

Plans to improve CPS are outlined

Proposals include more caseworkers

by **Mary K. Reinhart** - Dec. 15, 2011 09:54 PM

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Arizona child-welfare officials are proposing a new investigative unit, higher caseworker salaries, beefed-up training and additional centers across the state to investigate child abuse and neglect and treat its victims.

State Department of Economic Security Director Clarence Carter, who oversees Child Protective Services, also plans to revamp the child-abuse hotline and hire dozens of new caseworkers in a CPS reorganization he plans to complete by July.

The Arizona Child Safety Task Force reviewed more than 100 recommendations Wednesday during its final meeting, and most of Carter's proposals are among them. The final report, which the group will send to Gov. Jan Brewer by Dec. 31, will propose changes to state laws and CPS organization, as well as policies governing law enforcement, the courts and other child-welfare agencies.

The recommendations will cost money, Carter said, including hiring up to 50 specially trained investigators.

Brewer spokesman Matthew Benson said the governor agrees that it will take more money to improve child safety. He said she will review the recommendations and seek action "as quickly as possible" on some of them.

The sweeping recommendations included everything from CPS investigations and outcomes, workforce issues, the juvenile-court system and foster care.

They did not include suggestions for how to prevent child abuse and neglect or reduce the number of children entering the foster-care system. That's despite hours of testimony from prevention experts who offered dozens of examples of programs that help keep children safe and families together.

Maricopa County Attorney Bill Montgomery, the task-force chairman, steered the committee away from discussing how the state would implement recommendations and stopped short of calling for more funding.

In a separate presentation, Carter said the new investigative unit also would review cases with multiple abuse or neglect reports and study a sample of hotline calls to determine if CPS workers missed cases that involve criminal conduct. CPS workers are supposed to jointly investigate those cases with local police.

CPS has struggled to care for a record number of children in foster care, reduced services available to families and high caseloads and worker turnover.

Brewer created the task force following several high-profile child deaths this year, including at least six who had prior CPS reports.

Montgomery and other prosecutors say they're concerned CPS has failed to properly investigate the most serious child-abuse cases. Montgomery initially called for creation of an investigative unit independent from CPS but now says he supports Carter's plan to launch the new unit in-house.

It remains unclear how the state would organize the unit and which cases other CPS workers would take.

Currently, more than 700 caseworkers investigate or manage roughly 35,000 abuse and neglect reports each year.

Carter, the task force co-chair, said new laws aren't necessary to make significant changes. But Montgomery said he wants the new CPS unit, which he's calling the Office of Child Welfare Investigations, to be part of state law.

Task-force members sparred over several recommendations.

Republican Reps. Eddie Farnsworth of Gilbert and Terri Proud of Tucson pushed back against recommendations they feared would broaden CPS authority and lower the threshold for investigating families.

"Once there's an investigation, they have almost unfettered ability to do whatever they want," Farnsworth said.

"It's essentially a witch hunt."

The recommendations, gleaned from testimony during three daylong meetings and nearly 300 public comments, also include:

Fully staff family advocacy centers in all counties. Centers include CPS, police, medical and social-work professionals who investigate and treat abuse victims.

Create separate phone lines and screening questions for doctors, nurses, teachers and other professionals calling the child-abuse hotline, reducing wait times and lost calls.

Require cross-training for certain CPS workers and law enforcement; increase forensic-interview and supervisor training.

Review the Cradle to Crayons juvenile-court program to focus on babies and small children in foster care; support long-term assignment of judges to hear dependency cases.

Improve CPS' data system; improve caseworker technology, including cell phones and voice recorders.

Prohibit placement of children with relatives who have shown support for the alleged perpetrator.

Dana Wolfe Naimark, CEO of the Children's Action Alliance, praised the task force for covering a lot of ground in just one month. But she said many of the recommendations will require funding, not just well-meaning people with good ideas.

"If you're going to make it so, you have to put something behind it," Naimark said. "The next steps are the most important: leadership, implementation and resources."