

Chicago archdiocesan foster care program to end

CHICAGO - Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago has begun dismantling its foster care program after announcing that it will stop providing foster care services as of June 30.

The decision, which Catholic and state welfare officials called “tragic,” came after Catholic Charities was unable to get liability insurance for its foster care program.

Catholic Charities and other private agencies recruit and train foster parents to be licensed by the state, place children with the foster parents they have trained, and provide monitoring, casework and social services to the children.

When the closure was announced April 16, about 900 children were in the program, said April Specht, a spokeswoman for Catholic Charities. More than 150 staff positions are to be cut as well.

The decision came after Catholic Charities was unsuccessful in finding liability insurance to cover the program. Its current carrier agreed to continue providing coverage of all of Catholic Charities’ services except foster care.

The agency approached 25 providers besides its current carrier; 24 turned it down, and one did not respond, Ms. Specht said.

The insurance company’s decision came after Catholic Charities settled a lawsuit over the alleged abuse of three children in a foster home in the 1990s for \$12 million.

The insurance company capped its liability at \$10 million, and Catholic Charities had a \$1 million retention fund, said Walter Ousley, Catholic Charities' director of operations. That left the agency scrambling to come up with the rest of the money.

Catholic Charities and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services both have formed transition teams to transfer the children and their foster parents to either the state agency or other private agencies that continue to work in partnership with the department, said Kendall Marlowe, spokesman for the state agency.

Catholic Charities hopes that some of its foster care workers also can move to the agencies that will work with their young charges, in essence moving children, parents and workers together as a block, Mr. Ousley said.

Mr. Marlowe acknowledged that such a process would be ideal, providing the least disruption to the children, but said the agency cannot make any such guarantees.

"DCFS recognizes that there is a great deal of skill, expertise and a high level of qualifications among the outgoing staff," Mr. Marlowe told The Catholic New World, Chicago archdiocesan newspaper. "We wouldn't want to lose the skill, care and love those people bring to child welfare."

Erwin McEwen, the acting director of the state agency, said it was a sad day in the history of child welfare in Illinois. "The reputation of Catholic Charities is excellent," he said. "Their performance has been exemplary."

Staff members reacted to the news that the program would close with grief and shock, Mr. Ousley said, and with concern, above all, for the children.

"They were concerned about the kids first," he said. "Even though this is their livelihood."

Catholic Charities has been providing substitute care for children since 1921, and was among the agencies that advocated for the creation of the state's Department of Children and Family Services in 1963. It has continued to advocate for the welfare of the state's most vulnerable children since then, Mr. Marlowe said.

In the meantime, Mr. Marlowe said, his agency will continue to work with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago to continue to provide services to children who live with their parents.

The state is not worried about absorbing the foster children from Catholic Charities' program into other programs. The number of children in residential or foster care in the state is about 16,000, down from a high of about 52,000 in 1998, so the state's child welfare agencies have the capacity to take in these children.

The drop in the number of children in foster care was the result of a concentrated effort and changes in federal law in the late 1990s to keep families together when possible, and to return children to their parents or make them eligible for adoption more quickly when they were taken into foster care.

But while state law indemnifies the state agency from lawsuits, private agencies have no such protection in Illinois, one of only two states that do not protect private child welfare agencies working under contract to the government from lawsuits, Mr. Ousley said.

Catholic Charities' insurance carrier - whom Mr. Ousley would not name - provides coverage for foster care in 48 other dioceses, but none of them are vulnerable because they operate under different state laws.