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SPECIAL NEEDS ADOPTION PROGRAM

The Department of Health and Family Services arranges adoptions for children who have special needs because of disability, age, ethnicity, or other factors that are believed to make placement difficult. A child typically enters the program from county-run foster care when a county social worker concludes it is not in the best interests of the child to be returned to the parent or guardian. Excluding Milwaukee County, which has a separate program, the Department placed 415 children with special needs in adoptive homes in 1998. Annual administrative costs for the program are approximately \$1.7 million in general purpose revenue.

The number of children entering the program is expected to grow significantly as a result of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act, which encourages more timely adoptions of children in foster homes. Caseloads will also increase when Milwaukee County's program is fully integrated with the State's Special Needs Adoption program in January 2001.

Social Worker Productivity Has Improved Since 1994

Approximately 25.5 full-time equivalent social workers, five regional supervisors, and central staff in Madison provide special needs adoption services. Since our 1994 review (report 94-9), overall staff productivity has increased. In 1994, each social worker in the Department placed 10.7 children annually; by 1998, annual productivity had increased to 17.7 placements per social worker. Total placements during this period increased 52.0 percent, from 273 to 415.

More Families Are Needed For Eligible Children

In June 1999, 91 eligible children were waiting in foster care for adoptive placements; 41 eligible families were also waiting. Some children wait significantly longer than others for adoptive placement. In June 1999, children in the State's northern region had been waiting an average of 3.8 months for placement; in contrast, children in the southeastern region had been waiting an average of 16.2 months.

We found a number of issues that have hampered the Department's overall performance in administering the program, including inconsistent treatment of families during the adoption screening process, unequal length of waiting time among families during the assessment process, and the absence of uniform scoring standards in decisions of whether to allow families to adopt. During the course of our audit, the Department changed its approach to screening families, and it plans to develop a pool of qualified, available families to reduce the time children wait for placement. The Department has also recently funded an extensive media campaign to publicize the need for both adoptive and foster families statewide.

Communication With Prospective Families Could Be Improved

We received responses from 163 families to a survey we conducted on their experiences with the program. The majority of the respondents to our survey reported satisfaction with the services provided. However, 33.1 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the frequency of social worker contact. Our survey responses and our review of supervisory oversight of social worker staff in the Department indicate families can have significantly different program experiences depending on where they live and the staff person to whom they are assigned. To improve communication, we have recommended the Department establish timeliness standards for social workers to follow in responding to inquiries from families.

Federal Adoption Incentive Payments Have Not Been Fully Captured

The federal government has recently begun to provide incentive payments for states to increase the number of adoptions. However, we found that the Department failed to collect an estimated \$332,000 in available federal incentive payments for federal fiscal year 1997-98 because of reporting errors. The Department has now corrected the errors, which may result in Wisconsin recouping some of its losses when future incentive payments are made. In addition to the incentive payments, in April 1999, the Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance approved the use of \$697,000 in federal revenues to fund additional project positions in the Department and contracts with outside agencies for adoption services. At the time the funding was approved, it was estimated that these funds would provide the Department with additional capacity sufficient to increase placements by an additional 145 children over the number placed the previous year. However, the Department's use of these funds has been delayed, and it is unclear whether the net increase of an additional 145 placements will be realized.

[full report, PDF file \(2393KB\)](#)