

CPS' struggles mount as abuse reports rise

by **Mary K. Reinhart** - Mar. 20, 2012 10:56 PM

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A new report shows Arizona's child-protection agency is struggling on several fronts to cope with a dramatic rise in abuse and neglect reports and an unprecedented number of children in foster care.

Children have fewer places to sleep as the number of foster homes continues to decline, according to the latest biannual report on state Child Protective Services. The children are waiting longer in group homes and crisis shelters.

The report, which covers the six-month period ending Sept. 30, also shows the agency has been unable to respond to investigations within the time frames required by state policy. CPS workers say some cases dating back to last summer still have not been investigated.

The new data continue a two-year trend that has seen a growing number of foster-care children, with 11,535 children in the state's custody as of Sept. 30.

Officials with the state Department of Economic Security, which oversees CPS, say they hope investigative efforts will improve because of new procedural improvements under review at several CPS offices, a new investigative unit and a team of top administrators working to clear up a backlog of about 8,400 cases.

But child-welfare experts and CPS workers say the system is more overwhelmed than ever and needs help now, not later.

"It is a system ready to implode," said Marsha Porter, a former CPS administrator who runs the Crisis Nursery in Phoenix. "It's going to continue hitting the workforce. And, in this business, you can't keep going double speed."

Among the findings in the new report, compared with the prior six-month period:

A 12 percent rise in abuse and neglect reports to the Arizona Child Abuse Hotline, to 19,666 from 17,586.

A 20 percent increase in neglect reports.

Dozens of cases the agency has not investigated, according to a random sample. These include allegations of current injuries and past abuse.

The deaths of six children from suspected abuse who had open CPS cases, five of them in Maricopa County, compared with two overall during the previous period.

An increase in the number of reports classified at the highest priority, which requires a response within two hours.

A nearly 10 percent increase in the number of children coming into foster care.

A nearly 60 percent increase in the number of children remaining in crisis shelters for more than three weeks. Shelters are intended as temporary housing for children until they can return to their parents, go to relatives or settle into a foster home.

More babies and small children staying in shelters and group homes. The average shelter stay for a child under 4 years increased to 115 days from 98 days.

DES spokeswoman Tasya Peterson said the increased number of reports is encouraging if it means the community has become more aware of child abuse and neglect. She said the recession and budget cuts have played a role in pushing up the numbers.

"A lot of these numbers are going up because more attention has been brought to the issue," Peterson said. "The economy is a huge factor, as well."

About 50 administrators from the DES' central office this week began taking on investigations to help CPS caseworkers in field offices throughout Maricopa County.

CPS investigator Frances Acosta works in the Phoenix after-hours unit and sees what happens when caseworkers in field offices can't respond to reports. The reports start to stack up.

"We are responding to a whole bunch of things that the field hasn't gotten to ... and so now we hit a crisis," Acosta said. "We got more kids in care, workers who are overworked. When you pull in 20 hours a week in overtime, that's crazy."

Among the 4,531 children who came into foster care from April to September, more than 500 were returning foster children.

Shelter administrators say the majority of the children they care for are part of large sibling groups or kids returned by their foster or adoptive parents.

Just two shelters take babies and small children in Maricopa County, and another set of homes takes older children. All the shelters are full, administrators say, and they routinely have to turn children away.

Porter, whose agency also licenses foster families, said she has seen a renewed interest from people willing to care for foster children, but many of the new licenses go to families who already were caring for their relatives' kids.

About 80 percent of children during the past reporting period were living with relatives or in family foster homes.

Funding trouble

Child advocates say the agency is failing to seek the resources it needs to respond to a growing caseload, putting a huge burden on caseworkers and endangering children.

"It's impossible (for CPS) to meet our expectations. We've got to stand up and face that," said Dana Wolfe Naimark, CEO of the Children's Action Alliance. "When we don't face it, the system has to find ways to get through each day. But those ways can be very dangerous to kids."

But Peterson reiterated comments that DES Director Clarence Carter has made frequently, saying the internal improvements must be given a chance to work before the agency requests more funding from lawmakers.

"At this point in time, we've got to fix the way the process works before we just throw money at it," Peterson said.

Sen. Linda Gray, R-Glendale, said the new numbers are troubling, and she wants the agency to receive additional money in the coming fiscal year.

"We need to improve the funding to be able to close out some of these cases and do the initial investigations," Gray said.

Gov. Jan Brewer has \$45 million in her fiscal 2013 budget to make up for lost federal funds and pay for caseload growth in adoption and guardianship.

Legislative leaders have not included that funding in their proposal for the next fiscal year, but budget negotiations are ongoing.

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