

Office of Performance Evaluations

News Release: Child Welfare Caseload Management

February 4, 2005

(BOISE) The Department of Health and Welfare lacks reliable caseload information and has not regularly monitored the workload of staff in its Child Welfare program—the program charged with investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect, and overseeing the state's foster care system. Without this information, it is difficult for the department to ensure program staffing levels are appropriate and staff are allocated to areas where most needed, according to a report released today by the bipartisan Joint Legislative Oversight Committee.

The report, prepared by non-partisan evaluators of the legislative Office of Performance Evaluations, offers seven recommendations to ensure the department collects and uses caseload and workload information to allocate staff and assess resource needs, regularly reports key information to lawmakers to strengthen accountability, and takes steps to better access federal funding.

While the report finds caseload information at the department unreliable, some key workload indicators suggest workload in the program has been increasing. Over the past three years, the number of children in foster care has increased 33 percent, resulting in more work for department staff. Additionally, an increase in the number of cases involving substance abuse has added to the complexity of program work. Case workers and supervisors surveyed for the report estimated that approximately 80 percent of cases in the past year involved substance abuse, with methamphetamine the most frequently reported drug.

Case workers and supervisors surveyed expressed frustration with the department's caseload and workload management, and generally felt caseloads were not reasonable or fairly distributed, and management did not make adjustments to staff caseloads when necessary. Only about half of survey respondents thought the department's Child Welfare program was headed in the right direction.

The report also found the department is losing federal funding for foster children because court orders did not meet federal requirements, and required court hearings for foster children were not always held in a timely manner. Addressing problems with initial court orders issued in child protection cases could yield estimated cost savings of nearly \$350,000 to the state annually.

The department agrees with the recommendations of the report and has taken steps toward addressing them, but feels additional resources may be necessary. The evaluators, however, contend that most of the recommendations can be implemented with existing resources by making changes in the way the program is managed. The Office of the Governor believes the report provides a fair assessment of the department's caseload management efforts.