

News Release

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Department of Economic Security Releases Report On Immediate Reforms to Child Protective Services

PHOENIX (Oct. 7, 2011) - Following a thorough review of agency data, trends, policies and staffing related to child safety, the Department of Economic Security today released a report containing immediate reforms that can be implemented to improve Child Protective Services (CPS) in Arizona.

The report focuses upon specific, up-front strategies to improve CPS practices, strengthen its workforce and promote transparency, as well as a specific timetable for implementation. Meanwhile, Governor Jan Brewer today signed an Executive Order convening an Arizona Child Safety Task Force. To be comprised of experts in child welfare from the legal, judicial, public policy, education and victim's advocacy communities, this Task Force will look at longer-term and broader issues related to child welfare in Arizona and the best practices of other states. The panel will issue its recommendations to the Governor by the end of the year.

"There are dedicated professionals in this agency who are committed to the safety and welfare of children under state supervision or custody, but I know there is room for improvement in our operations," said DES Director Clarence Carter. "With the immediate reforms identified in this report and the work of the Child Safety Task Force, I am confident that CPS in Arizona is on the right track."

Today's report comes on the heels of several high-profile fatalities and near-fatalities involving children inside and outside the state's CPS system. In late August, Governor Jan Brewer and DES Director Clarence Carter met to discuss the status of CPS' investigative processes. This report is the product of that meeting and a follow-up in September, as well as eight focus groups involving more than 40 CPS caseworkers and supervisors, judges, attorneys and other child-safety experts inside and outside the agency and Governor's Office.

The report found that CPS workload and the Children's Services budget line item has remained fairly constant over the last five years, but the case backlog has spiked and staff attrition remains high. In August 2011, it was determined that there were nearly 10,000 "non-active" cases statewide. The agency has a special Social Work Assessment Team to analyze these cases and determine whether they can be closed or require additional action. This review should be completed by the end of the year.

Additionally, the special team is developing process changes to expedite the review of new cases of maltreatment for children who've been the subject of multiple prior reports.

The report has identified numerous steps to improve the recruitment, retention and training of CPS staff. Among these steps, the agency will:

- Continue to build relationships with universities and community colleges to refine the curriculum necessary for caseworkers;
- Explore immersion training for newly-hired CPS workers to get them in the field more quickly;

- Conduct a full assessment of CPS training and staff development needs;
- Explore additional resources, including technology, to help staff members perform their jobs more efficiently and effectively.

DES must be committed to transparency to the highest extent possible, while protecting confidential information in accordance with state and federal law. The agency will pursue the following actions related to internal and external communication:

- The Director will utilize social media, as appropriate, to communicate with the public;
- The Director will be in the field with caseworkers every month (ride-alongs, site visits, etc);
- The Director will hold open forums with the stakeholder community and public at-large.
- The Director will hold weekly senior staff meeting to monitor progress, and bi-monthly meetings with child-welfare supervisors;
- The DES senior child-welfare team will continue to hold weekly sessions to review critical cases;
- The CPS Division Director will continue to meet monthly with deputy directors to monitor progress.

Additionally, the agency will develop ways to publicly distribute a semi-annual report that catalogs data related to child safety in Arizona. This report is already available at http://www.azdes.gov/uploadedFiles/Arizona_Child_Safety_Review_and_Action_Plan.pdf, but a more active distribution will facilitate better feedback and recommendations from the public and stakeholders.

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