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Child Welfare Improvement Task Force cites improvements, calls for systemic reforms

DETROIT – Michigan should continue reforming its child welfare system to further focus on community-based services that strengthen, preserve and reunify families, the Michigan Child Welfare Improvement Task Force (CWITF) said on Monday.

The broad-based, 85-member task force offered a strategic roadmap for the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) in its ongoing efforts to improve the child welfare system and the lives of vulnerable children, adults and families. It set a goal of reducing the number of children in foster care – about 17,000 – by 50 percent by 2020.

"The protection of children and the strengthening of families go together," said Carol Goss, task force co-chair and president of the Skillman Foundation. "Whenever possible, it is in the best interest of children to be placed within a family or an extended family system."

The task force presented its report, "Improving Michigan's Child Welfare System: Our Children, Our Responsibility," to DHS Director Ismael Ahmed after nearly a year of work. The report was released publicly at news conferences in Detroit and Grand Rapids.

Ahmed created the task force in April 2008 to help build a template of reform in the child welfare system, which touches 80,000 children annually. The task force was asked to review state and federal standards, establish guiding principles, and develop outcomes and action steps for intermediate- and long-term reform. It is co-chaired by Goss and former DHS director, C. Patrick Babcock.

"I am grateful for the task force members' hard work and passionate commitment," Ahmed said. "The recommendations will become part of the department's ongoing child welfare reform efforts as we seek to protect the state's vulnerable children, adults and families."

Already, the department is addressing some of the concerns raised in the report, Ahmed said. For example, the department is hiring additional workers to reduce caseloads, is increasing staff training and standards, and is reducing backlogs.

The (CWITF) included a cross-section of Michigan's children and family services leadership. It included members of the judiciary, legislators, state and local officials, public and private agency leaders, educators, health and child welfare professionals, philanthropic leaders and advocates.

Highlights of the report include:

- **Keeping children in their homes:** The task force called for an emphasis on community-based in-home services. The task force called for changes in state and federal policies and funding systems that drive children into out-of-home services.
- **Preserving families:** When out-of-home placements are necessary for the safety of the child, efforts should be made to quickly provide services to children and families aimed at reunification.
- **Extended family:** If reunification with biological parents is not possible, a priority should be to place children with other family members. The report said the state should apply non-safety-related waivers to family members seeking to become foster parents, and should establish policies to ensure that children placed with relatives have the same financial support and access to services as those in non-relative foster care.
- **Juvenile justice:** Youths in the juvenile justice system are part of the child welfare system and should have access to the same treatment, and rehabilitation and educational services as others.
- **Transitioning youth:** Youths in the child welfare system need support as they transition into adulthood. The task force cited the existing Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative as an effective program that helps youths across the state develop leadership skills and prepare to lead productive lives. The task force recommends protecting and supporting the program and promoting scholarship and other programs to help transitioning youths succeed.

Babcock and Goss said they are grateful for the dedicated work of the task force members, who will continue to be strong advocates for children.

As policymakers debate priorities, Babcock said, the future of children should be utmost in their minds. "We have a real priority to protect kids," he said. "The protection of a child has to be our primary attention."

The report is available at www.michigan.gov/cwif.

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