

OVERVIEW

Follow-Up Audit of the Child Protective Services System

Report No. 03-12, August 2003

Summary

Every child deserves to live in an environment that is both safe and secure. To help ensure that Hawaii's children are given this opportunity, the Department of Human Services, through its Child Welfare Services Branch, provides protection to children at risk of abuse or neglect. A number of issues affecting the Department of Human Services' ability to achieve this responsibility have been raised in the past. In January 1999, our office released an *Audit of the Child Protective Services System* (Report No. 99-5) criticizing the department's communication and decision-making processes, which could ultimately affect the children's safety and well-being. These issues are so paramount that it prompted us to conduct this follow-up audit to ascertain the department's efforts to address the findings and recommendations of our 1999 audit. Despite the department's efforts to improve overall delivery of child protective services, significant problems persist and there is no evidence that children are better off today than they were four years ago.

In our current audit of the child protective services system, we found that many of the deficiencies revealed in our 1999 audit continue today. The crux of these problems stem from a lack or disregard of department management controls. We found that supervisory oversight and review—a critical department control—is inadequate and results in inconsistent enforcement of intake and investigation procedures, poor communication with Family Court and the Honolulu Police Department, and untimely permanency planning. In addition, the department did not always use or properly review its risk assessment matrices, which are tools that promote systematic and consistent decision-making. Errors and discrepancies in matrix use may result from a lack of in-depth matrix training.

We found that the Child Protective Services System, the State's child abuse and neglect database, remains unreliable, resulting in inaccurate, incomplete, and outdated case information for decision-makers. Moreover, the department does not consistently inform Family Court of pending expirations of voluntary foster custody agreements. We found six instances where children remained in voluntary placement beyond the 90-day statutory limit. In one of these cases, a child was placed in foster custody for five months before the department petitioned the court for jurisdiction. Lastly, inconsistent communication is further evidenced through the department's failure to comply with Hawaii's mandated reporting law, which requires all cases of abuse and neglect to be referred to the appropriate county police departments for criminal investigation.

We found that the department failed to plan for permanency by the twelfth month of a child's out-of-home care in nearly half of the cases reviewed (23 of 49).



Moreover, a family's inability to follow through with service plans was repeatedly disregarded in decision-making, leading to additional, similar plans being offered and resulting in permanency planning delays.

We also found that weak contract management practices may waste funds designated for services to children because service providers cannot ensure that clients receive the services billed for. Inadequate contract monitoring resulted in numerous overpayments to service providers. In one case, a service provider was overpaid \$13,000. We also found that welfare families continue to receive assistance benefits after children are placed in foster custody. Finally, we found that foster families were also paid for foster care services without adequate proof of the child being present in the home. In our sample, we found over \$11,000 in questionable payments because of inadequate documentation.

Recommendations and Response

We made a number of recommendations to the Department of Human Services to correct the problems identified. In its written response the department agreed with our basic findings that the Child Welfare Services Branch has not met all the benchmarks set out in our 1999 audit report. The department also provided clarifications regarding what it saw as errors or misunderstandings in the report.

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