

# Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

## Management Instability Hampered Efforts to Better Protect Children

### REPORT NUMBER 2011-101.2, ISSUED MARCH 2012

This report concludes that instability in the Department of Children and Family Services' (department) management has hampered its efforts to address long-standing problems. Since 2009 the department has struggled to complete investigations of child abuse and neglect within requisite time frames. In July 2010 the department reported it had 9,300 investigations that were open longer than 30 days, the maximum time period allowed by state regulations. Although this backlog has decreased substantially, it remains at a relatively elevated level. Department officials indicated that it contributed to the backlog in uncompleted investigations when, under pressure from outside stakeholders, department management created new, potentially unrealistic policies that it later revised or rescinded in early 2011. Nevertheless, in January 2012 the backlog was still 3,200, more than twice as large as it was in July 2009.

The department has also struggled to perform required assessments of homes and caregivers prior to placing children with relatives. From 2008 to 2010 the department completed fewer than a third of home and caregiver assessments before placing children with relatives. This delay resulted in nearly 900 children living in placements that the department later determined to be unsafe or inappropriate. Even after these determinations, the children typically remained in these homes for nearly a month and a half before the department removed them, or later reassessed and approved the placement. Department management failed to identify and address this long-standing problem because it has not monitored whether required assessments are completed prior to placement.

Finally, in just over a year, the department had four different directors. It has also experienced high turnover in other key management positions. This turnover impeded the department's ability to develop and implement a strategic plan that would have provided cohesiveness to its various initiatives and communicated a clear vision to department staff and external stakeholders.

In the report, the California State Auditor (state auditor) made the following recommendations to the department. The state auditor's determination regarding the current status of recommendations is based on the department's response to the state auditor as of September 2012.

#### **Recommendation 1.1.a—See pages 15—20 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To ensure that child abuse and neglect allegations receive timely resolution, the department should continue to monitor the status of its backlog of investigations but revise its policies and performance measures to no longer define the backlog as investigations over 60 days old. Rather, it should emphasize completing investigations within 30 days.

#### ***Department's Action: Fully implemented.***

The department created a goal to reduce the number of referral investigations that take longer than 30 days. In accordance with this goal, the department states that its regional managers will monitor how many investigations take longer than 30 days.

#### **Recommendation 1.1.b—See pages 15—20 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To ensure that child abuse and neglect allegations receive timely resolution, the department should assess whether it needs to permanently allocate more resources to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect.

***Department's Action: Pending.***

The department states it is currently assessing the caseload levels for social workers who investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect and is examining its processes to streamline its investigations.

**Recommendation 1.2—See pages 19 and 20 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To better ensure that inner-city regional offices are staffed by experienced social workers, the department should consider providing social workers with incentives to work in these areas or require them to remain in these offices for a period longer than the one year currently required.

***Department's Action: Fully implemented.***

The department has temporarily frozen transfers of social workers who work in inner-city offices. It has also notified future social workers, who will be assigned to inner-city offices, that they will be expected to remain in those offices for at least two years. Additionally, the department is attempting to provide financial incentives to social workers who work in inner-city regional offices.

**Recommendation 2.1—See pages 25—30 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To ensure that it is placing children only in safe homes, the department should measure its performance and adjust its practices to adhere to state law, which requires that all homes be assessed prior to the placement of the child.

***Department's Action: No action taken.***

- The department disagrees with our interpretation of state law; it believes it does not need to complete formal assessments of caregivers and homes before placing children in homes. As described in our comments on pages 81 through 84 of the audit report, we strongly disagree with the department's interpretations.

**Recommendation 2.2—See pages 25—30 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To improve its process for placing children with a relative, the department should analyze the best practices used by other county child welfare services agencies for such placements. The department should then implement changes in its practices so that relatives and their homes are approved prior to placement, as required by state law.

***Department's Action: No action taken.***

- The department indicates that it researched the practices of five other counties but the department believes that its relative placement process conforms to regulations and has not made the changes we recommended.

**Recommendation 2.3—See pages 33 and 34 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To ensure that social workers have as much relevant information as possible when placing children and licensing homes, the department should report requisite allegations of abuse or neglect to the Department of Justice and the Department of Social Services' licensing division.

*Department's Action: Fully implemented.*

The department implemented a process that will make it easier to submit the requisite reports to the Department of Justice. Instead of faxing reports, the department's employees can now click on an icon that will transmit the report electronically. Additionally, the department reminded staff regarding their responsibility for submitting these reports.

**Recommendation 2.4—See pages 35—37 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To fully benefit from its death review process, the department should implement the resulting recommendations.

*Department's Action: Pending.*

The department is working with its legal counsel to determine how it can best implement this recommendation.

**Recommendation 3.1—See pages 39—42 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To provide effective leadership, the director should form a stable executive team by filling the department's chief deputy director, senior deputy director, and other deputy director positions.

*Department's Action: Partially implemented.*

The director has filled the senior deputy director, director of program development and strategic initiatives, and executive assistant positions. The director also indicated that he plans to fill the other positions after a planned reorganization occurs.

**Recommendation 3.2—See pages 39—42 of the audit report for information on the related finding.**

To create and communicate its philosophy and plans, the department should complete and implement its strategic plan.

*Department's Action: Partially implemented.*

The department distributed the completed strategic plan in September 2012, which contained 50 objectives. To implement these objectives, the department will create action teams that consist of executive sponsors and project managers.

