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Good news for New Jersey. Judy Meltzner is talked about a good bit in this article.

Judge approves N.J. child welfare reform plan that could end federal oversight

allison-blake-chris-christie.JPG

A federal judge Wednesday approved a scaled-back agreement between a national child advocacy group and Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families Allison Blake, seen in this file photo with Gov. Chris Christie.

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NEWARK — Recognizing that New Jersey's child welfare system has made vast improvements after being "one of the worst" in the nation, a judge Wednesday approved a [scaled-down plan](#) aimed at ending federal oversight that's lasted for a dozen years.

In a major milestone for the Department of Children and Families, federal court monitor Judith Meltzer presented U.S. District Court Judge Stanley R. Chesler with a new blueprint for continued improvements but discards or relaxes some requirements that "were not feasible, created negative, unintended consequences, or failed to reflect what is now considered child welfare best practice."

Meltzer said she negotiated the new agreement privately over the last nine months with Children and Families Commissioner Allison Blake and Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of A Better Childhood, who sued the state to force improvements to its foster care system in 1999.

[RELATED: In surprise court announcement, N.J. child welfare leader wants some reform mandates changed](#)

Meltzer also submitted the latest analysis of the system's progress in reaching 53 goals. Like previous monitoring reports in the last several years, this one identified more shortcomings than successes. But steady progress has been evident, and it was time to recognize that with the adoption of an "exit plan," she said.

"The agreement marks a turning point that acknowledges the progress the state has made to date," Meltzer said.

The 1999 lawsuit had accused the child welfare system of being so under-financed and poorly managed that it was doing more harm than good for abused and neglected children.

The state settled the case and agreed to federal oversight in 2003 following the public outcry and national attention drawn by the death of 7-year-old Faheem Williams while under state supervision. The boy's body was found in a container in a closet, 11 months after the the child welfare agency lost track of his family and closed the case of suspected abuse without seeing him and his two brothers.

[The settlement required the state to spend millions of dollars a year](#) on a new cabinet-level department, hire and train workers, update its computer tracking system, recruit hundreds of foster homes, and expand medical, mental health and other services for families. But since 2010, the settlement also required the department to show it was protecting children better and reuniting families whenever possible, and in many areas, [progress has been mixed](#).

Blake called new brokered settlement "a watershed moment."

The state will make more data public on its website and will still report to the monitor, Blake said. But the agreement allows the system to more fully become "a self-monitoring, self correcting organization" that can focus more on quality and less on the threat of a bad report.

"The exit plan acknowledges the extraordinary successes we've made while using data to align our future goals with those for New Jersey's children," Blake said. "This is a momentous day."

The new agreement does not indicate when Meltzer and Chesler will end their supervision, but it does speed up the timetable. The department must continue its successes, reach the milestones it has missed, then maintain those actions for 12 months before the monitor and the court will consider ending their involvement.

[Earlier this year](#), Blake has said she expected the system will be ready to leave court supervision by 2017, but she declined Wednesday to predict when that might occur.

New Jersey went from operating "one of the worst child welfare systems in the country" to one that is

"good" and "moving in the right direction," Lowry said after the hearing.

"They still have much work to do to be released from the oversight of the court, and they need to focus on some key problems, but they are heading in the right direction," Lowry said.

Successes include recruiting an ample number of foster homes, providing timely medical checkups for foster children, reducing the incidence of child abuse in foster care and finding alternatives to shelters and juvenile detention centers for foster children, according to the monitor's report.

"New Jersey's children are benefitting from its many improvements," she added.

According to the 209-page report based on July-December 2014 data and interviews, too many investigations took longer than the expected 60 days, and not enough met quality standards. Under the new agreement, however, just 85 percent of investigations will need to be done within 60 days, and 95 percent must be done by 90 days. "

"This recognizes that some cases are more complex," Blake said in an interview after the hearing.

The new agreement also gives the system more time to convene "family team meetings," that gather a child's parents and other key people in their lives to plot a strategy on how parents can make improvements to get their child back from foster care.

The system has struggled to meet goals intended to help foster youth "aging out" of the system upon adulthood. Instead of having to meet the goal of connecting 95 percent youth ages 18 to 21 with a job or school, the goal is 90 percent.

Wednesday's [report](#) is the first since the Christie administration hired Attorney John J. Bursch of Grand Rapids, Mich. in March with the intent of ending the federal court's 12-year oversight.

At an hourly rate of \$558-an hour, Bursch is working toward winding down a similar long-standing court-monitored overhaul in Michigan. Bursch has argued before the U.S. Supreme Court 11 times, and his clients include the state of Utah seeking to protect its ban against same sex marriage.

After signing the new agreement, an effusive Chesler shook hands with about 50 members of Blake's senior staff who appeared in court as a sign of solidarity. Chesler thanked them "on behalf of a very grateful state of New Jersey."

Chesler said when court supervision ends and she knows children and families are better off will be "one of the happiest days of my life."

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