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But Melzter noted it will take "a couple of years" for the nearly 400 caseworkers hired earlier this year to get "real experience in the field to do this job effectively."

The state agreed to reform four years ago when it settled a civil rights lawsuit on behalf of foster children with Children's Rights, a national advocacy group.

"The Department of Children and Families is now where it is supposed to be under this massive, court-ordered reform effort, and Commissioner Kevin Ryan and his team deserve a great deal of credit for the work they have done," said Susan Lambiase, associate director of Children's Rights. "Unfortunately, too many children in New Jersey have yet to feel those improvements in their daily lives, so it is critical (the state) remain focused on the long-term goals."

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director for the Association for Children of New Jersey, said the state is "making good progress" but the monitor's deadlines to improve foster children's health care seem "unambitious."

The monitor gave the state four years before 95 percent of foster kids must get dental exams twice a year. A requirement that all children with behavioral problems undergo a mental health assessment won't kick in for three years.

Meltzer said the deadlines are "ambitious and fair, based on my experience (on) what it takes to get resources up and running. ... The trick ... is to balance the sense of urgency with the absolute necessity to plan for the change so (the system) can handle it."

The report may be found at www.cssp.org.

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