



After Further Delay, DCF Redesigning Child Welfare Training and Taking Steps to Clarify Case Transfer

at a glance

Although the Department of Children and Families has taken preliminary steps, it has not yet implemented a new child welfare training program as required by the 2003 Legislature due to procurement and design problems. Currently, the department has interim contracts, which will expire December 31, 2005, with two state universities to provide pre-service and certification training for investigators and caseworkers. The department is redesigning its training program and plans to have it fully implemented in early 2006.

To help clarify the roles of protective investigators and lead agency case managers in case transfer and case planning, the department has started identifying best practices and revising program rules. The department also should develop a model working agreement for lead agencies and investigation entities.

The department has developed and implemented a new quality assurance monitoring system for the child protection program and completed two rounds of lead agency quality assurance reviews. The department used data from the initial round of reviews to create a baseline from which to measure future progress or areas needing improvement.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Children and Families in response to the findings and recommendations in OPPAGA's January 2004 report on the training and roles of child welfare staff.^{1, 2}

Background

The purpose of the Child Welfare and Community-Based Care Program is to provide for the care, safety, and protection of abused and neglected children. The 1998 Legislature directed the Department of Children and Families to contract with community-based lead agencies to provide child protection services including family preservation, emergency shelter, foster care, and adoption services.³ In April 2005, the department completed the outsourcing of these services.

The department retained responsibility for child protective investigations, program

¹ Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

² *Special Report: DCF Needs to Improve Child Protection Staff Training and Clarify DCF and Lead Agency Roles*, OPPAGA Report No. 04-03, January 2004.

³ Lead agencies are private, community-based agencies responsible for planning, administering, and delivering client services; ensuring that services are delivered in accordance with state and federal laws; and coordinating with other local public or private agencies that offer services for clients.

oversight, and child welfare legal services. The department conducts child protective investigations in 62 counties and uses grant agreements with sheriffs' offices for investigations in the 5 remaining counties.⁴ It also has program oversight responsibilities such as providing a training and certification program for all child welfare staff, including child protective investigators and lead agency caseworkers, and quality assurance monitoring. Child welfare legal services attorneys are responsible for representing the state in dependency proceedings and providing legal expertise to caseworkers.

In Fiscal Year 2005-06, the Legislature appropriated \$973 million for the program. State general revenue accounts for \$338 million (35%) and trust fund appropriations account for \$635 million (65%) of the program's appropriated budget. The department provides a significant portion of these funds to lead agencies, but has not finalized the program's Fiscal Year 2005-06 operating budget.⁵ The department retains the remainder of the appropriation for program-related functions such as oversight, child protective investigations, and child welfare legal services. For Fiscal Year 2005-06, the Legislature authorized 4,486.5 full-time equivalent positions to the program.

Current Status

After further delay, new child welfare training program being developed

Our 2004 report noted that the department had been slow to implement the child welfare training system mandated by the 2003 Legislature. Our report recommended that the department's new training program include specific components such as

- extensive on-the-job training that gives newly hired investigators and caseworkers the opportunity to work under the mentoring of more experienced workers;
- advanced training in domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health;
- flexible curriculum that allows individual agencies to address issues specific to their working environment; and
- flexible training schedules to ensure that newly hired workers are trained quickly.

Due to procurement and design problems, the department has further delayed implementing the new training program. In response to our prior report, the department had contracted for the design of a new curriculum and planned to contract with a provider to deliver the training by July 2004. However, in August 2004, procurement problems led the department to cancel the contract negotiation process. To meet the statutory requirement to provide training to child welfare staff, the department entered into interim contracts with two state universities in August 2004. These interim contracts, which will expire December 31, 2005, are limited to pre-service training and certification training for investigators and caseworkers.⁶

After entering into the interim contracts, administrators of the Child Welfare and Community-Based Care program office decided that the curriculum developed in 2004 was not optimal and needed to be redesigned to better meet the training needs of child welfare workers. The program office created a Child Welfare Training Task Force in May 2005 composed of department and lead agency staff to obtain additional input on the curriculum's design.

Department managers plan to implement the new training program in early 2006. They stated that the revised training curriculum will meet statutory requirements and respond to

⁴ Sheriffs' offices in Manatee, Pasco, Seminole, Broward, and Pinellas counties conduct child protective investigations.

⁵ During Fiscal Year 2004-05, the department issued contracts with lead agencies that totaled \$510 million.

⁶ The reduced scope allowed the department to shift \$3.4 million to protective investigating entities and lead agencies to provide localized and advanced training.

our recommendation to include extensive on-the-job training and advanced training in the areas of substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence, as well as provide a curriculum that is flexible in meeting local needs and schedules.

Department is working to further clarify roles of caseworkers and protective investigators

Given the decentralized structure of the child welfare service delivery system, investigating entities (district staff and sheriffs' offices) and lead agencies need clear parameters delineating their responsibilities. A lack of sufficient guidance to investigating entities and community-based lead agencies has resulted in confusion and inconsistencies in program service delivery in various districts.

Our 2004 report recommended that the department clearly delineate the responsibilities of child protective investigators and lead agency caseworkers in two areas: the transfer of cases needing immediate services from investigators to lead agencies (termed "case handoff"), and the involvement of investigators in case planning. Case handoff can be problematic if protective investigators are unclear about how to access emergency services or what services are available. In such cases, investigators may choose to either wait until services are made available, putting children at risk of further harm, or remove the children from the home even though needed support services may be available. Case planning also can be problematic, as investigating entities and lead agencies tend to have differing interpretations on the role of investigators in case planning, resulting in investigators' responsibilities varying from district to district.

Department officials report that there is still confusion among protective investigation and case manager staff about their responsibilities in case transfer and planning. To address this confusion, department officials have begun to develop best practices and amend program rules.

The department plans to use best practice examples to help local protective investigating entities and lead agencies decide how to address case transfer and planning. To identify best practices, program staff are researching other states' practices and meeting with lead agency administrators. Department administrators then plan to train investigators and case managers on the best practices.

Program managers also said that an upcoming revision to department rules will help to clarify the roles of protective investigation staff and case managers in transferring cases needing immediate services and case planning. In January 2005, the department began to update its rules for program components affected by the outsourcing of program services such as child protective investigations, in-home protective services, and out-of-home care. The department held three rule development workshops throughout the state during January and February 2005 and plans to post a notice of proposed rulemaking and hold public hearings in mid-October 2005. If there are no challenges to the proposed rule, Florida statutes require the department to finalize the rule within 90 days after posting the notice.

In addition to identifying best practices and revising its rules, the department also should develop model working agreements to assist investigating entities and lead agencies in addressing case transfer and planning. In its contracts with lead agencies, the department currently requires the agencies to develop local working agreements with investigating entities. These working agreements are intended to delineate the roles of child welfare staff and outline case handoff responsibilities. However, the contracts do not currently specify how the working agreements should address these issues. Providing a model agreement would help investigating entities and lead agencies clarify these roles. The model agreement should serve as a guide, but be flexible enough to meet individual local needs.

Department has implemented its quality assurance monitoring system

Our 2004 report recommended that the department fully implement its new performance-based quality assurance system and ensure that the system was in place when the department finished outsourcing.

In January 2004, the department began to implement the new quality assurance monitoring system. This system was designed to evaluate the quality of provider services in order to identify best practices, take action to improve services to clients and resulting outcomes, and hold providers accountable for results.

The department completed at least one review of each lead agency by December 2004 and will review each lead agency on a semi-annual basis. The department reviewed 21 of the 22 lead agencies during the first half of 2005.⁷ The department used monitoring data from the first round of reviews to create a set of baseline measurements for tracking progress and identifying areas needing improvement. This data allows the department to identify strengths and weaknesses of individual providers and the statewide system.

⁷ The department deferred the review of the lead agency in District 11 (Miami-Dade and Monroe counties) until September 2005. This was the final department district to sign a contract and complete the outsourcing process for child welfare and community-based care.

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Florida Monitor: www.oppaga.state.fl.us

Project supervised by Nancy Dufoe (850/487-9242)

Project conducted by Amanda McCutchen and Claire Mazur (850/487-9211)

Becky Vickers, Staff Director

Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Director