

Report shows decrease in child

Staff and wire reports

More than 50 percent of reported cases of child abuse were not investigated by state caseworkers in 2001, according to a report released Wednesday by the nonprofit group Children First for Oregon.

The report, which evaluates children's welfare on a county-by-county basis, found that caseworkers looked into 46 percent of abuse allegations, compared to 64 percent five years ago. More than 19,600 reports of abuse went unassessed, according to the report.

In Jackson County, 40 percent of the 2,645 cases of abuse reported in 2001 were assessed, the report showed. Twelve percent of those cases proved to be founded.

Many of the local cases considered "unassessed" were referred to other agencies because they didn't rise to the level of abuse, said Doug Mares, child-welfare program manager in Southern Oregon.

"They don't meet the child-abuse neglect standards," he said. "It's situations like head lice or a dirty home."

The report comes just weeks after two audits commissioned by the Oregon Department of Human Services found that most counties did not have access to criminal or probation records for potential child abusers and that caseworkers often submitted inadequate paperwork.

The audits were commissioned by the agency after it failed to respond to reports of the alleged sexual abuse of 12-year-old Ashley Pond by a neighbor who was later charged with her murder.

The report provides a grim outlook, considering the state's looming budget crisis, said Marie Hoeven, executive director for Children First.

The child welfare division of DHS faces \$8 million in budget cuts, part of an overall agency shortfall of \$88 million, if a Janu-

ary tax increase measure fails. The division already lost \$2.5 million in December when tax revenue projections fell short.

"We have an increase in the number of reports being made, but we've not increased the resources on the ground or the staffing levels to investigate these cases," Hoeven said. "Children's safety still needs to be a priority no matter our resources."

Officials at the Oregon Department of Human Services said many abuse allegations considered "unassessed" by the report were in reality forwarded to other agencies because they didn't reach the threshold of abuse required by DHS.

Of more serious concern is the inconsistency between counties when it comes to assessing reports of abuse — something also highlighted in the report, said Ramona Foley, DHS assistant director of child, adult and family services.

abuse assessments statewide

"The level of protection provided by the agency should be more similar across the state," she said. "Right now, the way counties are staffed, it doesn't appear that that's the circumstance."

Counties with the best record on child abuse assessments tended to be rural and in eastern Oregon, while those with the lowest ratings were in the Portland-metro area, according to the report.

Union County, in northeastern Oregon, followed up on 98 percent of the child abuse re-

ports it received — the highest rate statewide. Washington and Clackamas counties, both in the Portland-metro area, had the lowest percentages, at 20 and 27 percent, respectively.

Hoeven said counties vary dramatically in the number of cases reported and the way the staff processes them.

"There's a difference of attitudes and a difference in the definition of what is abuse and neglect (in different communities) and there's a varying level of resources," she said.

In Clackamas County, the per-

centage of cases assessed is low because caseworkers enter more initial reports into a central database than do other counties, skewing the overall results, said Marge Reinhart, DHS manager for Clackamas.

The state will start using a standardized computer program in April at all its offices to create more consistency between counties, said Foley. The agency is also planning to shift caseworkers from areas such as foster care monitoring to abuse report screening, she said.