

MONTANA LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Review of Child Abuse and Neglect
Investigations

Department of Public Health and Human Services

OCTOBER 2015

14P-11

REPORT SUMMARY

The Department of Public Health and Human Services needs to address inconsistent documentation, limited supervisory oversight, and a lack of management information related to child abuse and neglect reports. The department also needs to comply with state law regarding investigative time frames, and resolve inconsistencies between state law and its investigative protocol for making determinations of child abuse or neglect.

Context

Child Protective Services (CPS) generally refers to protection provided by a governmental agency for children under the age of 18 who are at risk of, or are experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or emotional or physical neglect. In Montana, the Department of Public Health and Human Services (department) administers CPS activities, providing a continuum of care that begins with an intake process to assess a reported situation of child abuse or neglect to determine the level of response needed and continues with a field investigation of any allegation. According to department information, in fiscal year 2014, the department assessed 15,724 reports of alleged child abuse or neglect, with 7,812 of those reports categorized as requiring an investigation.

Audit work examined if the department consistently assesses reports of alleged child abuse via its intake function and if the investigations of reports meet statutory time frames and investigative protocols established by the department. As part of our review, we identified long-term and systemic management concerns in the areas of documentation, supervisory oversight, and the use of management information which the department should take steps to resolve.

For example, of 250 investigations included in our review sample, the department did not document notification to families of the outcome of the investigation 78 percent of the time. Audit work concluded that the department lacks basic access to some of the useful information it needs to effectively manage CPS work, due in part to an antiquated data system and the absence of a plan to actively use data to make informed management decisions. In addition to management concerns, we noted the department does not routinely meet statutorily-based investigative time frames or uniformly make final investigative determinations. Over 70 percent of investigations reviewed were not completed within 60 days as required by state law.

Results

Audit recommendations address the need for the department to strengthen various management controls, comply with statutory time frames, and address a lack of uniformity in making final investigative determinations. Recommendations include:

- ◊ Prioritizing documentation expectations for all intake and investigative activities.

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- ◊ Clarifying and implementing supervisory standards to review and verify intake and investigative activities.
- ◊ Developing a plan to actively use data to manage CPS activities including using legislative funding for the implementation of an automated case management system.
- ◊ Complying with state law and department policy regarding priority and investigative time frames.
- ◊ Resolving inconsistencies between state law and department policy regarding making final investigative determinations.

Recommendation Concurrence	
Concur	4
Partially Concur	1
Do Not Concur	0
Source: Agency audit response included in final report.	

For a complete copy of the report (14P-11) or for further information, contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to lad@mt.gov; or check the web site at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>
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