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Reforms are giving Oklahoma a 'model child-welfare system,' officials say

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After a class-action lawsuit accused Oklahoma Department of Human Services of failing to take proper care of children in its custody, improvements since 2012 include placing more children in family homes rather than group shelters and responding more quickly to allegations of abuse and neglect within the child-welfare system.

MIKE SIMONS, Tulsa World file

Michael Overall

Eleven years after a federal court began monitoring reforms in the state, Oklahoma now has a “model child-welfare system,” officials said Wednesday.

Court-appointed experts declared that Oklahoma has made sufficient “good faith efforts” to be released from most provisions of a settlement agreement reached in 2012, when a class-action lawsuit accused the Department of Human Services of failing to take proper care of children under its custody.

“I want Oklahoma to be the most pro-family state in the nation,” Gov. Kevin Stitt said Wednesday. “Oklahoma’s recognition as a model child welfare system is a testament to the great strides our state and foster care system have made towards prioritizing kids and making families whole.”



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To settle the lawsuit in 2012, DHS created the “Oklahoma Pinnacle Plan” that established a panel of experts to monitor progress on 30 specific “target outcomes.” The experts will no longer monitor 23 of those outcomes, now that they have seen sufficient progress in those areas, officials said.

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The experts noted “years of investment by the Oklahoma Legislature, support from the state’s governors and DHS’ relentless efforts to create a safer and more effective child-welfare system.”

Improvements include placing more children in family homes rather than putting them in group shelters and responding more quickly to allegations of abuse and neglect within the child-welfare system, the report says.

Child Welfare Services “worked tirelessly over the last decade to achieve this momentous milestone in the Pinnacle Plan,” said Justin Brown, the director of DHS. “Our system is dramatically different than it was at the beginning of the plan.”

The report also noted improvements in the workload for DHS officials.

The Pinnacle Plan has made Oklahoma a role model for the entire country, said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of A Better Childhood, a national advocacy group that brought the federal lawsuit against the state.

“Children in foster care in Oklahoma are far better off today than they were when we filed this lawsuit,” Lowry said. “This report amounts to an important blueprint about how other states could improve their systems.”

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