been listing for years.

Coming into 2003, DYFS had been dealing with 47,000 cases. Then, Faheem Williams' death lit up the headlines. A complaint that the 7-year-old and his two brothers were being abused was closed without the boys having been seen by a caseworker.

By the time authorities reached the boys, Faheem was dead, and his brothers were starving. Complaints raced in to DYFS, and fear over closing cases too soon grew the total number of caseloads well beyond 50,000. By this time this year, 13 suspected child-abuse and neglect deaths were being investigated.

DYFS is now dealing with 65,000 children and, like last year, is investigating 13 deaths suspected of being caused by abuse or neglect.

Still, even the agency's harshest critics are optimistic that, in the end, the state's most vulnerable children will be protected. Fuel for hope comes from the settlement of a lawsuit last year with the activist group Children's Rights - with the restructuring being done under the watch of a federal judge - and the heightened priority children at risk have gone down from McGreevey.

Thompson of Children's Rights said the settlement would keep the state honest. If changes don't take root as the plan planned, a judge could compel the state to take whatever action is deemed necessary.

DYFS overhaul hailed here

State kicks off May as Foster Care Month

TRENTON— Department of Human Services (DHS) Commissioner Jim Davy today announced that the state will expedite board payment increases for foster parents and carry out several planned improvements to the foster care system as part of the larger effort to reform New Jersey's child welfare system.

As part of the announcement celebrating May as Foster Care Month, Davy and Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) Director Ed Cotton recognized selected foster parents throughout New Jersey. There are currently 4,500 foster families statewide.

"Our foster parents do so much for our children," said Commissioner Davy. "Until now, we have done very little for them because we failed to provide the proper supports they need."

Davy announced several changes DYFS will make to better support foster parents:

- Increasing board payments for resource families over the next two years to close 25 percent of the gap between current rates and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's estimate for the cost of raising a child. Those payments, originally scheduled to begin increasing in July 2005, will now be raised in January 2005.
- Equalizing kinship payments with those of foster parents so more relatives step forward to care for foster children.
- Streamlining the process to become a resource parent by setting a standard that the entire process -- which currently takes up to a year -- will be completed in 90 days.
- All resource parents, whether recruited by DYFS or a contract agency, will be served by a single agency throughout the entire process from recruitment through home study and licensing, and beyond. This means that resource families, whether recruited directly by DYFS or by a contract agency, will have a support worker assigned to them permanently.
- Providing \$2 million a year in flexible funding to provide support services to resource families.
- Allocating \$1 million for home repairs so foster families can continue to meet licensing requirements.

"As an 18 year foster and adoptive parent, I have seen the difficulties and successes of fostering. I am thankful to Governor McGreevey for recognizing the dedication that we as foster families provide to the children in our care. Joy Norsworthy, vice president of Foster and Adoptive Family Services (FAFS), a statewide organization representing foster and adoptive parents. "Whether it's for one child or dozens more, foster parents are New Jersey's unsung heroes."

"FAFS supports Governor McGreevey's commitment to New Jersey's children and looks forward to continuing our partnership with DHS and DYFS on implementing the child welfare reform plan," Norsworthy.

The highlight of the event included the recognition of foster parents and other individuals for supporting foster children.

As part of the ceremony, Commissioner Davy also presented FAFS with a proclamation from Governor McGreevey declaring May as Foster Care Month. In addition, Davy presented a small tree covered in blue ribbons- representing 13,000 children in foster care in New Jersey.

"Let these ribbons and this tree remind us of why we are here today and everyday," said Commissioner Davy surrounded by foster parents. "Every child needs a champion- looking around this room there are many champions among us."

To learn more about foster parenting in New Jersey, call toll free 1-877-NJ-FOSTER or visit www.njfoστεrcare.org.

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DYFS to recruit foster homes for Hispanic children

May 12, 2004, 2:11 PM EDT

PASSAIC, N.J. -- The state child welfare agency is launching a new effort to recruit bilingual homes for Spanish-speaking foster children and will create an advisory council to help it better serve the Hispanic community.

While 18 percent of the 65,000 children in foster care are Hispanic, there are only 250 bilingual foster homes in Jersey, Human Services Commissioner James Davy said Wednesday.

"We are facing a critical shortage of foster homes for Hispanic children. No child should lose their culture, their self-identity when circumstances require they be removed from their home," Davy said. "We need to do a better job of recruiting foster families in the neighborhoods where children live."

In addition to foster home recruiting efforts in Passaic and Hudson counties, the Division of Youth and Family Services intends to spend \$150,000 to develop 15 more homes for Hispanic children in Cumberland County. Twenty percent of the children in foster care in Cumberland County are Hispanic, officials said.

The Hispanic Advisory Council will be made up of members of community organizations and churches and will focus on the needs of the Hispanic community, Davy said.

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Settlements restore jobs of 9 fired DYFS workers

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO Star-Ledger Staff May 27, 2004

The state has reversed the firings of nine child welfare workers who were terminated last fall after police discovered four starving boys in a foster home

DYFS overhaul hailed here

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

May 28, 2004

A program launched four years ago to revolutionize the way children receive publicly subsidized mental health care in New Jersey is not living up to its promise, a child advocacy group says in a report.

The Association for Children of New Jersey says children caught up in the state child protection and juvenile justice systems may not be getting all the help they need through The Partnership for Children.

The program installed a private company to manage all phases of a child's treatment -- from hospital stays to therapy and medication -- in an effort to eliminate the need for parents to call police or the Division of Youth and Family Services just to get help. It created parent support groups to give families a greater say in their children's care, and was designed to find more alternatives to institutions.

"One of the key goals of the partnership was to assess what kids really need so you could design a system that met those needs," said Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the child advocacy group. "We're not there yet."

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receives "no incentive not to spend money. This is not managed care."

Nancy Parelloan author of the report, said questions about how calls are screened "should raise a red flag that warrants further examination. Do we really know what is preventing (children) from getting into the system?"

Some parents give the program good grades. Shereene Chavers, a member of the Union County organization created by the partnership, credited it with keeping her family together.

"I feel like a mother again, and I can be a part of this process," she said at a recent hearing on DYFS reforms. "The program gave me the will and the strength to go on."

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