

Pols and Politics: DCF breaks record for stalling

Delays in reports' release frustrates avid watchdogs

Gov. Charlie Baker, along with his top health and child welfare officials, convened a press conference last week, trumpeting progress inside the beleaguered Department of Children and Families through a long list of reforms.

The purpose, Baker aides say, was to update the public. Such a press conference, in many ways, also serves as an effort to instill confidence, that all the talk of change is actually happening.

It's doing little, however, to convince one of the agency's most avid watchdogs, which is getting a taste of another slowly turning gear on Beacon Hill — its public records law.

Attorneys at Children's Rights, the New York group which unsuccessfully sued DCF in a high-profile federal case to force change at the agency, requested on Sept. 2 at least 16 different types of reports — all dating back to January 2013 — that would detail DCF's basic indicators: caseloads, regularity of home visits, etc.

Within two weeks, a DCF attorney wrote to Sara Bartosz, the group's lead counsel, saying the records would be ready by Sept. 25, according to correspondence provided by Children's Rights.

After that date came and went, attorney Andrew Rome said in an email on Nov. 20 that all the information was on a disc and he was "just reviewing it to ensure that it is complete."

On Dec. 14, Rome wrote in another email that he'd hope to have the records ready to send by the end of that week.

Nearly two more months passed when Bartosz wrote another email, asking for an update. Rome responded on Feb. 11, saying that he found an error and was working on it, noting that the agency had started interviewing for a public records officer to expedite requests.

Cut to Friday afternoon: On the eve of the request's seven-month birthday, DCF had yet to produce a report. (They also said they're still in the process of hiring a public records officer.)

"We're hopeful that the state is making every effort to fix DCF. It badly needs it," Bartosz said. "But it's extremely concerning, and it's extremely frustrating that this agency apparently still resists transparency and accountability. That's something that starts from the top, in the culture."

"They're holding back documents that would tell the public where they're at," she added. "If it's not where it should be, let the public know."

Andrea Grossman, a DCF spokeswoman, defended the agency, arguing that the request required it to produce an "extensive number of documents," some of which had to be redacted. (Her response did not address the aborted timelines DCF had provided in its emails.) Officials, she said, are still "actively working" on it.

"We expect to be able to provide a response very soon," she said.

By: Matt Stout