



Date: March 8, 2010

General contact: Gene Evans, 503-947-5286 (desk); 503-269-7950 (cell)

Foster Care Safety Team delivers recommendations to child welfare officials

A work group charged with reviewing abuse and neglect incidents in Oregon's foster care system delivered its final report and recommendations to state child welfare officials today. The recommendations are part of an aggressive effort to reduce child abuse and neglect of children in state foster care.

A Critical Incident Response Team report about a long-time foster parent convicted of child abuse led to the creation of an independent Foster Care Safety Team (FCST). Erinn Kelley-Siel, director of the Department of Human Services Children, Adults and Families Division, convened the work group.

"There is nothing we do that is more important than protecting children in foster care," said Kelley-Siel. "The state is responsible for the safety and well-being of every child in foster care, and when something goes wrong, we must respond quickly. Our goal is to make sure our child welfare system is the best and safest in the country."

The Foster Care Safety Team delivered eight findings and dozens of recommendations for improvement. Its highest priority for action was centered on three areas that the team felt must be resolved in order to move toward ending abuse in foster care: workload, communication and documentation.

Workload -- A foster care certifier carries a caseload of 55 homes. In addition to certifying these homes, they also recruit, train, monitor, support and work to find a good match between a child coming into foster care and an available foster family. These roles require very different skill sets and cannot be effectively accomplished by one person. In addition, certifiers, who often carry the same caseload for several years, run the risk of becoming too friendly with the foster parents and overlooking warning signs of abuse or neglect.

(more)

Foster Care Safety Team recommendations, Page 2

Communication -- The FCST found that the lack of communication among DHS staff and/or foster parents contributed to abuse of children in foster care. The work group examined two sensitive case reviews released in October 2009 and a random sampling of "closed at screening" files, those reports of suspected abuse or neglect against foster homes that are not referred for in-person investigations.

Documentation -- A major FCST finding is that abuse allegations against a foster care provider are only documented in individual children's files. Without the ability to cross-check abuse reports, it is difficult to know if there have been allegations made by other children or if there is a history of concerns against a specific foster care provider. In addition, because counties do not have the ability to share information, foster care providers are able to move to other counties without the new office knowing the history.

Kelley-Siel said the Children, Adults and Families Division is already acting on the team's most important recommendations: "We are looking at our branch offices that have a good system to ensure that caseworkers, certifiers and foster parents are communicating about safety issues for children in foster care, and we will move quickly to expand those best practices to the rest of the state."

This summer, child welfare offices in communities across Oregon will switch over to a new, up-to-date computer system that will allow staff to instantly see any and all allegations related to a foster care provider. "That will be a big technological step forward for child safety because that information today is fragmented between electronic and paper files stored in different databases and office locations," Kelley-Siel said. "That means important information sometimes can be missed. The new OR-Kids system will modernize our ability to track reports of abuse and other violations and ensure that caseworkers are able to make better decisions that keep children safer."

The Foster Care Safety Team's final report is posted online at www.oregon.gov/DHS/abuse/publications/children/fcst-final-report.pdf.

Kelley-Siel charged the team with four tasks to help prevent future abuse:

1. Review and analyze incidents of abuse or neglect in foster care to identify changes in practice or policy that should be made to help prevent it.

(more)

Foster Care Safety Team recommendations, Page 3

2. Review a statewide representative sample of foster home certification files involving foster parents who have been serving children for at least five years. This sample will determine whether the issues presented in recent reports are also identified in cases from other parts of the state.
3. Review a random sample of closed reports of abuse in foster care to identify whether cases of abuse are being properly responded to.
4. Review all efforts in the last 10 years, including those currently in place, to ensure the safety of children in foster care and recommend any additional improvements.

The Foster Care Safety Team included the following members:

- Chair Megan Shultz, CASA of Lane County;
- Don Darland, Oregon Foster Parent Association;
- Chief Gerald Moore, Salem Police Department;
- Leola McKenzie, Juvenile Court Programs, Oregon Judicial Department;
- Pamela Butler, former foster youth, Oregon Foster Youth Connection, Children First for Oregon;
- Margaret Olney, Department of Justice; and
- Kevin George and Cyndi Kallstrom, Oregon Department of Human Services.

#