

Department of Health and Human Services Division of Children and Family Services: A Review of Hotline and Non-court Data



The Legislative Audit Office is a nonpartisan division of the Legislature, directed by the Performance Audit Committee. The Committee selects topics for the Office to audit, details the scope of such audits, and makes recommendations as to how the Legislature should proceed after the Office completes its report.

Audit Overview

The audit examined selected aspects of the child welfare system, including 1) how reports of potential abuse or neglect are made to, and evaluated by, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Division of Children and Family Services (CFS), 2) different options for how reports are handled once CFS has made a determination about whether to accept them for further investigation, 3) the number of abuse and neglect reports going up between FY2015 and FY2019 while the percentage of reports accepted for further investigation went down during a part of that time period, and 4) for cases of children whose abuse or neglect report does not lead to court involvement (non-court cases), the available oversight and data on how long those cases are open and how often children have more than one non-court case.

Audit Recommendations

The Department of Health and Human Services should report to the Performance Audit Committee by January 1 on regulatory review of policies.

Additional review of the Eastern Service Area would be useful, however, the Committee will not recommend additional review until the impact of the pandemic on DHHS has decreased significantly.

The Committee will consult with the Health and Human Services Committee about a potential interim study to consider additional oversight of non-court cases.

DHHS is not promulgating many policies, hotline data shows increase in reports but decrease in acceptances

The audit found that DHHS is not promulgating many child welfare policies and is likely in violation of the Administrative Procedure Act. The hotline data examined during the audit showed that there was an increase in the number of reports to the Child Abuse and Neglect hotline and a decrease in the number of reports accepted, but that there was little change in the number of overrides, types of allegations, and reasons reports were not accepted. The most notable difference in the number of reports and acceptances was by service area. The Eastern service area was the only area to report a steady increase in reports between FY2015 and FY2019. It also had the lowest proportion of accepted reports during that time.

Non-court case oversight not uniform across state, non-court cases more likely than not to close within six months

Review of oversight for non-court cases found that while 1184 teams and the Foster Care Review Office have some powers to review cases and access to some information, not all cases are reviewed and oversight of non-court cases is not systematic or uniform across the state. Examination of non-court data showed that more than 60% of non-court cases were closed within four months of opening. The majority of children who had multiple non-court cases only had two cases during the period reviewed, though more than 10% of cases had 3 or more cases. More than half of the children with multiple cases had a case opened within 6 months of the previous case being closed.