



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 12, 2014

Contact: Greg Fugate, (303) 869-2839
greg.fugate@state.co.us

**IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED IN STATE SUPERVISION OF CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM,
STATE AUDIT FINDS**

DENVER—The Colorado Office of the State Auditor (OSA) has found deficiencies in the Department of Human Services' (Department) oversight of and guidance for county departments of human/social services that administer the child welfare system, particularly with respect to screening and assessing child abuse and neglect allegations. The audit findings collectively suggest a need for the Department to improve its supervision of the child welfare system to promote strong and consistent practices by the counties to help protect children.

The OSA made 16 recommendations related to improving various aspects of the child welfare system.

Auditors reviewed a sample of 60 referrals that counties received during Fiscal Year 2013 from people alleging child abuse or neglect, as well as 10 other referrals associated with an egregious incident of child abuse and near fatality that occurred during that year. Through those file reviews, auditors evaluated if documentation in Trails, the State's official electronic record of child welfare information, clearly showed that county staff followed laws and rules that govern screening and assessing child welfare allegations.

Counties didn't clearly document adherence to state laws or rules when deciding not to investigate six reports of child abuse or neglect, the audit found. For example, a county didn't assess allegations that a parent was using drugs in front of a 1-year-old child who'd previously been removed from the home. Counties are required to assess specific allegations of known or suspected child abuse or neglect as defined in statute and rules. Under state law, child neglect includes instances when parents don't provide adequate supervision, or an environment is injurious to a child's welfare.

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All 40 assessments that auditors sampled from Fiscal Year 2013 weren't completed timely or adequately. For example, 21 risk assessments had incorrect information about families and their histories, and five assessments didn't identify child safety issues.

For four of 40 sampled assessments, caseworkers didn't interview or observe children involved with child welfare referrals within county-assigned response times. The Department's method for measuring and monitoring county performance in this area appears to emphasize attempted, rather than actual, contact with children. A key part of assessing a child's safety and risk for maltreatment is actually seeing and/or talking to the child to help determine the most appropriate intervention.

As part of evaluating processes involving the Child Fatality Review Team, a statutorily created team that reviews fatal, near fatal and egregious incidents of child abuse or neglect, auditors analyzed 18 reports summarizing the team's review of incidents that occurred during Fiscal Year 2013. The audit found that the team didn't always identify violations of rules, and didn't recommend improvements for about 34 percent of the deficiencies it found related to referral screening and assessments.

Other problems noted in the audit included instances when the Department directed or approved counties' not following certain State Board of Human Services rules, and referrals that were assessed using an alternative method called differential response that may have been more appropriately assessed through traditional child welfare investigations.

Colorado's child welfare system was established to protect the interests of abused and neglected children, preserve and strengthen family ties and remove a child from parental custody when the child's welfare and safety are endangered.

The system is supervised by the Department and administered by Colorado's 64 counties. In Fiscal Year 2013, counties statewide received about 70,400 referrals of child abuse or neglect and screened in about 28,700 referrals (41 percent) for investigation.

The OSA's recommendations included 47 sub-parts. The Department agreed to implement 31 recommendation sub-parts, partially agreed to implement 6 recommendation sub-parts and did not agree to implement 10 recommendation sub-parts.

The child welfare performance audit report is available electronically on the OSA's website, <http://www.state.co.us/auditor>, via the link called "OSA Audit Reports."

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