



Child Protection Screening

Evaluation Description

July 2011

BACKGROUND

It is the policy of the State of Minnesota “to protect children whose health or welfare may be jeopardized through physical abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse.”¹ The state’s child protection system is intended to fulfill the policy when a child’s welfare is threatened by maltreatment by an individual responsible for the child’s care.

Counties and two American Indian tribes administer the child protection system in Minnesota, with oversight by the Department of Human Services (DHS). Children come to the attention of county or tribal child protective services staff when people report their suspicions of child maltreatment. Staff “screen” each report to determine whether it includes allegations that meet the legal definition of maltreatment. If so, the report is “screened in” as a report of child maltreatment.

Child protection staff complete investigations or family assessments for screened-in reports. An investigation determines whether maltreatment occurred and whether protective services are needed. Family assessments examine the child’s safety, the risk of subsequent maltreatment, and family strengths. In 2009, staff conducted family assessments for 66 percent of screened-in reports, and investigations for the others.

When county or tribal staff “screen out” a report as inappropriate for investigation or family assessment, staff may make referrals for services or provide the family with additional information. Screened-out reports represented 67 percent of Minnesota’s maltreatment allegations in fiscal year 2009, compared with 38 percent nationally.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do counties and tribes have consistent, reasonable practices for screening reports of possible maltreatment?

2. What is the variation in counties’ and tribes’ rates of screening in reports of maltreatment, and what might explain the variation?
3. Do state laws provide sufficient guidance regarding screening of maltreatment reports? Has DHS provided sufficient oversight of screening practices?

SCOPE

This evaluation, authorized by the Legislative Audit Commission in May 2011, will focus on the decision to “screen in” or “screen out” reports of suspected child maltreatment. A 1998 evaluation by our office identified county variations in that decision as a key issue. Many statutory and agency changes occurred after that report, and Minnesota now has statewide screening guidelines. This evaluation will explore any remaining variations in child protection screening criteria and practices.

To answer questions about variations in screening practices and rates, we will survey counties and tribes and interview staff in selected jurisdictions. In addition, we will survey selected groups of “mandated reporters”—people who are required by law to report suspicions of child maltreatment—about their experiences with maltreatment reporting. Finally, we will analyze data on child protection screening decisions recorded by counties and tribes in a state database.

We will review state law and state screening guidelines to assess the guidance they provide, in addition to asking counties and tribes for their opinions. Lastly, we will interview DHS staff and review agency guidance and oversight related to child protection screening.

We plan to issue a report in February 2012. For more information, please contact Carrie Meyerhoff, evaluation manager, at 651-297-3499 or carrie.meyerhoff@state.mn.us.

¹ *Minnesota Statutes* 2010, 626.556, subd. 1.