

## **Another count for DCS**

02/23/03

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services is lucky that only the courts are making official inquiry into its list of foster children.

Without the demands of first the Davidson County Juvenile Court and now the U.S. District Court's monitor, the next request could be an anxious relative or even worse, a police officer investigating a crime against a child.

Federal court monitor Sheila Agniel became the latest to raise questions about the ability of DCS to keep track of 10,000 foster children in the state system. After personally testing names and addresses, Agniel said she "cannot state with any certainty that DCS knows where all children are placed on any given date." She ordered DCS to conduct a statewide count, similar to one done recently to satisfy concerns raised by juvenile court authorities in Nashville about foster children in Davidson County.

Officials in Nashville raised a red flag at Christmas when juvenile court workers and volunteers were unable to locate several foster children on their list. The embarrassment was only cleared up when the department decided to personally track down over 1,000 youngsters. DCS was eventually able to account for every child with the exception of 47 classified as runaways. Agniel's test of the system, however, revealed similar shortcomings statewide.

With computer and communications technology, DCS should be able to assemble a database system that would put officials in contact with a foster child at the click of a button. And, as one advocate, attorney David Raybin put it, it's not a matter of more money but better management. If the problem is that case workers don't pass accurate information about a child's location over to the state, the department might need a zero-tolerance policy for its staff.

DCS' responsibility begins with accounting for children. Only after that duty is met can it spend its resources on helping those youngsters and their families address their problems.

But DCS can't depend on luck or the collective memories of its case workers; the children in its care shouldn't have to either.