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Atlanta Foster Children at Risk as State Fails to Make Required Child Welfare Improvements

(June 18, 2007) A court-ordered monitoring report of the Atlanta foster care system released today shows limited progress amidst serious problems, including failure to monitor children's safety in foster care. The report (available at www.childrensrights.org) is the second under a 2005 federal court settlement between Georgia and national watchdog group Children's Rights. Today's report shows Georgia has failed to meet benchmarks required by the settlement in 14 of 24 areas pertaining to the safety and wellbeing of approximately 2,800 children in foster care.

"This has been a terrible system for many years, and the limited progress shown in this report sure doesn't make it a good system," said Ira Lustbader, associate director of Children's Rights. "There's no excuse for the significant failures found in this report, which are putting abused and neglected children at further risk every day."

Today's report covers Georgia's performance from July 1, 2006 through December 31, 2006. It shows some progress, such as zero reports of corporal punishment used on foster children and only occasional placement of children in overcrowded foster homes (8% of cases reviewed). However, the data also show severe problems putting children in jeopardy, including:

- > **Failure to monitor the safety of children in foster homes.** Only 16% of children received the required twice-monthly visits from their case workers. Case worker visits are crucial to ensuring child safety and well being, yet 42% of the children did not receive even monthly visits. Case workers made the required visits with foster parents and group home staff responsible for children in only 39% of cases.
- > **Failure to conduct basic safety screens.** In 24% of cases, there was no evidence that foster parents were checked on the Sex Offender Registry. 46% of cases had no evidence of required drug screens for foster parents. Only 56% of relatives caring for foster children had been fully approved by the state.
- > **Poor support when children enter foster care.** Only 58% of children received required initial health check ups within 10 days of entering foster care; only 34% of children received timely initial dental check ups. Case workers documented that children had appropriate clothing in their new home in only 22% of cases.
- > **Poor support for foster parents.** In 86% of cases, foster parents were not provided with critical information about foster children, including medical, mental health and education records, before the children were placed in their homes.
- > **Failure to maintain sibling connections.** Only 19% of children in foster care who were separated from their siblings had required monthly sibling visits. For abused children placed into the foster care system and separated from their siblings, continued contact with their brothers and sisters is critical.

Children's Rights, along with the Atlanta law firm of Bondurant, Mixson and Elmore, filed its foster care reform lawsuit in 2002 against Governor Perdue and state officials responsible for the Georgia Department of Human

Services and its Division of Family and Children's Services. The class action suit, known as *Kenny A. v. Perdue*, charged that the foster care system in Atlanta was underfunded, mismanaged and failing to protect the safety and wellbeing of children in state custody. The 2005 settlement requires Georgia to make sweeping reforms to its foster care system in the metropolitan Atlanta area and to meet specific reform goals in service to children.

Children's Rights is a national watchdog organization advocating on behalf of abused and neglected children in the U.S. Since 1995, the organization has used legal action and policy initiatives to create lasting improvements in child protection, foster care and adoption.

www.childrensrights.org