

2016 EXCELLENCE IN ACCOUNTABILITY AWARD

South Carolina Legislative Audit Council

The South Carolina Legislative Audit Council (LAC) is pleased to submit its application for the NSAA Excellence in Accountability Award for a performance audit. Our work over the past two years has greatly contributed to the field of legislative program evaluation. In 2012, 32 members of the S.C. House of Representatives requested that the Legislative Audit Council conduct a performance audit of the S.C. Department of Social Services (DSS) to review:

- Various issues pertaining to child welfare services.
- Procurement.
- Agency management.

Our 2014 audit of child welfare issues was our third review of this topic since 1981.

A Review of the Child Welfare Services at the Department of Social Services (October 2014)

Through its Child Welfare Services programs, DSS has the goal of protecting children from abuse and neglect. DSS staff are required to operate in a complex, high-stress environment, accompanied by potentially severe consequences for children when mistakes are made.

INADEQUATE QUALIFICATIONS AND COMPENSATION OF COUNTY CHILD WELFARE STAFF

DSS did not require that new caseworkers have college degrees in social work or a behavioral science, nor did it, as an alternative, require previous relevant experience. As a result, there may have been limited ability of new caseworkers to effectively assess and respond to child abuse and neglect. The department had unclear policies regarding training and certification for caseworkers after they were hired. It also did not maintain central records that documented whether caseworkers had been trained and certified.

EXCESSIVE CASELOADS

Statewide, 19.3% of caseworkers were assigned more than 50 children each, 11.3% more than 60 children each, and 2.8% more than 75 children each. These percentages exceeded the caseload standards recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and new standards developed by DSS.

UNRELIABLE CHILD FATALITY STATISTICS AND AN INCOMPLETE CHILD FATALITY DATABASE

We found that data provided by DSS to the General Assembly and the public regarding child maltreatment deaths, particularly those with prior DSS involvement, was not reliable and should not have been used as a measure of agency performance. State law required that county coroners report violent, unexpected, and unexplained child fatalities to the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED). From 2009 through 2013, however, we identified 152 fatalities in those categories that were not in the SLED database.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF COMMUNITY BASED PREVENTION SERVICES (CBPS)

In FY 11-12, DSS implemented a program in which parents reported to have abused or neglected a child were offered community based prevention services when the department determined that an investigation is not warranted because there was not “substantial risk” of harm to the child. From FY 10-11 through FY 12-13, the number of children receiving CBPS services increased from 0 to 23,198. We found significant negative effects of the CBPS program. There was evidence that many of the children whose families received CBPS services would have been included in abuse and neglect investigations prior to implementation of the program. From FY 10-11 through FY 12-13, there was a decrease of 12,839 (33.7%) in the number of children included in child abuse and neglect investigations and a 1,335 (114%) increase in the number of children who became victims of abuse and neglect after their cases were screened out or referred to CBPS.

INADEQUATE OVERSIGHT OF CHILDREN PLACED WITH ALTERNATIVE CAREGIVERS

DSS did not maintain a statewide list of relatives and family friends used as an alternative to foster care nor did DSS maintain a list of the children placed in alternative care. The department did not report data on the extent of abuse and neglect committed by alternative caregivers against children placed in their care. In addition, the family court system provided only minimal protection of children in alternative care.

NON-COMPETITIVE CHILD WELFARE CONTRACTS

DSS entered into non-competitive contracts of approximately \$71 million with two state universities. The department also made a non-competitive “emergency” procurement of \$719,000 that did not meet the definition of an emergency under state law.

INADEQUATE DATA AND USE OF PERFORMANCE MEASURES

The department did not collect key categories of performance data on a periodic basis. Examples include salaries paid by employers with whom the department competes for employees, training and certification records, and a central listing of alternative caregivers who care for children removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.

IMPACTS OF AUDIT

Minimum Job Requirements — To become a caseworker, DSS now requires a degree in social work or a behavioral science or two years of relevant experience.

Caseloads — As of February 2016, 166 of 177 new caseworkers had been hired to reduce caseloads. In addition, 67 new caseworker assistants had been hired.

Increase in Salaries — DSS has increased salaries 10% for child welfare caseworkers, 15% for investigators and supervisors, and 10% for adoption case workers.

Continued Oversight — The S.C. Senate has conducted nine oversight hearings with DSS since the audit was published in October 2014 and more are scheduled.

Press Coverage — Reaction to the audit was substantial in the newspaper, television and blogs. In February 2016, a local TV reporter interviewed the current DSS Director, who was hired after publication of our audit, for a one-year, on-the-job assessment.