



Wyoming Legislative Service Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wyoming Child Protective Services

Program Evaluation Section

September 2008

Purpose

The Department of Family Services (DFS), Wyoming's child protective services (CPS) agency, responds to reports of child abuse or neglect (CA/N) that come to 28 field offices around the state. In 2007, there were nearly 8,000 such reports; DFS accepted and responded to about 5,000 of them. In August 2007, the Management Audit Committee requested an evaluation of the CPS multiple response system, CA/N investigations, DFS monitoring of child victims living at home, central registry management, and quality assurance efforts.

Background

A significant body of federal and state law directs how DFS conducts child welfare work in the state. The federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) and 2005 revisions to Title 14 of Wyoming Statutes set a focus on attaining permanency for children, avoiding out-of-home placements, and implementing a multiple response or track system in which only the most severe CA/N incidents warrant DFS investigations and findings.

At present, DFS investigates only about one-fifth of accepted CPS reports, handling the rest through other interventions or service responses. Our full report (page 6) includes a process flow chart that highlights important CPS decision points and casework activities. From report intake through incident closure, caseworkers and supervisors must balance child safety, legal considerations, parental

rights, and community expectations. The entire CPS process is complex and often ambiguous, guided by hundreds of pages of DFS policies and rules. With an average 2½-year experience level among caseworkers, experienced CPS supervisors are critical to child welfare practice in the state.

Results in Brief

CPS practice warrants improvement in each of the specific areas we reviewed. We have concerns with when and how supervisors assign accepted CA/N reports to tracks, as well as with the effectiveness of the track system itself. Caseworkers need to more thoroughly document investigation actions and better monitor those children receiving in-home services. DFS also needs to strengthen management of the central registry and enhance its quality assurance component.

Principal Findings

A CPS incident begins when a DFS supervisor accepts a CA/N report. By policy, within 24 hours of acceptance, incidents move into one of three tracks for casework: investigation, assessment, or prevention. The assessment and prevention tracks are intended to keep families' CPS issues from escalating to investigations. This hierarchy implies graduated degrees of DFS involvement – from offering assistance or service referrals, to investigating serious CA/N allegations (likely with law enforcement assistance).

Seven years after its implementation, we found two significant issues with the track system: CPS supervisors are assigning incidents inconsistently or not at all, and the track system is not effective in reducing families' severity of contacts. First, more than a third of CPS incidents lack a track assignment, and the wide variation we found among field offices in tracked incidents raises concerns about how supervisors are assigning similarly-situated incidents. To help establish greater purpose and consistency, DFS should seek statutory change to give supervisors more than 24 hours to assign tracks.

Second, the track system does not appear to help families avoid subsequent or more intense DFS contacts. In our review of randomly selected DFS client families' files, we saw that many families have multiple incidents spread among the tracks; despite repeated DFS contacts, there was little indication that their CPS issues improved. In assessment and prevention track incidents, where cooperation is optional, families rarely accepted services and their problems often worsened. We recommend that DFS heighten its scrutiny of families with chronic CPS issues, and that DFS evaluate how to make the track system effective or seek its repeal.

We also found that caseworkers are not consistently documenting evidence and findings in CPS investigations, as required in statute, policy, and training. Field offices use locally-developed documentation practices, thus undermining statewide consistency. For these most serious reports, we recommend that DFS adopt a statewide format for documenting CPS investigation decision points. Further, for each completed investigation, DFS should require thorough summary reports of evidence and findings.

DFS maintains a central registry of substantiated offenders and those "under investigation." It serves as an employment

screen for entities dealing with vulnerable populations. We found that checks for individuals who are under investigation are complicated by the track system, requiring careful verification to avoid over-reporting. Under-reporting may occur if caseworkers did not follow proper notification procedures. We recommend continuing vigilance in "under investigation" registry checks, and in substantiated incidents, redoubled efforts to ensure proper notification of perpetrators.

Our review of files and electronic data indicates that DFS does not consistently monitor the safety of children who remain in the care of persons who have maltreated them. Data indicate caseworkers are not completing safety and risk assessments to the extent policy calls for, nor are they following up consistently on substantiated incidents. DFS should clarify policies in key areas and install electronic alerts to prompt visitations with children who remain in their homes.

Finally, by compiling data and establishing state CFSR outcome reviews, DFS has made considerable progress in quality assurance since our 1999 CPS report. Nevertheless, DFS should complement the state CFSR with more effective use of its vast data resources for internal administrative and casework process reviews.

Agency Comments

DFS agrees with five of the report's eight recommendations and partially agrees with the other three. For most, the agency outlines specific actions it intends to take to implement changes, and proposes dates within the next 12 months by which it will accomplish these changes.

Copies of the full report are available from the Wyoming Legislative Service Office. If you would like to receive the full report, please fill out the enclosed response card or phone 307-777-7881. The report is also available on the Wyoming Legislature's website at legisweb.state.wy.us