

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS



CHILD WELFARE

PERFORMANCE AUDIT, OCTOBER 2014

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

CONCERN

Our audit found deficiencies in the Department of Human Services' (Department) oversight of and guidance for county departments of human/social services, 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.

KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS

- **REFERRAL SCREENING.** In our review of 20 screened out referrals and 10 referrals of incidents reviewed by the Child Fatality Review Team, it was unclear that counties had followed statutes and rules to make appropriate screen-out decisions for six referrals. If referrals are inappropriately screened out, the county takes no further action, and children and families may not get the services they need.
- **TIMELINESS OF INITIAL CONTACT.** For 4 of 40 sampled assessments, Trails documentation showed that caseworkers did not interview or observe children involved with child welfare referrals within county-assigned response times.
- **ASSESSMENTS.** The Trails records for all 40 assessments of child safety and risk in our sample did not demonstrate adequate or timely completion of all required elements. For example, 21 risk assessments had incorrect information about families and their histories, and 5 assessments did not identify child safety issues.
- **CHILD FATALITY REVIEW TEAM (CFRT).** The CFRT reviews child fatalities, near fatalities, and egregious incidents of child abuse or neglect. Our review of 18 CFRT reports summarizing reviews of Fiscal Year 2013 incidents found that the CFRT did not always identify violations and did not recommend improvements for about 34 percent of the deficiencies it found related to referral screening and assessments. Further, 75 percent of the CFRT's recommendations for incidents that occurred from Fiscal Years 2011 through 2013 had not been fully implemented as of April 2014.
- **INTERPRETATION OF DEPARTMENT AUTHORITY.** In several instances, the Department established processes to direct or approve counties' not following certain State Board of Human Services rules.
- **COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM.** The Department allocated \$1.3 million in incentive fund monies to county programs for Fiscal Year 2013, but lacks processes to ensure that the programs are accomplishing the intent of the Program.
- **DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSE PILOT PROGRAM.** Of 10 sampled referrals that were assessed using an alternative method called differential response, three assessments may have been more appropriate to assign as investigative assessments. The audit found problems with the completeness of Trails documentation for the sampled differential response assessments.

BACKGROUND

- 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 State 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 (41 percent) for investigation.
- For Fiscal Year 2015, the Department was appropriated \$448.3 million for child welfare activities. This represents 24 percent of the Department's total Fiscal Year 2015 appropriation of \$1.9 billion.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The audit made 16 recommendations (47 sub-parts) to the Department of Human Services to improve various aspects of the child welfare system. The Department agreed with 31 recommendation sub-parts, partially agreed with 6 recommendation sub-parts, and disagreed with 10 recommendation sub-parts.