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## OVERSIGHT PANEL ISSUES REPORT ON DCYF'S COMPLIANCE IN FOURTH YEAR OF FIVE YEAR SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT

On September 10, 2002, the three-person Eric L. Oversight Panel issued its fourth report on the performance of the Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and the Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) in implementing the federal court settlement agreement in Eric L. v. Morton. The members of the Panel are Richard Cohen of the Disabilities Rights Center, Concord; Christina Crowe of the Judge Baker Children's Center, Boston; and Charles Weatherill of the Ombudsman Office of DHHS, Concord.

This is the Panel's final report under the original term of the five-year agreement. The Panel found that DCYF had achieved substantial or full compliance or significant progress though not always for the duration required by the agreement in: the development of foster care recruitment plans, training of foster parents, social workers and supervisors, monitoring of providers, and in performing Internal Quality Assurance reviews. The Panel also found that DCYF continued to make excellent progress in most of the adoption requirements in the agreement, commending the Adoption Unit for its excellent work.

However in other critical areas of direct services to children and families, the Panel found that DCYF remained far from compliance. As the Panel stated in its report (p.2):

"The areas in which there is the most noncompliance are those which most directly impact the well being of the children and families covered by the agreement—Timely and Complete Assessments of child abuse and neglect reports; Family, Voluntary, and Medical services (including mental health and dental services) and Permanency Planning, including Teen Independent Living.

The Panel commended DCYF on several policy shifts and initiatives especially in Assessment, Family Services and Permanency Planning. However as the Panel noted, because these initiatives were only in pilot or beginning stages of implementation, they had not yet resulted in significant or statewide changes in practices or compliance. Nevertheless as the Panel added, the initiatives do "represent... a good start or an attempt to address most of the ...underlying reasons for noncompliance." (p. 3)

A number of recommendations were made or reiterated from previous reports, key among them was a call for significant increases in staff at field and supervisory levels and the development and implementation of a human resource plan to reduce, in particular, the disturbingly high turnover of social workers. In commenting on the basis for these recommendations, Panel member Crowe, a

social workers. In commenting on the basis for these recommendations, Panel member Crowe, a nationally known expert in child welfare and protection stated that:

“Child welfare and protection activities today are difficult and complex under any circumstances. Although DCYF has made some strides in the past year, they still lack sufficient numbers of field staff, and not surprisingly, many of their social work staff turn over at a very high rate creating a host of other problems. One of them is the hiring of replacements with little experience. In this environment, consistently effective child protection and welfare becomes impossible.”

The Panel also recommended that innovative and effective pilots be replicated state- wide As the Panel stated (p. 5): “The overall coordination of ... state agencies on behalf of dependent and neglected children and their families will be crucial to DCYF’s success ensuring protection and well being.”

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