California State Auditor FACT SHEET

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The California State Auditor released the following report today:

Child Welfare Services

The County Child Welfare Services Agencies We Reviewed Must Provide Better Protection for Abused and Neglected Children

BACKGROUND

Receiving nearly 482,000 allegations of maltreatment of children in 2013, California child welfare services (CWS) agencies substantiated more than 16 percent and removed more than 31,000 children from their homes as a result of their investigations. Each of the 58 counties establishes and maintains their own CWS program while the California Department of Social Services oversees, provides administrative services, and develops regulations for the CWS program. Both CWS agencies and local law enforcement receive and investigate allegations of abuse or neglect and make immediate decisions about whether a child is safe to remain in the home or temporarily removed.

KEY FINDINGS

During our review of CWS agencies in Butte, Orange, and San Francisco counties, we noted the following:

- Of the 120 files we reviewed, the initial intake documents—prepared when a report of abuse (referral) is received—for 24 were inaccurate or incomplete. Although most errors were inconsequential, some affected decisions of how quickly to respond to a referral and others affected the information that remained in the statewide case management system.
  - ✓ Because of these errors, county CWS agencies set later response times than was appropriate in eight instances.
  - ✓ The errors for 12 remained in the statewide case management system causing subsequent investigators to receive inaccurate and incomplete information.
  - ✓ Although supervisors in Orange and Butte counties provided the required oversight of the intake process in most cases we reviewed, supervisors in San Francisco County provided oversight in only 18 of 40 cases.
- While the county CWS agencies attempted to conduct timely in-person investigations, they often failed in making in-person contact with alleged victims—in some cases, the agencies closed the referrals after several failed attempts to make contact and, in at least one case, subsequently received another referral that was substantiated.
- Social workers did not always prepare the required standardized assessments while investigating allegations and those that were completed were frequently inaccurate and may have led to questionable decisions.
  - ✓ In Butte and San Francisco counties, some of the required safety assessments—used to determine if a child faces immediate safety threats—were not completed at all, while in each of the three counties, some completed assessments were inconsistent with the case history or the facts of the referral.
  - ✓ Some inaccuracies in the safety assessments included social workers failing to note a caregiver's substance abuse or domestic violence issues—in one case, the worker concluded no intervention was needed—when just weeks later a new allegation was filed and substantiated.
  - ✓ Completed risk assessments—the social workers' judgment of the likelihood of future maltreatment—were even less accurate than safety assessments, yet were used by county CWS agencies to determine whether to close or elevate a referral.
- Children may have remained in risky living situations because safety plans—needed to allow children to stay in their homes—were inadequately prepared and agencies did not always perform required background checks before placing children outside their homes.
- Both Butte and Orange counties have cooperative agreements with local law enforcement with whom they tend to collaborate in their investigations and in removing children from unsafe homes, while San Francisco tends not to involve local law enforcement in its efforts.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We made many recommendations to the three CWS agencies about accurately and promptly completing all required assessments, including that they develop clear guidance and monitor compliance with their policies. Further, we recommended that the agencies require timely supervisory reviews of the assessments. Additionally, each of the CWS agencies should make reasonable and timely efforts to make in-person contact with children who are allegedly being maltreated. Moreover, we advised that the agencies vet temporary living situations and caregivers and perform required background checks and home inspections before allowing children to be placed in a home.

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