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Independent Report Calls for Massive Child Welfare Overhaul, Increased Spending

A report from Washington state consultant Public Knowledge argues the Oregon Department of Human Services needs increased staffing and foster care programs must be better funded. The report also calls for all children in or entering the system to be given a needs assessment and an overhaul of the protocols and system for reporting child abuse.

by [CHRIS GRAY](#) | [THE LUND REPORT](#)

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An independent consultant says that the Oregon Department of Human Services needs to raise rates for all types of foster care providers and develop an assessment tool to determine children's needs when they enter the system.

The consultant, Public Knowledge of Federal Way, Wash., also recommended that the state centralize its hotline for reporting child abuse and redesign the process for reporting and handling potential incidents of abuse.

“The ability to swiftly respond to the correct abuse-in-care allegations and keep children and youth

safe will center around stakeholders' ability to see this set of steps from the perspective of a child or youth," according to the report. "The entire process has to become more standardized and less complicated in order to keep critical safety information from 'falling through the cracks.'"

The Department of Human Services report, released last week, seeks to boil down the ongoing troubles at the agency's child welfare system, but many needs, particularly the need to pay adequate rates for the providers of foster care services, will require significantly more funding for the agency, even as its sister agency, the Oregon Health Authority, has reported a \$1.2 billion budget hole, with funding primarily needed to maintain the expansion of Medicaid to adult citizens up to 138 percent of the poverty line.

Implementing an assessment tool from scratch and raising rates to providers, while centralizing and streamlining the child abuse hotline and protocols, could likely be done under current budget levels.

Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, said the state conducts a needs assessment for children and adults who receive assistance for a developmental disability, but DHS currently does no such work to quantitatively measure a foster child's needs, which leaves child placements up to guesswork and prevents the state from recording data to better understand the foster care population and determine which types of caretakers are most needed.

DHS has not yet formulated the cost of all these changes or how much the agency plans to ask the Legislature to raise rates for foster care providers, but spokeswoman Andrea Cantu-Schomer said rates hadn't been raised in 10 years, prior to the economic recession that wrecked so much of the state's ability to provide for its most vulnerable residents.

"Some providers have had financial problems because of the rates," said Cantu-Schomus.

Sen. Sara Gelser said the Legislature could come through a small 2 percent increase in rates when the emergency budget board meets in December, but anything more would have to be worked out in the next legislative session, which begins in February, and the next budget, which starts next July.

Doug Riggs, a lobbyist for the Oregon Alliance of Children's Programs, said the system was in such crisis that many of his foster care agencies would refuse to take on new children and some of the non-profits may close altogether if the state doesn't act soon.

"The state is wiping out the enter non-profit capacity for the programs," Riggs said. "It's a crisis and a tragedy for kids who desperately need these services."

Riggs said it has been very difficult to retain and recruit skilled employees when programs are not funded enough to provide highly educated people with a living wage. He complained that the meager

rates were now amplified by a scared and overzealous bureaucracy that was now launching child abuse investigations over such minor incidences as a stubbed toe, tying up the program's resources as employees are sidelined until the investigations are resolved, which can take weeks or months.

Gelser said the overzealous investigations stemmed from a misinterpretation of the law by the Office of Adult Abuse Prevention and Investigations, a problem she believed would be resolved with a shake-up in management at that division announced this month. But, "It's not an aggressive policing environment that you comply with licensing requirements," she said.

The state foster care system has been rocked since the departure of former DHS Director Erinn Kelley-Siel as the agency faced allegations of child neglect at several foster care agencies, the most prominent being Give Us This Day in northeast Portland. Three other foster care providers have been shut down, including Youth Villages, where a flurry of allegations were reported just months after its director, Lynne Saxton, left to head the Oregon Health Authority.

Youth Villages was shut down this spring after Saxton's predecessors failed to take corrective action to better supervise youth after a male teenage resident had sex with two of the girls and another youth climbed on the roof of the building,

according to documents provided by the Department of Human Services.

The report also took aim at systemic problems within the state bureaucracy, saying: “The culture of Oregon DHS has for some time been focused on reframing problems with the child substitute care system to deflect blame, comply with regulation, and preserve the existing System.”

“The department was looking the other way when things were going seriously wrong -- that’s not acceptable,” said Gelser.

New DHS Director Clyde Saiki has tried to clean up the agency’s act, shunting aside long-time child welfare managers Jerry Waybrant and Lois Day. But Saiki inherited an agency with terrible morale and faces many of the same challenges -- providing for vulnerable children and recruiting adequately staffed, nonprofit foster care providers who have the expertise to care for these kids, and also dealing with a state Legislature that has historically underfunded his agency’s programs.

“Until the [child protective services] workers, [Oregon Licensing and Regulation Office] licensers, [Child Protective Services] hotline screeners, and [Office of Adult Abuse Prevention & Investigations] investigators are adequately staffed, the system will always struggle to keep on top of child and youth safety,” according to the report.

Riggs also complained about foster children getting housed at hotels or DHS offices, but Gelser said this

was not a new problem that came about from recent reforms. “It is irresponsible for them to suggest that children sleeping in motel rooms is somehow related to Senate Bill 1515,” she said. “I would much rather have children in hotel rooms as opposed to sexually abused, neglected and physically abused.”

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