

## Children's advocates hope Bredesen talks about improving DCS

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When the governor delivers his speech tomorrow, children's advocates say they will be listening closely for his plans to further reform the state's troubled Department of Children's Services.

While some advocates see signs of improvement, they say DCS needs to increase the number of foster homes, reduce the number of times children in state custody change foster homes, and improve its oversight of managers supervising the care of foster children.

"We want to promote stability in the foster home process and in children's lives so kids aren't moving around so much," said David Raybin, an attorney for the advocacy group Children's Rights, which sued DCS over claims of inadequate care of foster children.

Other advocates said high turnover among DCS caseworkers and inadequate oversight by their managers is the most pressing problem, and called for an independent review of how DCS handles its cases.

"I think it's a culture where managers think they know what's best for children, and they don't care what judges or foster parents think," said Barry Stokes, who founded the group Tennessee Foster Parents and Foster Child Advocates in Dickson.

DCS Commissioner Viola Miller said the governor has been extremely supportive of her agency's efforts to improve, and understands the challenges she faces as she leads the reform effort.

Meanwhile, the director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation said he hopes the governor addresses a problem that affects both his agency and DCS — the burgeoning methamphetamine problem in the state.

DCS officials have said the number of children entering state custody because of their parents' meth abuse is continuing to rise and shows no sign of abating anytime soon.

"The methamphetamine problem is growing faster than law enforcement can keep up with," said TBI Director Mark Gwyn. "We need meaningful legislation that will attack the problem on many different fronts."

Gwyn served on Gov. Phil Bredesen's methamphetamine task force last year and said he believes the governor is taking the problem seriously.

But Gwyn said legislation is needed to prevent the sale of large quantities of over-the-counter cold medications used to make meth, to increase jail sentences for meth dealers, and to increase the length of time meth users spend in rehabilitation.

Gwyn said meth addiction is extremely powerful and recovery is long and difficult.

"We've got to stop the sale of hundreds of boxes of cold tablets," he said. "This is a social problem that needs to be addressed by the whole community."