

Key official resigns her post at children and families agency

Thursday, February 28, 2008

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO
Star-Ledger Staff

A key official at the state Department of Children and Families who was a leading candidate to run the agency resigned yesterday, state officials confirmed.

The unexpected departure of Molly Armstrong, the department's director for policy and planning, leaves no clear choice to lead a department that must prove to a federal court monitor it is making progress improving its troubled child welfare system. Armstrong could not be reached for comment last night.

Department spokeswoman Kate Bernyk said Armstrong resigned after her father's death. Jack Armstrong died in a car accident two months ago.

His death "led to new family and personal responsibilities, and she needs to take an extended period of time off," Bernyk said. Armstrong plans to leave in April, she added.

Gov. Jon Corzine must find a replacement for Kevin Ryan, who leaves March 14 to oversee philanthropic work in Newark and Africa by the MCJ Amelior Foundation, created by multimillionaire and Newark native Raymond Chambers.

Ryan called Armstrong "one of the primary architects of the reform work over the last two years. Much of the what we accomplished, particularly the historic net increase in foster parents, was largely the work of Molly Armstrong and her team."

Armstrong is the third senior staff person to resign this year. Chief of Staff Lisa Eisenbud resigned last month; Ryan had intended to leave this week, but said he has been asked to stay another two weeks while a search for his replacement continues.

Faced with a growing vacuum in department leadership, the executive director of a national advocacy group whose lawsuit on behalf of foster children prompted the court monitoring, called on Corzine to make the agency a priority.

"The responsibility rests squarely with the Governor," said Marcia Robinson Lowry of Children's Rights. "This agency needs really strong leadership. Just because they've made two years of progress doesn't mean it's not as important. The agency runs the risk of slipping back to where we were before."

Children's Rights was so dissatisfied with the pace of reform in 2005 it petitioned the court to take control of the child welfare system. Corzine's election, and appointment of Ryan helped avert a legal battle.