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Contact:

Jennifer Ferguson Nathan Pittman
501-371-9678 ext. 104 or 501-371-9678 ext. 111



News Release

Annual Report on Arkansas's Child Welfare System Released

Report Shows Slight Improvements but Overall Performance Still Lacking

LITTLE ROCK – Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) released its annual assessment of the Arkansas child welfare system today. The report titled, *Children in Crisis*, examines performance data from the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to determine how well they are serving Arkansas's children. Although the report shows some improvements, the overall findings are still disappointing.

Key Findings of the report include:

- Only 71% of children are seen by an investigator within 72 hours of a maltreatment accusation being made, compared to 89% in 2000.
- In 2000, 80% of maltreatment assessments were completed within 30 days of an accusation. Today, only 58% are completed in that timeframe.
- 54% of children in the system receive no monthly visits from family service workers.
- Only 44% of children in the system have a health assessment completed with 60 days.

“Although the data shows several areas in which DCFS is still lacking, there is a bright spot,” said Jennifer Ferguson, Legal Director at AACF and author of the report. “It appears that DCFS has turned the corner on its staffing shortage, showing only a 10% vacancy rate compared to 23% in 2004. However, current case loads are still too high, and with more children entering the system each year, we don’t anticipate performance improving unless other changes are made.”

Another alarming finding was the overall increase in the number of children within the system. In state fiscal year 2005, there were 8,000 children in the system, and by 2006, that number increased to almost 9,000 children.

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The report also notes that two major changes have taken place at DCFS this year which could possibly lead to some improvements. These include an \$8 million budget increase that DCFS received during the recent legislative session and the appointment of a new DCFS Director earlier in the year. The budget increase will allow DCFS to keep 75 staff positions that were in danger of being cut, as well as additional funding for service contracts, foster care board payments, adoption subsidies, and training and technology for workers.

“The budget increase is obviously a big factor in making improvements at DCFS, however, it’s important to highlight the fact that the money was needed simply to maintain current staffing levels, not increase them,” said Ferguson. “With a new director, we hope to see improvement in their performance in next year’s report, and in order to see improvement the new director will have to make some changes in the system. As we called for in last year’s report, a comprehensive assessment is needed of the entire organization.”

Under the new director’s leadership, DCFS is currently performing an organizational assessment in their central office, which is a piece of a comprehensive assessment. “We hope they will expand that assessment statewide and look at other parts of the system such as policies, practices, services, and budgeting. With more children coming into the system, DCFS does not have enough resources, and a comprehensive assessment would help them determine how to effectively use the ones they have,” said Rich Huddleston, Executive Director of AACF.

The conclusion of the report is that there are still far too many children not receiving the timely care they need in order to make sure they are safe and have the support they need to help them and their families. The majority of the cases are neglect cases, and with the appropriate services, these children can return to their families and grow up to live healthy and productive lives.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families will continue monitoring DCFS’ progress over the next year and will be watching to see if the budget increase and the new director can begin turning things around at the troubled department. The future of thousands of Arkansas children is depending on it.

For a full copy of the report, please visit www.aradvocates.org on or after August 22, 2007.

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