

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Women face added barriers in reuniting their families in child protection cases; burdens fall most heavily on women of color

MINNEAPOLIS (May 5, 2010) — A new report released today by WATCH has found that the child protection system places unrealistic burdens on parents who are working to reunite their families, despite statewide reforms intended to keep families together whenever possible.

The report, “Reasonable Efforts or Unrealistic Expectations: A Look at Hennepin County Child Protection Cases,” notes, for example, that parents facing mental health and chemical dependency issues must access a number of service providers in a number of locations to complete their case plans. Many lack the means for transportation or find that appropriate community resources are insufficient or unavailable.

In addition, parents are expected to juggle appointments and hearings among family, juvenile, and criminal courts, which, through no fault of their own, often begin hours late. As a result, parents often struggle to meet mandated time frames. Most often, this burden falls on women, particularly women of color, said Marna Anderson, executive director of WATCH, a court-monitoring organization dedicated to improving the justice system.

Anderson noted that 93 percent of the parents in WATCH’s research sample were female, most frequently the child(ren)’s biological mother. Furthermore, of the 129 child protection cases monitored by WATCH between August 2008 and December 2009, 69 percent of the primary caretakers or guardians were from communities of color. Seventy-eight percent of the children who were subjects of the complaints were also from communities of color. And in 30 to 50 percent of domestic violence cases child maltreatment was also alleged, but the abuser far too often did not face charges while the victim faced court action by child protection.

Because many of these women live in poverty and rely on government-sponsored programs for assistance, they become subject to greater scrutiny by authorities, adding another layer of obstacles to family reunification.

“The focus needs to shift away from how a mother has failed her children and address the ways in which society has failed the family,” the report states. “If the goal is to reunify families, everyone in the system should be focused on bolstering the family’s strengths and support systems with the same commitment used to investigate and assess the risk to children.”

To address some of the barriers families face, the report makes a series of recommendations, among them:

- Reduce the number of services and providers required in parents’ case plans.
- Start hearings on time and explain reason(s) when there are delays.
- Make every attempt to support victims of domestic violence to continue to care for their children at home.
- Improve communication and coordination among criminal, family, and juvenile courts.
- Ensure adequate representation for parents by having their attorneys meet with them prior to the day of a hearing.

For a complete set of recommendations and a copy of the report, visit watchmn.org.

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