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Child abuse, neglect rises

Causes a matter of debate

PORTLAND (AP) - State officials and an advocacy group are debating where to place the blame for a rise in child abuse cases in Oregon: methamphetamine use by parents or budget cuts by the state.

The Department of Human Services says in a new report that 18 Oregon children died of abuse or neglect in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, and it said reports of abuse or neglect continue to rise, driven by alcohol and drug abuse, particularly methamphetamine. "At nearly 48 percent, alcohol and drug issues, including methamphetamine, represent the largest single family problem when abuse and neglect are present," said Director Bruce Goldberg and Assistant Director Ramona Foley in a cover letter with the report.

But Children First for Oregon said the state officials are using methamphetamine to mask inadequate state funding of the child welfare system, including alcohol and drug abuse treatment for parents of abused and neglected children.

"While meth is a serious problem, it doesn't explain why the state won't invest in more caseworkers, better support for foster parents or effective substance abuse treatment for parents," said Robin Christian, the groups' executive director.

The group cited an e-mail from one state official that said the percentage of parents of children in the child welfare system who had alcohol or drug problems dropped from almost 88 percent to 42 percent.

Foley, the assistant director for children, adults and families, said that cuts in family services have aggravated child abuse and neglect, but methamphetamine is a major cause. "I wouldn't want to minimize the impact that meth has had on our families," she said.

The report said the 18 deaths attributed to child abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2005 was a sharp increase over the eight deaths the year before, but it was below the state record. Oregon recorded 34 abuse and neglect deaths in 1997 and 30 in 1996. Of the 18 deaths, 10 were caused by neglect, five by abuse and three by a combination of the two.

In 2005, the report said, the department got 55,114 reports and found reasonable cause to believe that abuse or neglect had oc-

curring in 11,255 of those cases, a 6 percent increase over 2004.

The department also reported:

- Almost half of the victims of abuse or neglect were younger than 6.
- Girls represented slightly more than half of all abuse and neglect victims but 80 percent of sexual abuse victims.
- More than half the neglect cases reported involved children 5 or younger, including 11.2 percent who were infants.
- For the third year in a row, more children entered foster care in Oregon than left the state-supervised care.