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Progress Report

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Report No. 03-09

Child Protection Program Makes Needed Changes But Lacks Data for Evaluating Results of Initiatives

at a glance

The Department of Children and Families' Child Protection Program implemented several recommendations made in our 2001 report. The program is now responding faster to hotline calls and monitoring private provider performance more effectively. However, the program continues to experience a large backlog of child protection investigations.

It would be premature to determine results of actions taken by the program to improve performance in the past year. But even when the actions have been in place long enough, the program still will lack reliable data for gauging effects of some of these initiatives, such as district efforts to recruit and retain new foster parents, and whether the program is beginning investigations within required time limits.

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 on the child protection program.^{1, 2} This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the

department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

Background

The Child Protection Program is intended to provide for the care, safety, and protection of abused and neglected children in an environment that fosters healthy social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. The program's goals are to protect children from harm caused by abuse and neglect and to ensure a permanent and stable living arrangement for children who are victims of such treatment.

Program services are administered through a central program office in Tallahassee, 13 district offices, 1 regional office, 5 county sheriffs' offices, and community-based care providers. In 1996, the Legislature mandated that the department establish pilot programs to privatize child protective services through contracts with community-based agencies (Ch. 96-402, *Laws of Florida*).

The Legislature expanded the department's privatization efforts in 1998 and 2000, and directed the department to contract with community-based agencies for foster care and related services statewide. Under the new privatized structure, these agencies will assume many of the management and operational responsibilities previously held by the

¹ Section 11.45(7)(f), *F.S.*

² *Justification Review of the Child Protection Program within the Department of Children and Families*, OPPAGA [Report No. 01-14](#), March 2001.

department's service districts. Such agencies will be responsible for planning, administering, and delivering client services; ensuring that services are provided in accordance with state and federal laws; and coordinating with other local public or private agencies that offer services to clients. As of December 2002, the department had contracted with community-based agencies in 12 of the state's 67 counties.

The Child Protection Program provides five major services. As shown in Exhibit 1, the volume of most of these services has increased over the past three years.

Exhibit 1 The Volume of Most Services Has Increased Over the Past Three Years

	Fiscal Year		
	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
Number of hotline calls	469,334	422,945	439,074
Number of protective investigations	164,464	176,635	185,675
Number of victims of abuse and neglect	76,494	111,593	113,907
Number of children in protective services	16,584	16,534	14,917 ¹
Number of children in out-of-home placement ²	29,168	31,964	33,270
Number of children with finalized adoptions	1,504	2,008	2,381

¹ Point-in-time count as of August 4, 2002, previous fiscal years point-in-time as of December.

² Out-of-home placements include children placed with relatives, non-relatives and foster care.

Source: Department of Children and Families.

- **Florida Abuse Hotline.** The hotline serves as the central point for receiving and assessing information about suspected abuse or neglect of children and other vulnerable citizens, including disabled or elderly adults.
- **Protective investigations.** Employees from the department and five sheriffs' offices conduct investigations of abuse reports received from the hotline to determine

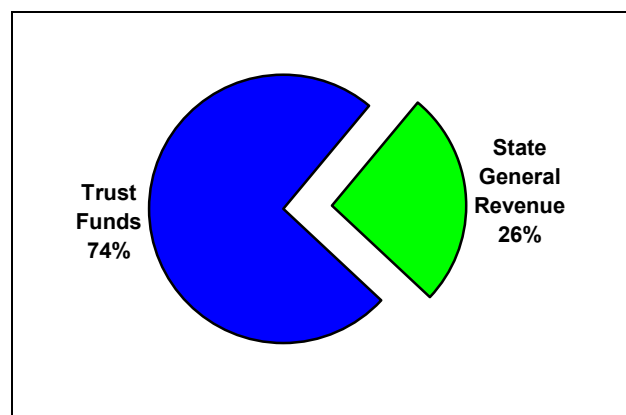
whether there is any indication that a child in the family or household has been abused, abandoned, or neglected and who is responsible for the maltreatment. The investigations also assess the immediate and long-term risks for each child in the household, and identify whether additional services are necessary.

- **In-home services.** When needed, the department provides an array of services including case management, counseling, homemaker services, and parenting skills training to protect abused children who remain in their own homes. In-home services can be voluntary, but may be court-ordered in cases that are more serious.
- **Out-of-home services.** When a child must be removed from their home, they may be placed in the care of a relative, a non-relative such as a family friend, or a foster care home. Foster care placements include emergency shelter services, family foster homes, residential group homes, and subsidized independent living arrangements.
- **Adoption services.** The program seeks to arrange permanent adoptive homes for those children who cannot be returned to their own families. This includes providing legal services to terminate parental rights, finding adoptive families, supervising adoptive placements, paying court costs, providing health services, and paying monthly cash subsidies for some children.

The program was appropriated \$853.6 million for Fiscal Year 2002-03. State general revenue appropriations account for 26% of the appropriations, while trust funds account for 74% of the program's appropriated budget (Exhibit 2 shows program appropriations by funding source). For Fiscal Year 2002-03, the Legislature authorized 5,425 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions to the program.

Exhibit 2

The Program Is Funded With State and Federal Funds



Fiscal Year 2002-03 Appropriations

Trust Funds

Grants and Donations Trust Fund	\$ 501,929
Administrative Trust Fund	9,763,357
Operations and Maintenance Trust Fund	9,879,494
Child Welfare Training Trust Fund	11,240,703
Social Services Block Grant Trust Fund	73,372,963
Tobacco Settlement Trust Fund	143,754,817
Federal Grants Trust Fund	383,516,409

Trust Funds Total **\$632,029,672**

State General Revenue **221,645,586**

Total **\$853,675,258**

Source: General Appropriations Act.

Prior Findings

In our March 2001 justification review, we concluded that the program had been reasonably successful in preventing abused and neglected children from further harm. However, the program had not met several legislative performance goals and needed to develop more effective strategies to improve its performance. We also found that the program faced a number of challenges in implementing community-based care initiatives.

The program had not been timely in responding to calls to the Florida Abuse Hotline. It is important for the program to quickly respond to hotline calls and promptly initiate investigations of alleged child abuse. A caller to the hotline who is kept waiting too long may hang up, resulting in a missed report of child abuse or neglect. To monitor whether hotline counselors answer calls

quickly, the Legislature established a performance measure of the percentage of calls that are abandoned. The Legislature has modified the standard for this measure over time.³

Our prior report found that the department had not met the legislative standard for abandoned calls for Fiscal Year 1999-00, when 23.4% of calls to the Hotline were abandoned (109,910 of 469,334 calls made). The department's performance had declined from the prior years. Program officials attributed this increase in abandoned calls to two primary factors. First, the number of calls made to the hotline increased by 44.9% (from 323,886 calls in Fiscal Year 1998-99 to 469,334 calls in Fiscal Year 1999-00), leaving hotline employees unprepared to deal with the large volume of increased calls. Second, due to additional documentation requirements, the department took more time to handle each call, which meant that hotline counselors had less time available to take other calls. To address this problem, the Legislature authorized 57 new hotline counselor positions beginning in October 1999.

The number of backlog cases had increased significantly. It is also important for the program to initiate and complete its child protection investigations in a timely manner. During investigations, program employees determine whether a child has been abused or neglected, assessing the long-term risks to the child and identifying the services necessary to ensure the child's safety and well-being. Florida law requires the department to initiate investigations within 24 hours of receiving the Hotline call. Before July 2000, Ch. 39, *Florida Statutes*, required that investigations be closed within 30 days. The 2000 Legislature extended the required timeframe for closing cases to 60 days. We recommended that the department monitor the impact of the new positions on its ability to meet the legislative performance standard.

Our prior report found that the department did not close investigations within the statutory timeframes and had not met its legislative

³ The standard established by the Legislature was 3% in Fiscal Years 1996-98, 2% in Fiscal Years 1998-00, 7% in Fiscal Year 2000-01, and 5% in Fiscal Year 2001-02.

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standard. During the 1999-00 fiscal year, the department closed only 37.6% (38,929 of the 103,455 investigations) within the statutory timeframe of 30 days. In Fiscal Year 2000-01, the percentage of cases closed within the new timeframe of 60 days increased to 52.4%. As a result, the program experienced substantial backlogs of cases. Program officials identified several factors that impeded efforts to close cases quickly, including the time needed to involve law enforcement and child protection teams in gathering evidence, and investigation delays that occurred because investigators were unable to contact witnesses. To reduce the backlog, we recommended that the program consider new strategies such as targeting those cases that remain open because supervisory action was needed.

Program management did not use key information related to program performance. In our prior report, we noted that the program did not report how quickly it began investigations for the two priorities of abuse referrals. Florida law designates two response priorities for protective investigations: immediate and within 24 hours. In cases in which information received by the hotline indicates that the child may be in imminent danger of being harmed, protective investigators must immediately initiate an investigation. The program did not analyze its response time for the two priority levels. As a result, program management could not determine whether children considered to be at higher risk were seen as soon as possible. We recommended that the program begin tracking the time it takes to see alleged victims needing an immediate investigative response.

We also noted that the program was not able to identify the reasons why investigations were open beyond the statutory timeframe because protective investigators did not record these reasons in the Florida Abuse Hotline Information System (FAHIS). Although investigators were required by department procedures to document the reasons why cases remained open, no reasons were documented for 65.8% of cases in Fiscal Year 2000-01. The lack of accurate information on the reasons for open cases made backlog reduction strategies more difficult. We recommended that the program ensure that

investigators comply with this procedure and record complete and accurate information on the reasons why investigations are not closed within 60 days.

The program also did not meet the legislative standard for reabuse and neglect during services and after service completion. However, according to program officials, the methodology for measuring reabuse was flawed, resulting in inaccurate performance data. The program was in the process of implementing an automated child safety assessment as part of the program's new information system, HomeSafenet, at the time of our 2001 report. The assessment instrument would allow the program to collect data on the types of problems that lead to child abuse and analyze this information. We recommended that the program use information about specific family characteristics that are present in cases in which reabuse occurs and determine whether strategies for preventing reabuse are effective or need to be redesigned.

Program efforts to increase the supply of foster and adoptive homes to sufficient levels were not successful. Our prior report noted that the number of children in foster care outpaced the program's and private agencies' ability to increase the number of foster homes. Maintaining a sufficient number of foster care placements is critical to the program's ability to match the needs of children with the resources of individual foster care homes. In overcrowded homes, children do not receive the attention and support they need from foster parents. Ongoing efforts to recruit foster parents are necessary to ensure the availability of appropriate placements as families stop fostering or serve fewer children than their licensed capacity.

Due in part to growth in the number of children in foster care (which grew by 19% between June 1998 and June 2000), some of the program's foster homes served more children than they were licensed to serve. As of August 2000, nearly 11% of the program's foster homes were serving more children than their licensed capacity.

The program also did not meet its goal for placing children in adoptive homes, but had improved its performance from prior years. When children cannot be safely returned to their

families, the program attempts to find them permanent adoptive homes. The program focuses its placement efforts on special needs children who are difficult to place because they are older, belong to a minority group, have siblings, or are disabled. The Legislature's performance standard is to finalize adoptions for 90% of children who are legally available for adoption each year. In Fiscal Year 1999-00, the program did not meet this standard, although its performance improved; 66% of children legally available for adoption were adopted in Fiscal Year 1999-00, an increase over the Fiscal Year 1997-98 adoption rate of 45%. The number of children waiting to be adopted had grown and outpaced the number of adoptive homes, placements, and finalizations.

High staff turnover diminished the program's ability to meet legislative goals. Our prior report noted that high turnover and lack of experience among family services counselors impeded the program's ability to work effectively with families and, therefore, achieve its goals. When a counselor leaves employment, the remaining counselors' and supervisors' workloads are increased. Turnover also adversely affects case continuity because when a counselor leaves, a new counselor is assigned to the case. A change in counselor can mean less stability for the child, as a new counselor has to become familiar with the child's history and develop a relationship with the child and the family. Furthermore, inexperienced counselors are not as productive initially because they are assigned fewer cases.

In Fiscal Year 1999-00, the turnover rate for family services counselors was 24.2%. This rate was significantly higher than the 8.3% average turnover rate for all state employees during calendar year 2000. The Child Welfare League of America identified several factors contributing to the difficulty in retaining child protective workers nationwide. These factors included hard-to-serve client populations, employee shortages, frequent revisions to program laws, and low to modest compensation given the stress associated with the work. To improve its employee retention efforts, we recommended

that the department target program resources to eliminate barriers within its control such as assessing conditions that may have a major impact on job satisfaction. Additionally, we recommended that the department identify the best practices of service districts and private providers and use them as models for all districts.

The department faced challenges in implementing community-based care initiatives.

Our prior report noted that the department had experienced difficulties and delays in establishing contracts with community-based agencies to privatize program services and was in jeopardy of not meeting the statewide implementation date. We recommended that the Legislature provide more flexibility in the definition of the community-based agencies that were to perform these functions.

Our prior report discussed weaknesses in the department's monitoring system, which focused mainly on compliance with contract requirements and related fiscal, administrative, and programmatic components of service rather than critical aspects of service provision. The system did not allow for the routine assessment of the quality of the provider's service provision. Program monitoring should evaluate the provider's performance in delivering services and achieving desired program goals through quality decision making. We recommended that the program implement a system for monitoring the quality of provider services.

Current Status ---

Since March 2001, the program has implemented several of our recommendations, and its performance has improved in a few areas. It also has recently implemented some additional initiatives to improve its operations, including strategies to reduce the backlog and to recruit and retain employees; but the effectiveness of these steps cannot yet be determined. The program lacks reliable data needed to assess the effectiveness of district efforts to recruit or retain new foster parents and whether child abuse investigators are initiating immediate response investigations within required time limits.

The program is meeting its legislative goal of responding to hotline calls, and is implementing new strategies intended to further improve timeliness

The hotline's abandoned call rate has been reduced substantially. As shown in Exhibit 3, the hotline's abandoned call rate was 4.6% for Fiscal Year 2001-02 (20,161 of 439,074 calls made), which met the legislative goal that no more than 5% of hotline calls be abandoned. The program has reported a 4% abandoned call rate for the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2002-03.

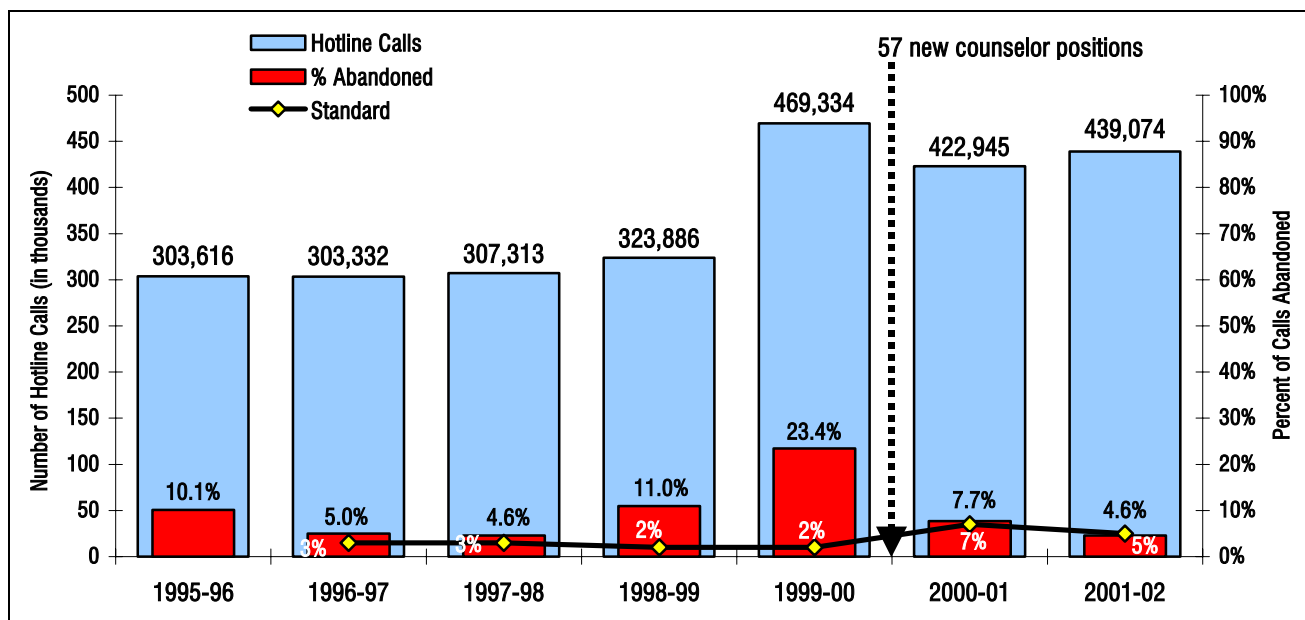
Program officials attribute this improved performance to the addition of 57 new hotline counselor positions authorized by the Legislature in 1999, and to fewer calls received by the hotline in Fiscal Years 2000-01 and 2001-02. Also, the hotline has hired a training manager and has implemented a new pre-service training curriculum and a competency-based assessment certification program to improve counselor performance. The certification program consists

of a written examination and a performance-based assessment. These steps help ensure that hotline counselors have the skills to effectively and efficiently gather pertinent information from callers and determine whether an investigation is warranted.

The hotline also made shift changes in April 2002 to cover emerging call patterns, reassigned counselors, and implemented overtime to cover peak call times. For example, the hotline changed existing shift hours from 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and created a new shift from 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. with eight counselors from overstaffed shifts. According to hotline management, these changes provide better coverage during peak call times.

The hotline also upgraded computer equipment for counselors and eliminated the use of fax machines and manual scanning of reports by using a fax server. According to program management, faster computer processing and eliminating manual, paper-based processes has enhanced hotline counselors' efficiency.

Exhibit 3
The Hotline Has Significantly Improved Its Abandoned Call Rate



Source: Department of Children and Families.

The number of backlogged cases has decreased, but the program did not meet its goal to reduce case backlog to 15,000 cases by June 2002

Since our March 2001 report, the program has reduced the backlog of child abuse investigations, but a substantial backlog remains.⁴ As shown in Exhibit 4, the investigation backlog dropped from its January 2001 peak of 51,338 cases and fell to its lowest level in March 2002. However, the backlog grew for several months, reaching 35,017 cases in September 2002.⁵ The program did not reach its goal to reduce the backlog to 15,000 by June 2002.⁶ In December 2002, the department established new targets for backlog reduction: a 50% reduction by February 28, 2003, and a 90% reduction by June 30, 2003.

In addition to receiving additional positions from the Legislature, the department recently has implemented several strategies to address the backlog. These strategies appear to be working to reduce the backlog. As of January 2003, the backlog dropped to 29,914.

- In June 2002, the department established its Challenge Campaign initiative and targeted \$2 million for Districts 7 and 11, which have the highest number of backlog cases (representing 47% of the cases in backlog).⁷ The department created a team of six experienced investigators and a supervisor to act as a special unit to close backlogged cases. The department also targeted an additional \$90,000 (\$7,500 per district) to the remaining districts for overtime pay to reduce the backlog.
- The program also has developed a rapid strike team consisting of experienced investigators operating out of the central program office. This team was deployed in August 2002 in areas of the state needing assistance with backlog reduction or other investigative issues.

⁴ The program defines backlog as investigations that are open longer than the legislative time frame of 60 days.

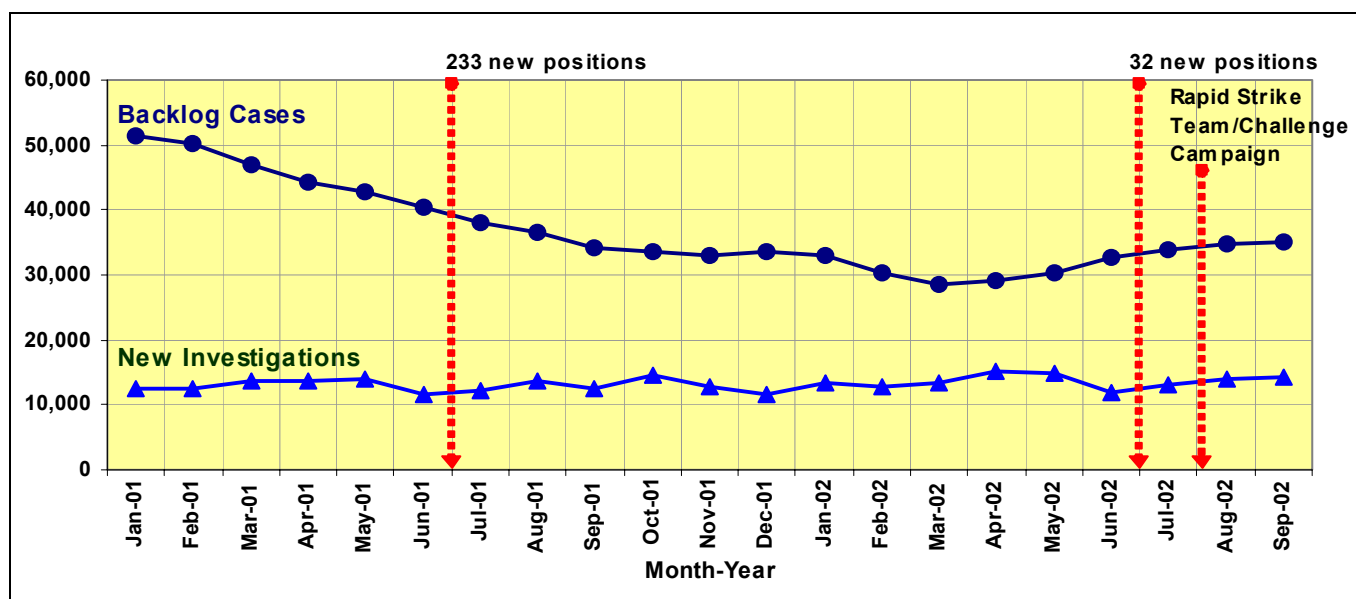
⁵ September 2002 is the last month that reliable, statewide data is available on the number of backlog cases. The department estimates that the backlog decreased slightly to 34,529 as of December 2002.

⁶ Internal goal for FY 2001-02; PB2 measure for FY 2002-03.

⁷ As of June 2002.

Exhibit 4

Backlog Cases Have Dropped Since Their Peak in January 2001 But Remain High



Source: Department of Children and Families.

- In September 2002, the department required districts to update case status in FAHIS and enter missing information on the reasons that investigations were not completed. When the data clean-up effort began, 60% (20,956) of backlogged cases had no recorded reason for the case being open. By the end of September, 25% (8,262) of the cases lacked information on the reason the case remained open. This was the first step in identifying those cases to target for closure.
- In December 2002, the department began the Backlog Reduction Project. Districts are required to submit written plans including the approach to meeting the new backlog reduction targets, resources needed to reduce the backlog, and quality assurance procedures for closed backlog cases and high-risk open cases.

The program has not implemented our recommendations to report specific investigative activity information

The program has not implemented our recommendations to begin reporting key data related to child protection investigations because

of delays in implementing the Child Safety Assessment (CSA).⁸ Specifically, the program cannot report through the CSA component of HomeSafenet whether higher risk children are seen as soon as possible, the reason cases are open more than 60 days, and information about family characteristics in which abuse occurs or reoccurs..⁹

Since our March 2001 report, the program completed the design and development of the CSA as a decision support tool for protective investigators. The program reports that when implemented statewide the CSA will capture critical investigative response time and case tracking information. The CSA also will prompt investigators to close investigations when the documented evidence is sufficient to determine case disposition, thus ensuring that investigations are closed within the legislative 60-day time frame. HomeSafenet documentation shows that system will produce management reports that

⁸ For a discussion of delays in implementing the CSA, see OPPAGA [Report No. 02-65](#), December 2002.

⁹ As described in the earlier discussion of backlog, the department recently required districts to enter missing information on the reasons cases were not closed within 60 days.

document investigative activities. These reports will allow managers, supervisors, and investigators to determine on a daily basis whether key investigative activities are completed.

However, no data is available at this time because the department put HomeSafenet on hold because of problems encountered during testing of the instrument and other aspects of HomeSafenet. The department's projected statewide implementation date for the CSA is now March 2003.

The program indicates that it plans to use HomeSafenet data to evaluate current safety strategies to prevent re-abuse and re-neglect; however, a research agenda has not been developed.

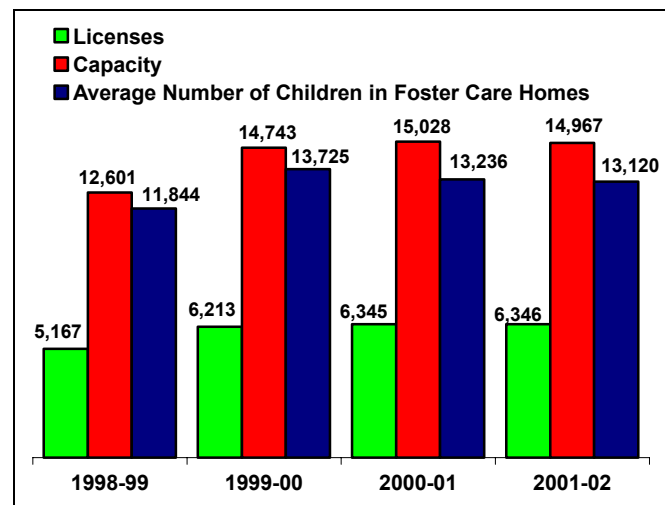
The program developed strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents; however, it is too soon to determine effectiveness

The program has taken several steps in the past year to recruit and retain foster parents. However, it is too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies because of delays in implementing a new recruitment and retention plan for foster and adoptive families and the recent implementation of other strategies.

As shown in Exhibit 5, the number of foster home licenses, the capacity of these homes, and the average number of children placed in family foster homes has remained relatively stable over the past three years. Since Fiscal Year 1998-99, the capacity of licensed family foster homes increased 19% and the average number of children in family foster care increased 11%. However, this data should be interpreted with caution because it does not reflect the entire population of children under foster care supervision. For example, children in residential group care settings may step down to a family foster care setting or children reunited with their parents may return to foster care. Additionally, data on family foster home capacity may overstate the number of placements available. Licensed homes may be inactive and serve no

children or serve fewer children than they are licensed to serve.

Exhibit 5 Foster Home Capacity Is Keeping Pace With Need



Note: Licenses and capacity includes Family Safety foster homes, foster homes with dual licenses, and child placing agency foster homes. The number of children in foster homes does not include children in residential group care, other settings such as DJJ facilities, and runaways.

Source: Department of Children and Families.

A nine-year analysis of foster care licensing activities conducted by the department indicate a need to focus on recruiting and retaining foster care homes. The analysis found that over a nine-year period (Fiscal Years 1992-93 through 2000-01) 14,681 licenses were issued and 13,345 licenses were lost, resulting in a net gain of only 3% in family foster homes. Program officials indicate that the department is taking several steps to improve foster parents recruitment and retention. These strategies are discussed below.

- Establish a dedicated position in the central program office to oversee foster parent recruitment and retention activities and to provide technical assistance to districts and lead agencies.
- Develop a foster parent recruitment and retention plan to guide district and lead agencies activities. The plan includes performance measures so the program can monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed strategies. This plan was developed during the 2001-02 fiscal year;

however, its final version was not released to the districts until January 2003.

- Create a mentoring program in which experienced foster parents provide support, assistance, information, and advice to new foster parents as one retention mechanism.
- Provide funds to support specialized training for foster parent such as behavior management, the mentoring program, and child care while foster parents participate in training or mentoring activities.

The program has been successful in increasing the number of children with finalized adoptions. In Fiscal Year 2001-02, 2,831 foster children were adopted, an increase of 18.6% from the prior year. Although no longer a performance measure for the program, 60% of children legally available for adoption were adopted in Fiscal Year 2001-02. This was below the prior legislative standard of 90%, and a drop from Fiscal Year 2000-01, when 66% of children legally available for adoption were adopted.

The program has taken several actions discussed below to strengthen its recruiting for adoptive parents.

- Creation of a position in the central program office that specializes in the adoption of hard-to-place children (older children, large sibling groups). This position works with districts and lead agencies, especially those having difficulty with adoption placements, to develop individualized strategies to recruit adoptive parents and place children.
- Provision for specialized training by national experts in working with and placing adolescents for adoption. This training was offered to adoption staff in districts and lead agencies.
- Expansion of the central office adoptions unit through Tallahassee Community College/Professional Development Center contracted positions to provided additional technical assistance to districts and lead agencies.
- Affiliation with the national adoption exchange in 2002, which will enable Florida's program to benefit from the national exchange's campaigns, out-of-state adoptive

parent recruitment opportunities, and sponsorship of free photographs of available children through the Sears Roebuck Company.

Employee turnover continues to be a problem for the program; additional recruitment and retention efforts are planned

Employee turnover for family services counselors and protective investigators continue to be a problem. However, the program lacks accurate data on turnover of its Family Safety district staff for several reasons.

- As districts move to community-based care, positions scheduled for deletion remain in COPES giving a distorted statewide vacancy rate. For example, districts that have fully privatized are shown to have vacancy rates that range from 11% to 100%.
- In May 2002, a separate job class for child protective investigators and protective investigator supervisors was established, separating these employees from the family services counselor class. This change means that comparisons of turnover and vacancy rates over time are no longer possible.
- In July 2001, the state shifted 16,000 career service positions to select exempt status. As a result, the turnover rate for all classes of career service employees has been inflated, making comparisons between the program's turnover rate and the turnover rate for state employees for Fiscal Year 2001-02 and over time inaccurate.

In October 2002, the vacancy rates for family services counselors ranged from 2% to 15.5% in districts not yet privatized based upon agency reports, while for child protective investigators vacancy rates ranged from no vacancies to 26%.¹⁰ An unpublished 2001 nationwide study by the Child Welfare League of America found the average vacancy rate for child protective services workers was 8.5%, indicating that the program's vacancy rate is higher than that of other states in many districts. Turnover data for family services

¹⁰ Privatized Districts 1, 12, and 23 not included, and District 10 not included because investigations are conducted by the Broward County Sheriff's Office.

counselors and protective investigators was not available for this report.

Program officials report that the department has several initiatives underway intended to improve the recruitment and retention of employees.

- Establishment of a separate job class in May 2002 for protective investigators and protective investigator supervisors to attract and keep applicants with specific qualifications for the job.
- Implementation of a behavioral and competency-based assessment process for job candidates to improve the likelihood of successful employment.
- Assessment of the mentoring and advanced specialty programs, providing additional training required for those programs and providing related pay incentives for family services counselor and protective investigators to incorporate these initiatives into a career path for employees.
- Implementation of an on-line exit interview process to capture reasons employees leave the agency.
- Sponsorship of a conference in early December 2002 for frontline supervisors to train them in creating a work environment that increases performance and retention of frontline workers by developing communication, recognition and mentoring skills in supervisors.

Community-based care implementation appears to be on schedule

Since our March 2001 report, the Legislature amended s. 409.1671, *Florida Statutes*, to provide more flexibility in lead agency models and extended the deadline for completing privatization.¹¹ According to department officials, lead agency models range from the original model in which the lead agency serves as the administrative service organization for a network of providers to a model where the lead agency serves as the administrative service organization as well as providing direct services.

As of November 2002, community-based care networks are providing all foster care and related services in the Sun Coast Region and Districts 1 and 12, encompassing 12 counties. Start-up contracts had been established in Districts 9, 10, 15, and Duval County in District 4 encompassing seven counties. These contracts provide funds for lead agencies to establish infrastructure such as hiring employees and developing policies and procedures. The remainder of the state, Districts 2, 3, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, and the remainder of District 4 encompassing 48 counties, have released invitations to negotiate, and six of these districts anticipate having start-up contracts in place by the end of Fiscal Year 2002-03.

The Legislature extended the deadline for full transfer of foster care and related services to community-based care to December 2004 from the initial deadline of January 2003.

Quality monitoring of provider services is in place; improved coordination is needed for an efficient and effective oversight system

The department has expanded its oversight role by initiating quality monitoring for community-based care services to augment compliance monitoring. These System of Care reviews examine child and family outcomes as compared to system performance. The department began these reviews in September 2002 in the Sun Coast Region and is currently reviewing the remaining lead agencies with service contracts. Additionally, the department piloted an integrated monitoring review of the Sun Coast Region in September 2002. This integrated approach occurred over a two-week period with employees reviewing compliance with federal funding and outcome requirements, administrative and programmatic requirements of service contracts, lawsuit settlement agreements and licensing requirements.

¹¹ Chapter 2002-219, *Laws of Florida*.

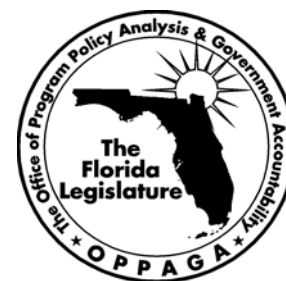
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State oversight of a privatized system is critical to ensure that quality services are being delivered and taxpayers' dollars are spent in accordance with state and federal law and as efficiently and effectively as possible. As of yet, the program's integrated monitoring approach has not streamlined its current duplicative and overlapping monitoring processes. For example, each review has its own sample methodology

and size, review instruments and issues to examine. As a result, a comprehensive assessment of provider performance is not achieved and targeting needed performance improvements is difficult. The department should develop a comprehensive contract, quality assurance, and federal compliance monitoring system that is coordinated internally and with other agencies whenever possible.

The Florida Legislature

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