

Advocates say child welfare is neglected

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*As caseloads increase, the
Legislature's budget for child
protective services doesn't include
money for more caseworkers*

By **EDWARD WALSH**
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SALEM — The Oregon Legislature has delivered a mixed record on child welfare issues this session, passing a handful of useful bills but leaving the child protective system deeply underfunded as caseloads grow, child welfare advocates said Tuesday.

At a news conference at the Capitol, representatives of child welfare organizations said the budget that the Legislature adopted for the Department of Human Services fails to address the funding shortfall in a system strained to capacity.

"We continue to do things on the cheap," said Tina Kotek, policy director for Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit advocacy group.

According to a report issued Tuesday by Kotek's organization, suspected child abuse cases have increased 28 percent in Oregon since 2001. Last year, the report said, DHS received 46,524 reports of suspected child abuse or neglect, investigated slightly more than half of them, and identified 10,622 children who were victims of abuse or neglect. For a second year, more Oregon children went into foster care than left the system, the report said.

Kotek and others at the news conference praised the Legislature for passage of a few bills, including a "Foster Parents Bill of Rights" and a measure that authorizes juvenile courts to allow foster children to remain in the same school even if they are moved to a home outside their school district.

But they repeatedly returned to the funding issue, which Kotek called "the elephant in the room."

"They talk about doing better with existing resources," said Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland. "At the heart of the matter, we don't have enough resources."

The Legislature authorized spending \$2.27 billion during the next two years for DHS' Children, Adults and Families section, which handles child abuse and neglect cases. That's an increase from

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