

Advocates: Child-welfare system ailing

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In Oregon, reports
of abuse increase; so
do worker caseloads

BY PETER WONG
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Despite steps by the 2005 Legislature, child-welfare advocates say Oregon is failing to keep pace with the growing number of children who may be victims of abuse or neglect.

Leading the list of needs, they say, is more caseworkers in the Department of Human Services.

Judy Cooper, a DHS caseworker in Washington County, said she is handling double the load recommended by the Child Welfare League of America. Those standards are 10 active families and four initial assessments.

Cooper said her co-workers are no exception.

"We struggle every day to do what we need to do," she said.

Cooper said that she tries to return telephone calls by foster parents on the day they are made but that caseworkers

Online 

For more details, visit www.childrenfirstfororegon.org.

often are overwhelmed.

"It is the tyranny of the urgent: a child is running away, a mother is relapsing on drugs; it's crisis, crisis, crisis," she said. "We do not have

time for the kind of support we would like to be able to give."

Cooper appeared at a presentation by Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit advocacy group that said last week that reports of suspected child abuse or neglect have increased

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28 percent since 2001.

Of the 46,524 reports filed with the state last year, 23,727 were investigated and 10,622 children were found to be victims of abuse and neglect, the group said.

It is unclear how that growth is linked with drugs, the report said, but "the rise in methamphetamine use in Oregon puts children at increased risk."

Of Oregon's seven most populous counties in metropolitan areas, Marion County ranked first with a rate of 16 confirmed victims per 1,000 children.

Tina Kotek, policy director for Children First for Oregon, said that last year was the second consecutive year that more children entered Oregon's foster care system than left it.

"We continue to do things on the cheap," she said. "There are warning signs that this system is under stress. If Oregon is going to keep children safe, these warning signs must not be ignored."

The final budget for the Children, Adult and Families section of DHS is \$2.27 billion in the next two years, up from

\$2.15 billion in 2003-05. Nearly all of the increase is for federal food stamps.

In addition to child abuse and neglect, the section also oversees Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, as welfare now is known.

DHS officials say there is no cut in the number of child-protection caseworkers.

Jessica Stevens, a political organizer for the largest state employee union, said the legislative report accompanying the agency budget suggests otherwise. The report said that 136 positions will be shifted from the section, 80 of them into central services.

Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, said he voted against the agency budget because it did not contain enough for child caseworkers or alcohol and drug treatment.

"We need to make sure that the people responsible for the child-welfare system have the tools they need to be able to work with families and children," he said.

Greenlick and Rep. Billy Dal-

Key points

Excerpts from "Strategies for Improving Oregon's Child Welfare System," by Children First for Oregon:

DECREASE CASELOAD SIZE: "Child protective services must have the resources needed to keep up with the growing number of reports of suspected abuse and reduce caseloads, so child welfare workers can do the best job possible for Oregon's most vulnerable children."

EXPAND DRUG AND ALCOHOL PREVENTION AND TREATMENT: "Substance-abusing parents must have access to comprehensive,

long-term treatment with follow-up supports for relapse prevention ..."

INCREASE SUPPORTS TO FOSTER FAMILIES. "With an increasing number of children entering foster care, recruiting and retaining an ample supply of quality foster families is more important than ever."

INCREASE SUPPORTS TO FOSTER YOUTHS. "Youth in foster care face many challenges, particularly in the transition into adulthood. The risks these children face can be mitigated by doing a better job of monitoring and supporting the educational needs of foster youth."

to, R-Salem, were members of a special House child-welfare subcommittee formed after several high-profile deaths or serious injuries of children.

Dalto, who led the group, said he agrees that more needed to be done.

"But you are not going to convince me that we solve that problem until you can convince me to solve the management problem," he said.

Some recommendations were contained in Senate Bill 818, which passed the House but died in the Senate in the final days of the session. Among other

things, it would have required DHS to set uniform rules for dealing with children taken into custody and to work more closely with police in investigating cases of suspected child abuse.

In a separate action, the Legislature set aside \$2.5 million for the agency to develop a plan for legal representation of caseworkers in child-welfare cases. The money will be released by the Legislative Emergency Board.

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