

The California State Auditor released the following report today:

Follow-Up—California Department of Social Services

Although Making Progress, It Could Do More to Ensure the Protection and Appropriate Placement of Foster Children

BACKGROUND

The California Department of Social Services (Social Services) oversees counties' efforts to protect California children from abuse and neglect through the State's child welfare services (CWS) system, which provides family preservation services, removes children from unsafe homes, and provides for the temporary placement of these children. When county CWS agencies determine that children's safety is at risk, they have the authority to remove them from their homes and place them with relatives, foster parents, or group homes. In addition to overseeing the CWS system activities, Social Services oversees and regulates licensed community care facilities statewide, including foster and group homes that house children removed from unsafe homes. In October 2011 the state auditor issued a report recommending the creation of an address comparison process to ensure that registered sex offenders are not living or working among children. Other recommendations addressed the counties' reliance on foster family agencies when placing children.

KEY FINDINGS

During our follow-up of Social Services' progress in addressing issues raised in our 2011 audit, we noted the following:

- Although it began performing regular monthly address comparisons, because of a significant deficiency in its methodology, Social Services did not begin comparing the addresses of its licensed facilities and foster homes against the entire sex offender registry until almost two years after it implemented the address comparison process.
- It does not adequately track the screening or disposition of all the address matches it identifies and does not document certain review procedures.
 - ✓ Of nearly 25,000 potential address matches, Social Services could not initially provide documentation that any outcomes had been reached for more than 8,600, and another 422 potential address matches were more than 45 days past due for review.
 - ✓ None of the four units responsible for initiating and tracking outcomes of registered sex offender reviews were actively reconciling the number of address matches identified through its address comparison process to the number of address matches reviewed.
 - ✓ Two of the units had no procedures documenting the screening process they perform during the preliminary investigation, and the two other units did not include explanations of why it was safe to screen out certain address matches.
- Although counties have reduced the placement of foster children with more expensive foster family agencies, Social Services has not fully implemented four recommendations related to such placements and counties continue to pay higher monthly rates to foster family agencies without adequately justifying the more expensive placements.
 - ✓ Social Services does not know how it determined that the 40 percent administrative fee paid to the foster family agencies was an appropriate amount for the agencies' recruitment, training, and other administration.
 - ✓ Monthly payment rates for foster family agencies are more than \$1,000 higher than the monthly cost of licensed foster family homes.
 - ✓ Social Service still does not require counties to document the treatment needs of children placed with foster family agencies, nor has it revised its regulations to make placing children in licensed foster homes a higher priority.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We made several recommendations to Social Services, including the following:

- Improve its current mechanism to track and monitor the outcome of each potential address match it identifies.
- Better document its review process to ensure staff conduct reviews consistently and preserve institutional knowledge.
- Fully implement recommendations made in 2011 to ensure that counties justify placing children in foster family agencies.

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