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State sees more neglected children, many left to wander

■ The death of 7-year-old Ashley Ann Carlson opens a window on thousands of children never removed from their parents but whose circumstances still spark real concern

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Toddlers wandering alone in busy parking lots. Children living in homes full of garbage, rats and lice. Parents who can't hear their children crying through a fog of drugs or alcohol.

Caseworkers hear such stories more and more in Oregon. But these conditions of child neglect usually aren't cause enough for the state's child protective agency to move children into foster care.

Child neglect is on the rise in Oregon, but the state remains limited in how it can respond and is able to react only to the most severe cases.

The state has a limited number of caseworkers and receives thousands of calls about neglect each year. State law also says the agency can only intervene if there is an immediate threat to the child's safety or when the parents have proved through repeated failure that they will not be able to parent adequately.

The death of Ashley Ann Carlson, found strangled in the home of a 16-year-old neighbor earlier this month, calls attention to the thousands of neglected children in this state, because of reports that the 7-year-old spent time wandering alone.

On the day she disappeared, Ashley's mother had turned herself in to police because she had missed appointments with a parole officer. A boyfriend who was caring for Ashley said he gave the girl \$5 to go to McDonald's with the sister of the teen later arrested as a suspect in the case.

A woman who provided child care said Ashley's mother once took off for a month, leaving Ashley in the care of a boyfriend. Calls to the State Office for Services to Children and Families worried the agency enough to investigate the family and open a case on Ashley.

The agency would not comment on the case because it is under investigation, but Ashley's family said that she was never in foster care.

Most calls of concern yield no response from the agency, and even fewer result in a child being removed from his or her home.

Neglectful parents get many more chances than those who inflict abuse that's more apparent, such as cigarette burns or broken arms.

Families caught letting a toddler wander out into the crowded parking lot of an apartment complex, or living in conditions that are dangerously filthy, often get a few warnings before they lose their child, said Victor Congleton, program manager for