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Cries for help to DCF hot line go unheeded by design

Thousands of abuse reports to a DCF hot line go unheeded every month because of a new screening process intended to keep the strained system functioning.

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Sept. 16, 2:02 p.m.: A Broward sheriff's deputy calls the Florida child-abuse hot line to report that a 4-year-old had been molested by a babysitter as the sitter's boyfriend videotaped the assault. A hot-line counselor declines to forward the report to an investigator.

Oct. 6, 10:15 a.m.: A school guidance counselor reports a mother who had repeatedly missed doctor's appointments for her daughter, whose sickle-cell disease is so severe she is losing her hearing and needs a new liver. The report is rejected.

Nov. 16, time unknown: A father is attempting to break into his estranged wife's home. He says he will kill his children. That call, too, is not accepted for investigation.

These decisions, and thousands more, are the result of a little-known -- but potentially dangerous -- practice by the Department of Children & Families: Beginning last year, DCF dramatically increased the number of abuse calls considered unworthy of investigation.

In an effort to reduce workload -- and the system-wide stress that high case loads generate -- intake workers at the Tallahassee-based hot line have been screening out tens of thousands of calls.

Among the screened-out allegations: reports of kidnapping, rape, aggravated child abuse, medical neglect, malnutrition, kids roaming the streets unsupervised and domestic violence that threatens to harm the children.

Among the callers being turned away: school counselors, grandparents, circuit court judges, hospital social workers, day-care workers and juvenile-justice staffers.

The hot line rejected a call from one of the agency's own child-abuse investigators: On Oct. 15, a state child protective investigator filed a report on behalf of an infant whose babysitters' own 4-month-old suffered ``significant head injuries."

Details of the screenings have come to light as part of a review of procedures by child-welfare managers in Broward County.

DCF administrators say the policy is a necessary triage that allows investigators to concentrate their energies on children who are most at risk.

Last year, DCF Secretary George Sheldon complained at a meeting of an avalanche of frivolous complaints, including a report from a teacher that a child came to school in mismatched sneakers and a report from another teacher about a boy whose underwear was on backward.

"I think this is still a work in progress," Sheldon told The Miami Herald last week. "I think we've got to continue to refine our risk assesment, both at the hot line and in the field."

"I think we have started this ship turning. But it ain't there yet."

BEHIND THE SCENES

In Florida, hot-line counselors come from all walks of life. Before being allowed to answer calls -- which number about 190,000 each year -- counselors are given seven weeks of training followed by a two-week supervised "practicum," said Edward Cotton, a child-welfare consultant who is helping the state revise the program.

Counselors screen calls based on detailed definitions of abuse, neglect and abandonment as spelled out in Florida statutes and a host of internal policies and procedures.

In the past year, records show, DCF has been accepting fewer child-abuse calls to the hot line for investigation.

In January 2009, DCF accepted 14,930 child-abuse reports, down from 17,999 the previous year. In February 2009, DCF accepted 14,724 reports, down from 18,427 in 2008. In September 2009, DCF accepted 14,553 reports, down from 17,709 the year before. And in October 2009, the agency generated 13,188 investigations, down from 17,345 in 2008.

Children are not the only Floridians who may be left in harm's way. The hot line is also screening reports about disabled adults and elders, including an Oct. 12 complaint that a disabled woman had been raped by another resident at a home for people with disabilities.

A source with knowledge of the new policies says DCF has revised internal guidelines on what constitutes abuse, including a new protocol to reject complaints about children who have suffered bruises or welts from beatings -- unless such beatings result in a trip to the doctor or hospital, or "permanent disfigurement."

And a December 2008 DCF report shows the agency is considering revising the definition of "inadequate supervision" so narrowly that, for example, the hot line would screen out calls where "a parent allows [a] 3-year-old to play with a loaded gun while they are in the room supervising them."

“The hot line would only accept an intake if the 3-year-old shot themselves with the loaded gun the parent allowed them to play with,” says the report, part of a review of several potential policy changes.

DCF's top child welfare administrator, Alan Abramowitz, said the state will not implement that particular protocol. “It's not going to happen,” Abramowitz said. “I don't even think the NRA would agree with that.”

Mark Riordan, a DCF spokesman, said the agency's senior management had not yet reviewed the proposed revisions and that it is unlikely some of the new definitions will be approved.

Cotton, the consultant, who worked two decades in the Illinois child-protection system and was director of New Jersey's Department of Youth and Family Services, said Florida does not appear to screen out a higher percentage of calls than other states, though differing hot-line designs make comparisons difficult.

“There is really no national standard for what is screened and what is not,” Cotton said.

As a safety value, Sheldon and Abramowitz said, the agency has asked its “quality assurance” team to randomly review thousands of screened-out calls to ensure proper decision-making.

Child advocates say stepped-up screening is a dangerous shortcut that will claim children's lives. And, in fact, it may already have.

In July, 1-year-old Bryce Barros was beaten to death after a Broward County domestic violence judge, Eileen O'Connor, sent three faxes to the hot line requesting an investigation into Bryce's safety in the wake of ongoing family violence by his parents.

“The court is deeply concerned about the welfare of the minor child,” O'Connor wrote in the three faxes she titled “court orders.”

O'Connor's appeals were ignored.

“Hot-line calls are cries for help on behalf of a child,” said **Howard Talenfeld**, the Fort Lauderdale-based chairman of Florida's Children First, an advocacy group. “Any call that is screened out is a cry that falls on deaf ears.”

This fall, the head of the Broward Sheriff's Office's child-protection unit teamed with a DCF administrator to study about three months' worth of reports that were rejected by the hot line but then referred to a prevention program in Broward administered by BSO.

About one in four of the screened calls result in such prevention referrals in Broward. In each case, parents are sent form letters suggesting they seek help. No one follows up with the families to determine whether the services were accepted.

A finding of the joint review: About 46 percent of the cases studied by the two administrators -- BSO's James Walker and DCF's Kimberly Welles -- ultimately were phoned back to the hot

line by BSO investigators who concluded the children remained at risk, said Riordan, a DCF spokesman in Broward.

Statewide, Abramowitz said, about 6 percent of prevention referrals are phoned back to the hot line.

Among the screened calls: On Oct. 21, someone alleged that a woman and her five children were living in a car because her husband kicked her out and changed the locks.

Two of the kids were disabled: an autistic 3-year-old and a 6-year-old sibling who is developmentally disabled, failing to thrive, and required 24-hour nursing care to maintain a feeding tube. Local homeless shelters refused to help the family because they wouldn't accept disabled children.

But DCF turned her away, too.

“So, a child requiring a feeding tube, along with an autistic child, was forced out of the home by the father -- thereby . . . forcing his [children] with handicaps into the streets. Isn't that harm?” Walker wrote in his review of the Broward prevention referrals.

The push to reduce the number of full-fledged investigations began in June 2008, well into the economic downturn. “The Child Protective System is experiencing significant stress due to the high number of reports that [the agency has] been receiving since Oct. 2006,” Sheldon wrote in a June 10, 2008 e-mail, when he was still assistant secretary.

From fall 2007 to fall 2008, the hot line was receiving about 1,320 more calls per month, Steve Holmes, a strategic planning director, wrote nine days later.

“The more reports a child protective investigator receives,” he wrote, “the less time he or she has to conduct a thorough investigation.

“Less time spent on investigations may place an increased risk to the safety of children,” Holmes added. Adding to the strain: For budget year 2008, Florida lawmakers reduced funding to the four sheriff's departments, including Broward, that conduct abuse investigations under contract with DCF by \$2.9 million, or almost 6 percent.

STRAIN ON SYSTEM

Sheldon said he had been told by so-called “professional reporters” -- educators, coaches, ministers, pediatricians and judges -- that a 1998 law setting penalties for failing to report suspected maltreatment left them little choice but to phone the hot line even with frivolous complaints.

From 2006 through 2008, reports from school professionals, for example, jumped 132 percent while reports from social workers increased 51 percent, a DCF report says.

“I don't believe it's abuse, but my sergeant told me I should report it,” was a common refrain from frustrated police officers, Sheldon said.

At about the same time DCF administrators ramped up their screening of hot-line calls, they also expanded a program that allows caseworkers to offer an array of services -- such as subsidized child care, rent and utilities assistance, parenting classes, and domestic-violence intervention -- to struggling families that are not under investigation.

Abramowitz called the ``prevention referrals" a safety net for parents whose troubles do not require a full investigation but who might benefit from a helping hand.

``We created a mechanism to review screened-out calls," Abramowitz said. ``It's a safeguard. . . . We want to make sure we have engaged families so that we make sure we help them."

But some child-welfare experts question whether the prevention program can take the place of a quality investigation.

Consultant Norma Harris, who directs the Social Research Institute at the University of Utah and has reviewed Miami's foster-care system, said children remain at risk if caseworkers don't ensure that parents accept the services that are offered. Simply sending letters or brochures does not protect children, she said.

And Cheleene B. Schembera, a 27-year DCF child-welfare administrator and inspector general who now works as a consultant, said she has never approved of screening out hot-line calls, because even fairly innocuous allegations, once investigated, can uncover serious threats to children.

``That isn't child protection," Schembera said.