

The Child Welfare System

A summary of three OPE reports

February 2019

The Child Protection Legislative Oversight Committee is a public forum that will add to the momentum of continuous improvement in the Idaho child welfare system.

OPE reports

Child Welfare System (2017)

Representation for Children and Youth in Child Protection Cases (2018)

Child Welfare System: Reducing the Risk of Adverse Outcomes (2018)

Legislative response

Senate Bill 1341 added more review and oversight to the foster care system by establishing citizen review panels and the Child Protection Legislative Oversight Committee.

The Legislature appropriated or approved the following:

\$50,000 in fiscal year 2019 to the Supreme Court to develop and train the new citizen review panels

\$32,000 and \$20,000 from separate funds to public health districts to manage and oversee the panels

\$467,500 to increase compensation of guardian ad litem programs

20% increase in compensation to foster parents

\$1,781,400 more to the child welfare program beginning in fiscal year 2018 for nine additional full-time equivalent positions to address excessive workloads

The committee is a new tool that can improve stakeholder engagement:

Learning at the system level

Improve data collection and reporting of diversion actions to inform managers and policymakers

Formalize governance structure for interagency and interjurisdictional data sharing and leadership

Creating common goals

Clarify the intent and role for diversion actions in statute and policy to distinguish placement criteria for licensed foster care or kinship diversion

Prioritize the development of support networks and community resources for youth transitioning to independent living

Having difficult conversations

Address gaps in representation for children and youth in care

Establish criteria to measure the quality of representation

Provide state leadership and stability for guardian ad litem programs

Sustaining focused efforts

Provide policy and legal frameworks for success

Ensure resources are available to sustain efforts

Ensure that problems are addressed

Provide systemwide accountability for outcomes



View the reports:
www.legislature.idaho.gov/ope/

Child Welfare System

Report highlights

February 2017

Gaps in placement services, program capacity, organizational culture, and system-level oversight prevent the state's child welfare system from performing at the high level of expectation set through policy making and program design processes.

Findings

A worsening shortage (8% decrease between 2014 and 2016) of foster parents threatens the fidelity of the state's child welfare system.

“ There is a sense of anxiety that comes over you because you have to find someone to take [the children]. —Social worker

Compromised performance and a persistent expectation gap are the effects of excessive workloads.

“ I believe that most health and welfare workers want to do a good job and are good people. I also believe that...because they are overwhelmed, they are only capable of doing an average job. I'd give them a grade of "C" if I were a teacher. But there is ample room for them to be improved. —Judge

Additional staff are likely necessary to improve workloads, but alone, adding staff will not be sufficient to address workload challenges. Workload should be addressed by examining processes, expectations, documentation, technology, and other requirements for opportunities to improve efficiency.

“ Because of resource constraints, social workers have to settle for C-grade work. The problem is that there is an expectation for A-grade results. —Chief of social work

The belief that workers cannot consistently meet requirements and quality expectations has led to a culture of compromise in which poor performance is explainable, excusable, and expected; a condition that critically undermines meaningful accountability.

Addressing complex, entrenched problems of child welfare requires a systems approach with ongoing system-level oversight.

Legislative standing committees dedicated to child welfare, children, or families have been established in many other states, any one of those states could function as a model for Idaho.

We estimate social workers are carrying on average

28–38%

more cases than what program managers, supervisors, and social workers believe social workers can carry while still serving every case effectively.

Organizational culture is undercut by a constant feeling of crisis. Social workers described a detrimental cycle of priority and compromise.

Despite collaboration and multiple forms of accountability, Idaho's child welfare system lacks system-wide accountability and oversight.

Recommendation

We recommend the formation of a formal, system-wide oversight entity with authority to ensure ongoing accountability, visibility, and accessibility for all child welfare partners and stakeholders.



View the report: www.legislature.idaho.gov/ope/

Representation for Children and Youth in Child Protection Cases

Report highlights

February 2018

Gaps in representation have occurred and the state does not have a way to validate all children and youth are being served.

44 counties and 7 guardian ad litem programs provide representation.

In fiscal year 2017, 81 percent of children and youth were served by guardian ad litem programs. Of the 19 percent not served, most received representation through a public defender and some had gaps in representation. Three circumstances contributed to the gaps:

- Neither a public defender nor a guardian ad litem was appointed.
- A guardian ad litem program was appointed but did not have the capacity to serve, and a public defender was not subsequently appointed.
- A guardian ad litem program served for a period of time but withdrew from the case, and a public defender was not subsequently appointed.

Consistency and stability are the state's biggest challenges in providing effective representation to children and youth.

The state has a shortage of volunteer advocates. This shortage increases the following likelihoods:

- A gap in representation will occur.
- Children and youth will experience turnover in representation.
- Program staff will serve more cases leaving less time for support, supervision, fundraising, and community awareness.

Even though guardians ad litem represent best interest and public defenders represent expressed wishes, collaboration between these groups is essential to improve the quality of representation.

State coordination is needed to ensure consistency and stability across multiple programs, counties, and the Supreme Court.

Recommendation

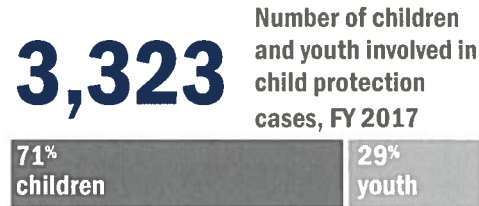
The Legislature should facilitate a coordinated, collaborative effort to bring together relevant stakeholders to help strengthen representation for children and youth in child protection cases.

Idaho Child Protective Act

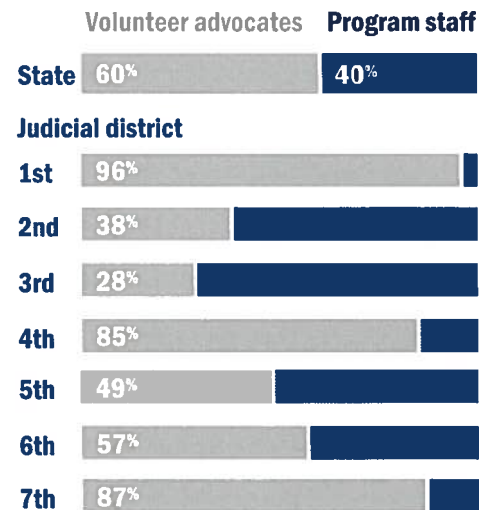
Children 11 years and younger shall be appointed a guardian ad litem.

Youth 12 and older shall be appointed a public defender.

Children and youth may have both a guardian ad litem and a public defender.



Because of the shortage of volunteer advocates, some programs use a high percentage of program staff to serve children and youth.



View the report: www.legislature.idaho.gov/ope/



Child Welfare System: Reducing the Risk of Adverse Outcomes

Report highlights

March 2018

The report offers the Legislature and all child welfare partners a roadmap for reducing the risk of adverse outcomes for children and youth who have been maltreated or involved with juvenile justice.

Findings

The evaluation addressed three aspects of Idaho's child welfare system.

1. Diverting maltreated children from foster care when possible

Child and Family Services' data systems did not support the collection practices necessary for systematic analysis of foster care diversion.

Child protection partners (law enforcement, prosecutors, medical professionals, schools, and families) affected the use of foster care diversion.

Social workers inconsistently applied the child safety assessment model.

2. Preventing youth from crossing between the child protection and juvenile justice systems

Data sharing obstacles have hindered stakeholders' understanding of youth who have had contact with both the child protection and juvenile justice systems.

The system lacked a clear legal and policy framework that supports data sharing and coordinated approaches to treating dual system youth.

3. Preparing youth who are exiting the child welfare system for independent living as adults

Managing crises took precedence over providing independent living services.

Youth and staff showed inconsistent knowledge of benefits and services.

Unstable caregiver relationships or lack of community connections caused youth to have a false sense of support.

25% of child maltreatment cases received safety services that diverted children from foster care in fiscal year 2016

19% of diversions escalated to foster care

70% of diversion cases relied on extended family or friends to ensure the safety of children

34% of youth involved with the juvenile justice system in 2014 or 2015 had previous contact with Idaho's child protection system

The evaluation builds on two of our previous studies:

1. *Child Welfare System*, February 2017
2. *Representation for Children and Youth in Child Protection Cases*, February 2018

Recommendations

When used in conjunction with our 2017 recommendation to establish system-wide oversight, recommendations in this report will enable child protection partners to further improve collaboration and ensure that responsibility for child protection outcomes is shared.



View the report:
www.legislature.idaho.gov/ope/