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EDITORIALS

It's the kids

MARYLANDERS didn't need a whistleblower to point out critical fissures in the state's child welfare system. For the Ehrlich administration to spend all its energy protesting the actions of an erstwhile ally, whose recently released e-mail exchanges with top department staff point out glaring safety issues in Baltimore and elsewhere, while not denying the substance of her messages, misses the point.

Better to spend the time attacking the problem — that way, things might improve.

For example, the city's Department of Social Services and the plaintiffs in a consent decree have disagreed for more than 16 years on the actual number of caseworkers serving the city's 7,000 children in foster care each year. The plaintiffs have claimed that the department was artificially reducing the average caseload count by doing such things as counting more people as caseworkers than were actually working cases. That would help explain why the reported caseload count average is closer to the consent-decree goal while state and federal statistics show that 31 percent of children aren't seeing a caseworker even once a month. Department secretaries through the years have denied any such number-fudging, but have been unable to explain the wide disparities in counts.

Now it turns out that children's cases have been assigned to empty caseworker slots rather than actual workers, among other unusual accounting practices, accord-

ing to internal e-mail. With scores of positions empty for years, such an error is grave. Children in crisis get precious little assistance from ghost guardians.

Other children had trouble even getting into the system, especially if their crises happened at night or on weekends, when the DSS intake center was seriously understaffed. One e-mail cites an average of 200 calls coming into the center during shifts when just two people were working. Some of the calls were reports of abuse that later ended in children's deaths, suggesting that a fully staffed force might have been able to save them.

The city's DSS has expanded the intake center, is hiring at a rate that at least keeps up with turnover and now reports an intake caseload ratio that, while 50 percent more than the consent-decree minimum, does ring truer. While tardy and crisis-driven, these are improvements.

But its continued failure to ensure that foster parents pass background checks, that a DSS worker sees each child at home once a month, that all its school-age children are actually going to school — all mock the promises the state made to the courts and children in the class-action lawsuit.

Rather than meet its obligations to legislators, the public and the children and families it promises to serve, this administration sees conspiracy in the shadows. But there's no secret cabal making sure caseworkers don't see the children in their care. That's just poor management.