Foster-care crisis looming

By MARSHA SHULER
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A foster-care crisis is looming because the state doesn’t have the resources to care for a growing number of children with major mental and health problems, the state’s social services chief said Monday.

Department of Social Services Secretary Madlyn Bagnieris said that’s why her agency will ask the 1998 Legislature for more money to train people willing to take such hard-to-place children and to pay them an extra subsidy for doing so.

The foster-care initiative and changes in child-support enforcement laws are the two big upcoming legislative issues for DSS, Bagnieris said.

If changes in child-support laws aren’t made, Bagnieris said, Louisiana could lose $27 million in federal funding.

And the foster-care problem is getting more acute, Bagnieris said. About 6,100 children in foster care have developmental disabilities, mental health problems or similar problems, she said.

“These children need much more than a loving, nurturing home,” Bagnieris told the Press Club of Baton Rouge. “If we don’t get a handle on the resources out there, we are going to be sending children out of state.”

Bagnieris has said she fears the foster-care situation could lead to the next “Gary W.” case for Louisiana.

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In the Gary W. case, a federal court found Louisiana violated the constitutional rights of a group of mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed children by warehousing them in Texas institutions.

The state spent decades and tens of millions of dollars trying to comply with a court order to get the youngsters returned to Louisiana and to place them appropriately.

Now DSS is seeking $2.5 million in state funds in the 1998-99 fiscal year to start developing resources within the state for “special needs” foster-care children.

The money will be used to attract some federal dollars for a $3.6-million program to provide specialized foster homes for 84 children, DSS Undersecretary Renea Austin said.

Austin said the money will be used to give specialized training to foster parents and provide a subsidy for parents willing to care for “high maintenance children.”

Foster parents would get the regular rate of $345 a month, plus an additional subsidy — depending on the needs and age of the child — of up to $1,200 a month.

The child-support law changes will come up in Gov. Mike Foster’s proposed special session in March.

During the 1997 legislative session, lawmakers refused to approve the changes required by federal law. Now the state is facing financial sanctions.

To avoid that, DSS will again try to win approval of bills:

• Requiring Social Security numbers on applications for professional, occupational, recreational, and marriage licenses, on records relating to divorce decrees, support orders, and paternity determinations and on death certificates.

• Requiring the filing of addresses and telephone, Social Security and driver’s license numbers of parties in child support proceedings.

• Requiring paternity tests once a sworn affidavit is received alleging or denying paternity.

Bagnieris said child support collections by her agency have increased in a year from $169 million to $315 million.