

Intellectual consistency  
"Gross said. "There's

anded cost recovery  
component of the plan,  
balanced out by lower  
tion of competition.

...to climb thereafter, he said.

"It's like a credit card teaser rate," Stewart said.

The court heard the appeal on an expedited basis, so a decision could be made later this month.

Rep. Jeb Bradley, R-Wolfeboro, a law-

...electric rates by 15 percent to 18 percent the first year, or about \$13 savings on an average monthly bill. It involves PSNH refinancing almost \$700 million of its debt. The consumer groups wanted the utility to absorb as much as \$200 million more of its own debt.

# Panel: State agency fails to protect N.H. children

## Watchdog group telling state DCYF it's time to clean up act

CONCORD (AP) — The state agency responsible for protecting children has not complied with a 1997 federal court ruling ordering it to clean up its act, a watchdog panel said in a report released Thursday.

The three-member panel wrote in its 53-page report that the Division for Children, Youth and Families has made "little or no progress" and in some cases there have been "worsening situations" in the protecting of those in its care.

On July 29, 1997, a federal court approved a settlement of a class action lawsuit against DCYF that required the agency to make certain changes in its adoption, assessment, family service and foster care prac-

tices.

The suit was filed on behalf of all children in New Hampshire about whom DCYF had received a complaint of abuse or neglect. The settlement agreement was to last until 2002, and the court set up the panel to oversee the changes.

"More than three years of the five-year term of the agreement have passed and DCYF still fails to meet many of the requirements," said panel member Christina Crowe of the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston. "We found an unacceptably high number of assessments which were overdue and which did not meet the requirements of the agreement."

Crowe said the report would be

sent to the state Department of Health and Human Services and to the parties in the class action suit.

The panel made several recommendations, including the need to address staff shortages, eliminate the backlog of overdue assessments and bring field operations into compliance with performance expectations.

In January, members of a special legislative committee said they planned to push for major changes in the way the state's child protection agency handles troubled families and uses confidentiality laws.

Their intention followed four months of testimony and two public hearings on the field practices of DCYF.

The agency has long been under attack by parents who have been investigated or had their children taken from them, and several legislators have joined them in criticizing DCYF.

# Klemm umber

lic Service of New Hampshire,

### BRIEFLY

## Natural gas customers face rate hike

PORTLAND, Maine — Customers of Northern Utilities, southern Maine's principal supplier of natural gas, may soon be hit with another rate hike.

Northern Utilities is preparing to ask state regulators to approve an emergency rate increase to cover record-high wholesale prices. The company said it has yet to determine the size of the increase, which could take effect in January.