

THE CALL

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Social service agencies mobilize against move

By RUSS OLIVO

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WOONSOCKET – The state Department for Children, Youth and Families may shut down its satellite office on Clinton Street – an idea that's drawing sharp protest from a group of social service agencies focused on child welfare.

Terry Curtin, the director of Connecting for Children & Families, said the satellite office was established after a local task force studied the problems of child abuse and neglect in the city several years ago.

"To have it now taken away, we don't feel would be in the best interest of families here in Woonsocket," said Curtin. "There were many organizations from Woonsocket that were members of that task force, and establishing that satellite office was a key recommendation."

Head Start, CCF, the Community Care Alliance and other organizations have signed a letter protesting the closure of the office to state officials, said Curtin.

The satellite office is located in a portion of 450 Clinton St., headquarters of Thundermist Health Center, which owns the building. Thundermist also leases another portion of the building as a satellite of the state Department of Human Services.

Joanne Lehrer, spokeswoman for DCYF, said the office functions as a branch of the agency's Region Four service headquarters, which is based in Providence.

Region Four covers not just Woonsocket, but most of north and northwest Rhode Island, including Pawtucket, Central Falls, Lincoln, Cumberland, Burrillville, North Smithfield, Johnston and Cranston.

The caseload of the satellite office varies, Lehrer said, "but in terms of cases covered by that office on a given day there would

be about 150-160," she told The Call in a series of e-mail exchanges.

Lehrer confirmed that DCYF is considering eliminating the satellite office as part of a budgetary consolidation move. She added, "No decision has been made."

If the office were closed, Lehrer said the caseload would be transferred to the Region Four headquarters in Providence.

About 15 case managers and support staff work in the satellite office. One who declined to give his name said employees are upset by the possible move, but he wouldn't elaborate.

Marlene Roberti, vice president of communications for Thundermist, said the agency does not lease the DCYF space directly to the agency. She said Thundermist has a broader contract with the state Department for Human Services. She said Thundermist does not expect to be notified if DCYF is moving out, and DHS has not signaled any intention of terminating its lease.

Curtin said the task force on child abuse and neglect that prompted DCYF to plant roots in the city was triggered by troubling data collected by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, an agency that collects data on child welfare throughout the state. At the time, Curtin said, KIDS COUNT had been tracking Woonsocket with the highest and second-highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the state for the better part of a decade.

The task force thought a local branch of DCYF would improve access to services and help the city reverse the poor record on child safety.

Curtin said CCF and other child-welfare advocates in the city feel that the proximity of the office has been beneficial to the community. She said local social

workers, counselors and other professionals have developed strong alliances with case managers and are able to steer them to useful, easily accessible resources within the city to help them manage their caseloads.

“It’s been a very good working relationship,” said Curtin. “We don’t want to see that end.”

According to RI KIDS COUNT, Woonsocket’s track record on child abuse and neglect does not appear to have changed much in recent years. In 2013, the most recent year for which data was available, Woonsocket had the highest rate of child abuse and neglect among all the major cities and towns.

The agency’s latest Fact Book says that for every 1,000 kids living in the city, 35 were affected by child abuse and neglect last year, more than twice the statewide average.

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