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# Clear Standards and More Accountability Would Improve Child Protective Services

## SUMMARY

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County child protection agencies in Minnesota receive limited guidance from state laws and rules, rely considerably on local property taxes, and are subject to little oversight by state government or others, according to a report by the Legislative Auditor.

The study found that per capita rates of child protection investigations and maltreatment determinations vary widely among counties, partly reflecting differing interpretations of maltreatment definitions in state law. A majority of county human services directors said that they would favor additional state guidance about which cases to investigate and when to determine that maltreatment has occurred.

Certain professionals are required by law to report instances of suspected maltreatment, but the study found that many of these people do not feel well-informed about the criteria that child protection agencies use to make decisions or about the outcomes of the cases they report to counties. For example, 63 percent of pediatricians and 42 percent of school social workers statewide said they were “sometimes, rarely, or never” adequately informed about county criteria regarding which allegations of physical

abuse to investigate. In addition, 69 percent of pediatricians and 54 percent of school social workers said they were “sometimes, rarely, or never” informed about case outcomes, contrary to the requirements of state law.

In addition, these professionals expressed concerns about the effectiveness of child protection interventions—particularly in cases of child neglect, the most common type of child maltreatment. For instance, 55 percent of school social workers and 45 percent of pediatricians said that child protection agencies have “sometimes, rarely, or never” taken appropriate steps to protect victims of child neglect from further harm.

The study found that 29 percent of Minnesota families investigated for maltreatment in 1993 were investigated again by the same county within three years. Eighteen percent of families determined by counties to have maltreated their children in 1993 had another such finding by the same county within three years.

The report suggests that it might be possible to protect some children more effectively through better risk assessments, longer family monitoring, and greater willingness by counties to take

*Program Evaluation Report*  
**Child Protective Services**

*January 13, 1998*

**Key findings:**

- Per capita rates of maltreatment investigations, determinations, and services vary widely among counties.
- Many pediatricians and school social workers lack confidence in the child protection system.
- There is little accountability for child protection agencies' performance.
- Eighteen percent of families found to have maltreated their children had a subsequent finding within three years in the same county.

**Recommendations:**

- The Department of Human Services (DHS) should adopt clearer definitions of maltreatment in state rules.
- The Legislature and DHS should consider various options for improved oversight.

*The report is available at our web site:  
<http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9801.htm>  
Copies of the full report or summary are also available  
by calling 612/296-4708.*

uncooperative families to court. Most district court judges said that parents sometimes receive too many “second chances” before agencies seek substitute care or termination of parental rights.

There has been very limited accountability for child protective services in Minnesota. Minnesota is one of ten states in which child protective services are provided by county (not state) employees. In recent years, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has not closely scrutinized county practices, the state’s child mortality review panel was inactive, and counties had difficulty measuring the performance of child welfare programs. In addition, child protection records are classified as private data, so they are not open to the public.

The report recommends that the Legislature and DHS consider various options for improved accountability, including outside reviews of county cases, compliance monitoring, agency self-reporting on performance, improved employee supervision, and public release of certain child protection records in cases of child fatalities and

near fatalities. To better serve the interests of children, the report also recommends that the Legislature authorize child protection agencies to share case information with certain professionals who work with children and families.

The report notes that child protection staff in the Twin Cities metropolitan area are much more likely than staff elsewhere in Minnesota to have master’s degrees, and Twin Cities staff have been with their current agencies for a longer time than outstate staff, on average. The report also says that counties may need additional staff to adequately serve troubled families. It notes that Minnesota is unusual in its heavy reliance on local property taxes to pay for child protective services, so there may be a rationale for additional state assistance to counties.

Copies of the report, entitled *Child Protective Services*, may be obtained from the Office of the Legislative Auditor at 612/296-4708 or at <http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9801.htm>. For further information, contact Joel Alter or Roger Brooks at 296-4708.