

# Progress Report



December 2002

Report No. 02-65

## The Department Still Lacks Data Needed to Assess the Child Safety Administrative Review Process

### *at a glance*

The Department of Children and Families is still working to develop an information system that can provide the data needed to determine if it is taking appropriate and adequate measures to prevent further harm to abused and neglected children. The department planned to implement the needed component to its HomeSafenet information system by October 2002. However, its implementation has been put on hold. Until the department puts the Child Safety Assessment component in place and conducts appropriate data verification, it will lack data needed to assess the effectiveness of its administrative review process. As a result and more than three years later, the Legislature continues to lack assurance that its mandate that the department closely examine at-risk children is having the intended effect.

### Purpose

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Children and Families in response to a 2001 OPPAGA report.<sup>1</sup> This report presents our

assessment of the extent to which the department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

### Background

Due to concerns that the Department of Children and Families was not appropriately considering the potential risk to children when child protective investigations did not result in court action or removal from the child's home, the 1999 Legislature amended Ch. 39, *Florida Statutes*, to require the department to establish an administrative review process for these investigations (Ch. 99-168, *Laws of Florida*). The administrative review is intended to ensure that the department takes appropriate and adequate measures to prevent further harm to abused and neglected children.

The department is to conduct an administrative review for all cases in which it decides to leave children in their homes and not take the children into custody or file a dependency petition with the courts. At a minimum, an administrative review is required when a family has not complied with its prior case plan or when there are prior abuse reports with findings.

<sup>1</sup> *Performance Review: Client Characteristics and Outcomes Are Similar for Both Administrative and Judicial Review of Child*

*Abuse Cases*, [Report No. 01-06](#), February 2001.

The 1999 Legislature directed OPPAGA to analyze and report information on all child protective investigation cases that were subject to statutorily mandated administrative review by the department. OPPAGA issued reports on the administrative review process in December 1999 and a final report in February 2001. This report provides updated information on the status of the department efforts.

## Prior OPPAGA Findings

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### *The department implemented the administrative review process in May 1999*

To meet its statutory requirement, the department used the supervisory review component of its Initial Child Safety Assessment rather than creating a new administrative process.<sup>2</sup> Under this procedure, the protective investigator must assess the immediate safety risk(s) for each child in a family that is subject to a child protective investigation within 48 hours of making face-to-face contact with the alleged victim and family members. The investigator's supervisor must then review the appropriateness of this assessment as well as any safety actions that were taken or proposed by the investigator within 72 hours of receiving the investigator's initial assessment.

If the supervisor determines that investigator recommendations concerning the child are not appropriate, the supervisor may require an alternative course of action that may include removing the child from the home or filing a court dependency petition. The supervisor has 24 hours to

provide comments to the investigator after completing the supervisory review.

In addition, protective supervisors are required to refer certain high-risk cases for a second-party review. Second-party review occurs in all cases in which the caregiver is responsible for the death or serious injury of another child. A review is also to occur if at least two of the followings three factors are present:

- the child is age four years or younger or is non-verbal;
- there are prior reports involving the child regardless of findings; and
- there is a current report of actual serious or severe injury, neglect, or threatened harm.

### *Client characteristics and outcomes were similar for both administrative and judicial review of child abuse cases*

For our 2001 report, we analyzed the 35,679 cases of children who had been subjects of abuse reports investigated and closed between January 3, 2000, and September 30, 2000, and who had been subjects of previous department investigations. Of these alleged victims, 31,442 children (88.1%) had gone through the administrative review process, and the remaining 4,237 children (11.9%) had gone through the court system. Our analysis reached the conclusions below.

- Children who had gone through the administrative review process were similar to those who had gone to court in terms of their demographic profiles, and both groups had similar types of verified maltreatment. The children who went through the courts system were more likely to have multiple incidents of abuse and neglect.
- About one-fourth of the children in both groups had subsequent alleged abuse reports. However, we concluded that

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<sup>2</sup> The department implemented the assessment tool statewide in May 1999, and an automated version was implemented in January 2000.

the department was appropriately using higher-level safety actions (such as removal of children from their homes) to ensure the safety of children considered to be the most vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

***The department needed to maintain additional data on case outcomes***

At the time of our prior report, department data systems did not maintain information on all the child safety risk factors that were to be used in its administrative review process. The department originally used its Initial Child Safety Assessment as the data source for its administrative review process. However, this assessment did not capture data on many of the specified child safety risk factors such as a caregiver's suspected substance abuse or mental illness. In addition, the data did not contain complete information on child protective investigations conducted around the state. These data weaknesses precluded assessments of how the various risk factors were being used in the administrative review process.

The department subsequently phased out the Initial Child Safety Assessment when it developed a new risk assessment instrument, the Child Safety Assessment. The Child Safety Assessment contains data needed to assess the administrative review process. The assessment documents safety factors for each child such as whether the caregiver has a substance abuse or mental health problem and whether the child is age four or younger or nonverbal. The assessment also provides documentation that the supervisor has reviewed the protective investigator's findings and decisions.

We recommended that the department ensure that complete and accurate information was available to facilitate future assessments of the administrative review

process. Specifically, we recommended that

- all entities responsible for protective investigations enter information into the Child Safety Assessment component of the HomeSafenet information system once it was fully implemented, and
- necessary data validation practices be designed and implemented to ensure that information collected could be matched across information systems.

## Current Status

The department still lacks data needed to fully assess its administrative review process because of delays in implementing the Child Safety Assessment component of HomeSafenet. Moreover, although the department has begun data verification activities on the Child Safety Assessment, more work is needed. As a result, the Legislature continues have no assurance that its mandate that the department closely examine at-risk children is having the intended effect, more than three years after passing this requirement.

***Data is not available to assess the administrative review process because of delays in implementing the Child Safety Assessment***

The department's goal was to implement the Child Safety Assessment as a component of its new HomeSafenet information system statewide by October 2002.<sup>3</sup> The department began testing the Child Safety Assessment on a limited scale in selected protective investigation units in two districts in July 2002.<sup>4</sup>

However, in October 2002, this

<sup>3</sup> The Child Safety Assessment replaces the tool the department was using at the time of our 2001 review which did not contain sufficient data to fully assess the department's administrative review process.

<sup>4</sup>The two districts are District 10 (Broward Sheriff's Office) and District 2B.

implementation was put on hold because problems were found when the department tested the Child Safety Assessment and other aspects of the system. The department determined that the Child Safety Assessment needed to be enhanced to make it more useful and user friendly. These needed enhancements include fewer data screens, easier data entry, and improved displays for chronological notes. The State Technology Office became a partner in the development of HomeSafenet in October 2002 and is developing a plan for a new technical direction for the system.<sup>5</sup> According to department officials, a new timeframe for statewide implementation will not be established until the State Technology Office completes its plan. That office has not set a timeframe for when it will complete its plan.

***The department needs to ensure that Child Safety Assessment data is accurate when it resumes implementation of HomeSafenet***

The department had begun some needed data verification activities before it put implementation of HomeSafenet on hold.

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<sup>5</sup> The department announced in October 2002 that it is partnering with the State Technology Office to improve and integrate its technology services, including HomeSafenet.

Department personnel worked on improving the accuracy of the system's eligibility data and had checked the accuracy of data in some fields and reconciled the master client list. Staff members also checked the accuracy of data on home visits and began reconciling data in the Child Safety Assessment with data in the Florida Abuse Hotline Information System.

Department management said it plans to develop a long-range strategy for verifying data accuracy and to form a quality assurance team to review data accuracy on a routine basis. The department plans to establish the quality assurance team to coincide with statewide implementation of the Child Safety Assessment.

These activities will be critical to ensuring that data in the Child Safety Assessment is accurate and should be continued. The department also should set a completion date for these activities, as well as for the full implementation of the Child Safety Assessment. The department cannot provide accurate, statewide information to assess the effectiveness of its administrative review process until full implementation and data verification is accomplished.

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