

Digest of A Performance Audit of Utah's Child Welfare System

Our audit identified problems with Utah's child welfare system and recommends many changes to help the Division of Family Services (DFS) better accomplish its goals of protecting children from abuse or neglect, preserving families wherever possible, and finding a permanent home as soon as possible. The problems we identified in Utah's system are not unique. National experts said Utah's problems are similar to those they have seen in other states. Though we identified problems with the system, we also found DFS' child protection workers generally to be hard-working, dedicated and concerned about children.

The Division of Family Services is the child, youth, and family services authority of the state. To accomplish its goals DFS has developed programs to help families, including child protective services, out-of-home services or substitute care, and in-home services. In fiscal year 1993, DFS reported about 360 caseworkers in these programs investigated over 15,000 referrals of abuse or neglect and provided services to an average of 1,537 children in foster care. The state also has established the Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) program to ensure that a child's legal rights are protected. The GAL program is independent of DFS and is overseen by the state's Court Administrator's Office.

Child abuse and neglect have been major concerns nationally and in Utah over the past few years. Child and family advocacy groups, the public, legislators, and the media have all been concerned about child protection issues. DFS caseworkers have a very difficult job trying to do what is best for the child in the face of competing demands. For example, workers must protect the child while at the same time trying to preserve the family. If an abused or neglected child is placed in foster care, those more concerned with preserving the family may argue that the worker is destroying child-parent bonds. On the other hand, if the worker leaves the child in the home other critics may charge that the child is put at further risk of harm because the parents are unfit. Child welfare agencies and workers across the nation are faced with the challenge of finding the correct balance between these and other controversial issues.

To address child welfare concerns, we collected information from several sources. We reviewed 100 child protection services (CPS) investigations and 100 foster care cases selected randomly and discussed the cases with workers and supervisors. We also reviewed over 50 complaints from the public both about general concerns with the child welfare system and specific cases. Our review of these complaints identified similar problems to those found when we reviewed the random samples of CPS and foster care cases. We also conducted group discussions with supervisors and caseworkers on major issues. To assist in deciding what information to extract from the case files as well as how to interpret the information, we reviewed literature on child welfare and hired two nationally recognized experts to assist us.

They helped prepare our data extraction instruments and assisted in evaluating the information.

Improvements Needed in Foster Care. Improvements are needed to ensure that all children in foster care are protected, that families get services and that children get a permanent family as soon as possible. Out of our sample of 100 randomly selected cases, we found that in 51 cases DFS protected children, provided services and established a permanent home in a timely manner. In 30 cases the circumstances of the case made it very difficult for DFS to place the child in a permanent home. In other cases we found children were not placed in a permanent home, either with their natural parents or with other caretakers, within a timely fashion. Also, in other cases services were not provided to parent or child, and, in rare instances, children were not protected from further abuse or neglect. To prevent these problems, all foster care workers need to more strictly follow principles designed to help provide a permanent family for children in foster care and help protect children from abuse or neglect. Making these changes will alleviate some of the problems with the current system; however, circumstances in other cases make it very difficult for DFS to achieve the goals of providing services and establishing a permanent family.

Improvements Needed in Child Protective Services. More can be done to ensure that all appropriate referrals receive thorough and adequate investigation, and that all referrals are appropriately screened and prioritized. We found 24 of 100 randomly selected referrals were inadequately investigated. When a referral is inadequately investigated there is some concern about whether the child is being protected. In addition, we found that some referrals not accepted for investigation should have been investigated and some referrals were not properly prioritized. Further, more needs to be done to provide services to families to avoid further referrals and out-of-home placements.

System-Wide Changes Needed. Better training, more focused supervisory review, and changes in staffing will help ensure that children are protected, families are preserved where possible, and a permanent home is established. These changes and others that DFS can develop, such as periodic case file reviews, are needed as part of a program of continuous quality improvement. Making these changes will help ensure that the appropriate goals are achieved on every case. Currently, as case examples show, the state's child protection system has a significant number of cases where a relevant goal was not reached. Enhanced training, focused supervision, and changes in staffing will help increase the likelihood of meeting DFS' goals on every case.