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# Baker administration pledges major reforms for troubled foster care system

By [Kay Lazar](#) Globe Staff, May 14, 2019, 2:10 p.m.



The Charlie Baker administration Tuesday announced major reforms to the state's troubled foster care system that it says will improve the lives of thousands of children, ease caseloads for their swamped social workers, and more aggressively recruit and retain foster families. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The Baker administration Tuesday announced major changes to the state's [troubled foster care system](#) that it says will [improve the lives of thousands of children](#), ease caseloads for their swamped social workers, and more aggressively recruit and retain foster families.

The plan, presented as a joint agreement between the state's Department of Children and Families and SEIU Local 509, the union that represents foster care workers, promises to boost the number of social workers who communicate directly with foster families.

DCF will also hire 11 additional employees to recruit more foster families, and offer more training for foster families who are struggling to care for severely traumatized children. And the Baker administration is promising to initiate listening sessions statewide to better understand the roadblocks families face in obtaining mental health care for foster kids.

[Recent Globe stories](#) have revealed an overwhelmed and understaffed foster care system at a time when the opioid epidemic continues to ravage families across Massachusetts. Social workers rely on archaic technology that is unable to track available emergency homes on any given night. Children are being bounced from home to home and enduring long waits for mental health care. [Frustrated foster parents](#) are dropping out at a time when the state desperately needs more of them.

“My goal is to improve the stability and permanence of kids who come into care, and make sure social workers have the tools available to achieve those goals,” Marylou Sudders, the state's health and human services secretary, said in a phone interview. “We have to work as quickly as possible to ensure children have childhoods.”

The plan will not require changes in law. The administration did not say how much it would cost or how it would be funded, but Governor Charlie Baker left the door open for additional spending.

“We’ve added roughly \$150 million to the DCF budget over the course of the past four years,” he told reporters Tuesday. “It’s a place where we continue to make investments. If it turns out we need to make additional ones, we will.”

The president of SEIU Local 509 said he is “cautiously optimistic” about the promised actions.

“The Baker administration [says they are committed to fixing this system](#), and we will take them at their word,” said Peter MacKinnon. “If attention gets shifted, we will call people out on that.”

Sudders said the changes include a top-to-bottom review of policies, in the hope that doing so will draw more prospective foster parents. For instance, she said, decade-old rules that require foster children to have at least 50 square feet in a home don’t make sense when the department is trying to encourage more relatives to step forward and take in children. Some relatives’ houses just miss that mark.

Current regulations also eliminate as candidates for fostering any relatives who have had minor scrapes with the law when they were much younger — offenses that do not affect their ability or the safety of raising children today.

“I see these as common-sense reforms,” Sudders said.

Child advocates said they welcomed the promised changes.

Cheryl Haddad, president of the Massachusetts Alliance for Families, an advocacy group for foster families, hailed the end of what she described as overzealous adherence to arbitrary space requirements, which she said followed a string of child deaths at DCF four years ago.

She also lauded the promise to hire more staffers to work directly with foster families. She said children are entering foster care more traumatized than they were in years past, with drug addiction, domestic violence, and mental health

problems splintering their families.

“It’s a harder situation to encounter, and parents need more assistance,” she said.

Mary McGeown, president of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, agreed. She said surveys of foster families conducted by her organization for DCF found that families are clamoring for better communication with the department.

“Being able to get timely responses to questions asked by hiring family resource workers will go a great distance toward improving communications with foster families,” she said.

McGeown said her organization is also discussing with DCF ways to improve respite care for foster families by training volunteers who would provide a few hours’ or a couple days’ care, allowing parents a much needed break.

In its announcement Tuesday, the Baker administration said it would also provide emergency day care for 10 of the busiest DCF offices, and it plans to offer day care for all its offices in the next year. Many of these offices have been operating as de facto child care centers, with even small children playing in the offices all day as social workers search for foster homes to take them in.

The administration also laid out a timetable for [major technology upgrades at DCF](#), detailed in the Globe on Sunday, to improve communication with thousands of foster parents and to overhaul the process for placing abused and neglected children who are removed from their homes at night.

A new, secure intranet system is slated to go live on Monday, allowing foster families to communicate directly with DCF.

And a new after-hours hot line database will track open foster homes in real time. Sudders said Tuesday that database will be operational by Nov. 1.

The lack of such capabilities in a state known as a technological hub has sparked withering criticism of the agency. Recent Globe stories featured social workers who drove through the night with children, as the department's supervisors, hampered by a lack of a real-time database, searched for available foster homes.

The Globe coverage also described a severe shortage of mental health services for foster children, who receive mental health benefits through MassHealth. Foster parents say they typically wait as long as six months to get appointments for their children. State officials said they are working to understand why.

Sudders said the administration has invested \$1.9 billion through 2022 to strengthen behavioral health treatment throughout the state.

"I am not pleased with the fact that people are still having problems with access," Sudders said.

She said her agency in early June will announce a "very intensive" statewide listening tour to learn why residents are still having problems.

"We want to learn what works, what's not working, and what treatment they can or cannot find," Sudders said.

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