



LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR  
DARYL G. PURPERA, CPA, CFE

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## CHILD WELFARE: INTAKE, ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE AND CHILD PROTECTION ACTIVITIES DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Officials of the Department of Children and Family Services, charged with investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect, did not always conduct its child welfare activities according to its own policies, and referred more than 2,600 cases to a lower level of care when an abuse investigation should have been opened, according to a report released Monday by Legislative Auditor Daryl Purpera.

From fiscal years 2009 to 2013, the agency improperly referred a total of 2,602 of 96,178 victims and perpetrators to family assessment, a level of services designated for low-risk cases, instead of to a child protection investigation, which is for medium- and higher-risk cases. “As a result,” the report said, “these individuals may not have received services consistent with their risk level and needs.”

Auditors said that from fiscal years 2009 to 2013, DCFS responded to a total of 130,186 cases of child abuse and neglect, including 192 child fatalities. “Therefore, it is important that DCFS ensures that caseworkers are referring cases appropriately, that cases are investigated timely, and that DCFS uses repeat maltreatment and repeat referrals as methods to measure the effectiveness of child welfare activities,” the report said.

The report by the state auditor pointed out that although DCFS has decreased caseworkers’ response time from an average of 7.26 days in 2009 to less than three days in 2013, it took some caseworkers more than two months to respond to 1,195 cases out of almost 89,000 in that period. Auditors said 104 of the cases DCFS responded to untimely involved sexual abuse, and three involved deaths. “Timeliness of making contact with families is vital for ensuring the immediate safety of children,” the report said.

In one of the 104 cases, a father sexually molested his son and was previously charged with raping his daughter but was never indicted, according to the report. “For this case, it took DCFS 117 days to make contact with the family” because the department did not re-assign the case to a second caseworker when the original caseworker resigned and the case supervisor was out on extended leave.

During 2013, the report said, 4,167 of 11,134 safety assessments, a process used by DCFS to determine if a child is in present or impending danger, and 9,696 of 19,042 risk assessments, which are used to determine the future risk of harm to a child, “were not conducted within required timeframes.”



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The report also said that the department “did not appropriately refer individuals” to child protection investigation when it was needed after having assigned the case a lower priority. It said that during the 2009 to 2013 period, DCFS did not refer 2,193 of 6,473 cases to a child protection investigation after caseworkers determined it was no longer a low-risk issue. “As a result, the individuals may not have been investigated as required,” auditors wrote.

The report pointed out that the number of state caseworkers has decreased from 1,008 as of June 30, 2009 to 816 by June 30, 2013, while the average caseload per child protection caseworker has increased from 138 in 2009 to 163 in 2013. According to national standards, caseworkers should handle about 144 cases a year. DCFS policy says child protection caseworkers’ loads can vary from 120 to 240 new files per year. Meanwhile, the overall caseworker turnover rate in positions at the agency has grown from 32.6 percent in fiscal year 2009 to 55.1 percent in 2013. The rate includes those who leave the agency or took other jobs at DCFS, auditors said.

The report said a “major challenge” confronting caseworkers and others involved in protecting children is “a lack of services and available resources” at the state and community levels. “Mental health and substance abuse services have been cut significantly but are the services most needed for child welfare families,” the report said. Funding for services has decreased from \$86.6 million in the 2009 fiscal year to \$63.5 million in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2013.

The report also said that the department also could improve how it evaluates the effectiveness of its services. Reviewing “repeat maltreatment and repeat referrals over varying lengths of time could help DCFS identify short-term and long-term trends for individuals in the child welfare system.” In Louisiana, the percentage of repeat maltreatment six months after an original report of maltreatment of a child is 6 percent, higher than the national standard of 5.4 percent after six months.

The agency said in its response to the report that it agreed with most of the findings. However, department Secretary Suzy Sonnier took issue with a finding that called on the agency to “consider revising its caseload” for individual caseworkers, even if it means requesting more money for staff from the Legislature. “DCFS does not have the flexibility once the budget has been adopted to add additional staff in regions that experience an increase in reports,” Sonnier’s response said. “Even if there was greater capacity to do so, new child welfare staff are not given full caseloads until they have been sufficiently trained and have received additional experience, requiring approximately two new staff in order to replace an experienced one.”

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**On Twitter:** DCFS did not always conduct its child welfare activities according to its own policies.