

Social workers' caseloads were also cut, foster care officials said.

By Kera Ritter Inquirer Staff Writer Jan. 27, 2005

The Division of Youth and Family Services has reached a record level of adoptions and decreased caseloads for caseworkers, two improvements that are part of overhauling the troubled New Jersey agency.

Report cites gaps in abuse probes

An audit found that a N.J. agency overlooked evidence. The state says it is trying to improve.

By Angela DelliSanti Associated Press Feb. 04, 2005

TRENTON - Even after a father acknowledged beating his foster child with a belt and had received repeated reports from state Human Services workers to stop harming the child, investigators still did not do enough to protect the child, according to a new report.

That was not the only lapse in judgment by investigators in the Department of Human Services unit charged with pursuing claims of abuse and neglect suffered by children in state custody. An audit by the Office of the Child Advocate released yesterday reveals continuing problems in the department's Institutional Abuse Investigations (IAIU), which has been plagued with a history of poor performance.

In more than half the investigations detailed in the independent audit, the state failed to check its own child-abuse registry to determine whether complaints had been logged against adults in contact with children. In six cases out of 161 audited, people with a documented history of child abuse maintained contact with children, the audit shows.

"The IAIU is the main safety net for children who have been removed from their families," the state's child advocate Kevin M. Ryan, said. "The audit reveals fundamental weaknesses within the IAIU. This is just not good enough for children. No way."

The Child Advocate's Office audited 161 randomly selected files from the 1,613 cases that the Human Services unit accepted for investigation from Nov. 1, 2003, through May 31, 2004. The cases contain allegations of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect from children who had been removed from abusive households and had been living under state supervision in residential treatment, detention, shelters or foster care.

The audit found that the unit's decisions were "professionally reasonable" in three-quarters of the cases, a slight improvement over results of a similar audit conducted two years ago by a different agency.

And it found that the unit correctly verified 10 of the 161 allegations of abuse or neglect, including one instance in which a Human Services investigator doggedly pursued a case in which a school principal tried to cover for an abuser who had slapped a student across the face.

In scores of cases, though, the audit found that workers bungled the investigations. The report, which did not identify the alleged victims or their caregivers, cites 11 instances in which auditors found evidence of abuse that the state's investigators overlooked.

"It is important to remember that we are only a half-year into a five-year process to reform this system," Human Services Commissioner James Davy said in a statement yesterday. "These conditions didn't develop overnight, and it will take some time to correct them. But we will correct them."

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Faulty investigations still plague DYFS

Report says some with history of abuse are acting as foster parents

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

Star-Ledger Staff

February 04, 2005

The state's child welfare agency continues to place kids at risk with faulty investigations of abuse and neglect in foster homes and institutions, a new report released yesterday by the Child Advocate's office concludes.

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"Nothing has changed," said Susan Lambiase, Children's Rights associate director, who called the latest report "alarming and appalling."

Noting the state is required to submit a plan to a court-approved monitor next month describing how the unit will improve, Lambiase said the Child Advocate's report "calls into question how serious they are about reforms in the settlement agreement."

The report says one in four foster parents accused of maltreatment had been accused before, and nearly half of complaints turned out to be true. The findings were the same in 2003.

State officials warned of this problem last month. In a Jan. 3 memo to all DYFS staff, Assistant Commissioner Ed E. Cotton ordered them to "stop placing children with relatives, family friends, or others who have been named as substantiated perpetrators in child abuse/neglect reports," according to a copy of Cotton's e-mailed memo obtained by The Star-Ledger.

"When we remove a child from a parent's home, we are, in effect, promising that child something better for them," Cotton's memo said. "I believe the vast majority of you would be shocked by some of the situations brought to my attention regarding the placement of children in homes with violent past perpetrators."

The report also found state investigators failed to run a child abuse background check on 53 percent of the 199 people accused of abuse and neglect. Skipping such a basic step in any investigation "is a great concern," the report said. The 2003 study found investigators ran a background check on 68 percent of the people accused of abuse.

Davy said this is now less of a problem since July 1, when the new child abuse hotline opened. Call screeners now run child abuse background checks every time they take a complaint, Davy said.

The Child Advocate's report did praise some investigators for aggressively ferreting out evidence to prove a child had been harmed.

"In one case, an investigator thwarted an apparent cover-up by a school principal regarding a physically abusive aide who had open-hand slapped a child," the report said. The aide was fired.

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