

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

It Still Needs to Improve Its Oversight of County Child Welfare Services

REPORT NUMBER 2000-500, MAY 2000

We performed a follow-up audit to determine the extent to which the Department of Social Services (department) implemented the recommendations included in our January 1998 report, number 97103, titled *Kern County: Management Weaknesses at Critical Points in Its Child Protective Services Process May Also Be Pervasive Throughout the State*.

Specifically, we reviewed the timeliness and completeness of the department's compliance reviews of county child welfare services agencies. We also evaluated the department's efforts to track statewide child fatalities caused by maltreatment, and its efforts in analyzing this information to develop prevention strategies. Finally, we assessed the department's progress in developing and implementing assessment tools to aid caseworkers in making critical decisions regarding the welfare of children.

Finding #1: The department conducts compliance reviews as required, but is not promptly ensuring corrective action.

The department now conducts timely compliance reviews of county child welfare services programs; however, it is still slow to give counties written reports of their deficiencies and remiss in ensuring counties promptly submit corrective action plans (CAPs). These delays may extend the amount of time a county remains out of compliance with department regulations designed to ensure children are adequately protected.

We recommended that the department continue pursuing and implementing measures to reduce the amount of time it takes to issue compliance reports and to receive and respond to CAPs.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

In its October 2000 response, the department stated that it continues to use the tracking tool it developed for compliance reports and CAPs to ensure these items are completed timely. It is also revising the CAP process to clarify what is expected from counties in order to facilitate their preparation of CAPs. It now immediately assigns corrective action specialists to provide technical assistance in developing and improving the quality of county CAPs. Finally, the department hired four new analysts to enhance its compliance review efforts.

Finding #2: The department has not fully implemented our recommendations to improve the quality of its county compliance reviews.

Although it implemented our recommendation to examine cases from county emergency response systems during its compliance reviews, the department does not always require corrective action when it notes deficiencies. It is important to review each county's emergency response system and to ensure problems are corrected because a system that is not working properly may prevent a county from responding quickly to allegations of abuse or neglect, leaving children at risk.

In addition, the department does not examine the administrative practices of child welfare services as part of its county compliance reviews. Because weak administration can hinder the delivery of key program services, the department is missing opportunities to better ensure children's health and safety.

We recommended that the department require counties to develop CAPs for all emergency response deficiencies noted during compliance reviews and that it review county administrative practices during compliance reviews.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department reports that it implemented a requirement for CAPs for all emergency response deficiencies beginning in July 2000. Further, the department told us that it is working with the County Welfare Directors Association to develop a process for reviewing county administrative practices that will be consistent with reviews the federal government will be conducting.

Finding #3: The department should begin assessing child abuse and neglect-fatality data currently available.

The department does not yet analyze existing data on children's deaths from abuse and neglect. Until the department analyzes this data, it cannot identify potential systemic weaknesses in child welfare services or consider whether legislative or regulatory changes might prevent future deaths of children from abuse and neglect.

In addition, the department has not distributed procedures for counties to comply with Chapter 1012, Statutes of 1999, which requires counties to report all cases of child deaths suspected to be related to abuse or neglect through the child welfare services Case Management System (CMS). The reporting of all child deaths through the CMS would improve statewide data regarding the extent of these deaths.

We recommended that the department assess the data currently available regarding child fatalities from maltreatment and that it develop and disseminate procedures for counties to report all child deaths through CMS as soon as possible.

Department Action: Pending.

The department is exploring ways to improve the monitoring, analysis, and tracking of data on children who die from abuse and/or neglect in California. In addition, it is finalizing a procedure to facilitate the documentation on the CMS of all child deaths related to suspected maltreatment.

Finding #4: Although its Structured Decision-Making Project appears to have potential for statewide benefit, the department does not have plans to assess whether counties participating in the project achieve better outcomes for children and families than counties that are not participating.

The department continues to provide leadership for statewide child welfare services by implementing its Structured Decision-Making Project. Although this pilot project is just getting started, initial indicators suggest it can benefit all child welfare services. However, the department presently does not plan to assess whether counties participating in the pilot project achieve better outcomes for children and families than counties that are not participating. Without such a comparison, the department cannot easily confirm the project's benefits and advocate its expansion to all counties.

We recommended that the department conduct an outcome evaluation to determine if the pilot project results in better outcomes for children and families.

Department Action: Pending.

The department is continuing its review of data generated from the pilot project to evaluate its capacity to improve the decision-making capabilities of child welfare workers. The department is also continuing discussions regarding the possibility of hiring a contractor to conduct an outcome evaluation of the project. However, the department believes that such an evaluation should not be conducted before fiscal year 2002–03 in order to allow for a sufficient case sample size.