



Secretary of State Oregon Audits Division



Department of Human Services
**Recommendation Follow-up Report:
DHS Has Made Important Improvements, but
Extensive Work Remains to Ensure Child Safety**

June 2019
Report 2019-24

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Executive Summary

Follow-up to Audit Report 2018-05

Department of Human Services

Recommendation Follow-up Report: DHS Has Made Important Improvements, but Extensive Work Remains to Ensure Child Safety

June 2019

Follow-up Summary

The Department of Human Services (DHS) made progress on all 24 recommendations from the original audit, fully implementing eight. However, extensive work remains to improve child safety in the foster care and child welfare system, including increasing staffing and addressing a continued shortfall of foster homes and residential beds.

Findings from the Original Audit

- » Chronic management failures and high caseloads jeopardize child safety.
- » Child welfare workers are burning out and leaving in high numbers.
- » The supply of suitable foster homes and residential facilities is dwindling.
- » Prior management response to these issues was slow, indecisive, and inadequate.

Improvements Noted

- » Agency leadership has begun implementing solutions, including improving DHS's work culture. ([pg. 2](#))
- » DHS has enhanced support services and added training for field staff. ([pg. 14](#))
- » The agency houses fewer children in hotels, though it still places some in sub-optimal settings. ([pg. 9](#))

Remaining Areas of Concern

- » Caseworkers and other staff remain overburdened and turnover remains high, jeopardizing child safety. ([pg. 7](#))
- » Management has not yet clearly communicated its staffing deficits to the Legislature. ([pg. 7](#))
- » The state still lacks enough foster homes and in-state residential beds for high-needs children. ([pg. 10](#))
- » Critical data on staffing and placements is not being collected. ([pgs. 11, 15](#))
- » The new central abuse reporting hotline has experienced substantial transition issues. ([pg. 4](#))

The Oregon Secretary of State Audits Division is an independent, nonpartisan organization that conducts audits based on objective, reliable information to help state government operate more efficiently and effectively. The summary above should be considered in connection with a careful review of the full report.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to follow up on the recommendations we made to the Department of Human Services (DHS) as included in audit report 2018-05, “Foster Care in Oregon: Chronic management failures and high caseloads jeopardize the safety of some of the state’s most vulnerable children.”

The Oregon Audits Division conducts follow-up procedures for each of our performance audits. This process helps assess the impact of our audit work, promotes accountability and transparency within state government, and ensures audit recommendations are implemented and related risks mitigated to the greatest extent possible.

We use a standard set of procedures for these engagements that includes gathering evidence and assessing the efforts of the auditee to implement our recommendations; concluding and reporting on those efforts; and employing a rigorous quality assurance process to ensure our conclusions are accurate. We determine implementation status based on an assessment of evidence rather than self-reported information. This follow-up is not an audit, but a status check on the agency’s actions.

To ensure the timeliness of this effort, the division asks all auditees to provide a timeframe for implementing the recommendations in our audit reports. We use this timeframe to schedule and execute our follow-up procedures.

Our follow-up procedures evaluate the status of each recommendation and assign it one of the following categories:

- **Implemented/Resolved:** The auditee has fully implemented the recommendation or otherwise taken the appropriate action to resolve the issue identified by the audit.
- **Partially implemented:** The auditee has begun taking action on the recommendation, but has not fully implemented it. In some cases, this simply means the auditee needs more time to fully implement the recommendation. However, it may also mean the auditee believes it has taken sufficient action to address the issue and does not plan to pursue further action on that recommendation.
- **Not implemented:** The auditee has taken no action on the recommendation. This could mean the auditee still plans to implement the recommendation and simply has not yet taken action; it could also mean the auditee has declined to take the action identified by the recommendation and may pursue other action, or the auditee disagreed with the initial recommendation.

The status of each recommendation and full results of our follow-up work are detailed in the following pages.

We sincerely appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended by officials and employees of DHS during the course of this follow-up work.

Recommendation Implementation Status

As in the original audit, our recommendations are presented in three sections: recommendations addressing management at DHS, recommendations regarding foster parent retention and recruitment, and recommendations to address the agency’s staffing issues.

Management Recommendations

We recommended that DHS make foundational improvements to its management practices and work culture, build capacity in the Child Welfare office, and better use data for decision making.

DHS has taken meaningful steps toward improving its culture and addressing management practices that have hampered the agency’s performance for many years. DHS and Child Welfare management has turned over considerably in the past 18 months. New management has improved staff training, data use and caseworker assistance, and is making stronger efforts to identify and address the concerns of field staff.

The agency also faces continued risks. Caseloads remain high and caseworker staffing is low, as is adherence to required child safety practices in the field. A new centralized abuse reporting hotline has substantial transition issues, including inexperienced workers and dropped calls. DHS adheres to a two-track investigative model for Child Welfare cases with no evidence that it improves child safety. The agency has a long history of poorly planned and implemented initiatives that new management must overcome.

Without additional staff to reduce workload, other efforts to improve culture, field staff practices, and child safety could be compromised.

Recommendation #1

Review and address the four foundational recommendations outlined in the Public Knowledge report: (See below)	Partially implemented
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Management is laying the groundwork to fully implement these recommendations, In particular, the agency has made progress initiating a cultural shift in the Child Welfare program. See below for more detail on each sub-recommendation.

Sub-Recommendation #1a

Per the Public Knowledge report: Improve the DHS culture.	Partially implemented
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DHS has taken important initial steps to improve the agency’s internal culture and strengthen external relationships with communities and stakeholder groups.. As expected, much work remains, including follow-through to ensure cultural changes take effect at all levels, including field offices and staff.

Steps to date include increased training and enhanced communication both agencywide and externally. The agency is emphasizing a “trauma-informed” practice that recognizes the difficulties families and children face and the toll on staff. DHS also disseminated a staff engagement survey in summer 2018 and conducted listening tours to connect with community leaders, staff, and stakeholders.

We anticipate it will take several years of consistent focus by DHS leadership, likely combined with increased staffing and legislative and community support, to improve the agency’s work culture. Without more staff, full implementation of improved work culture may not be possible.

Agencywide culture initiatives

DHS is in the early stages of rolling out RiSE, an overarching cultural change program for employees that is based on the Positive Human Development program employed at the Oregon Youth Authority. OYA has seen measurable improvements in staff and youth safety under the program, including a reduction in violent behavior.

DHS leaders have also taken initial steps to improve relationships and communication in the agency. They hosted listening tours in districts across the state, holding meetings that involved about 2,000 staff and community members.

Organizational assessment

The agency conducted a statewide organizational assessment in late 2017 and issued a draft report in August 2018 to help identify root problems. The assessment included several thousand DHS employees, identifying problems that pose substantial risks to the agency's ability to perform its functions, including keeping children safe.

The draft report concluded many workers faced "unmanageable workloads." The assessment found only a quarter of staff time was spent on direct client-related support — a sharp drop from the past — with the rest devoted to processes and paperwork. The organizational assessment is scheduled for completion in 2020.

DHS also conducted staff engagement surveys with caseworkers in 2018 and plans to continue sending them out each quarter to newer staff, and annually to more senior staff. Other actions include sending regular newsletters to staff and foster families and establishing an email inbox for staff feedback on work processes.

Sub-Recommendation #1b

Per the Public Knowledge report: Focus the whole DHS Agency and Child Welfare on Safety.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has taken numerous steps to improve child safety. However, uncertain funding for improvements could undermine these efforts, and a rocky transition to a centralized child abuse hotline could further slow progress.

Uncertain funding

The Governor's Budget for the Child Welfare program in 2019-21 proposes 3,217 positions, 297 above the previous biennium and 78 above current service levels needed to maintain existing services. This budget proposal is still under review by the Legislature as of the time of this report. General Fund spending in the Governor's Budget is \$762 million, \$56 million above current service levels.

The \$56 million increase includes \$40 million of General Fund dollars to replace federal funding that can no longer be used to pay for Child Welfare staff. The Governor's budget also includes initiatives designed to improve recruitment of foster parents, services to foster care parents and children, legal representation of caseworkers, DHS research capacity, and the availability of placements for high-needs children and youth.

However, the Governor's Budget does not include additional agency requests for \$59 million of General Fund dollars for 375 new Child Welfare field staff, or \$18 million for 98 central office program support staff. It also does not include requests to maintain and expand a family engagement program that provides peer mentors for parents and helps children move out of

foster care. Additional staff and program support, while costly, would likely reduce staff workloads and improve child safety and family stability.

Centralized hotline

DHS initiated 10 tasks under a Unified Child and Youth Safety Implementation Plan in late 2016 in response to findings earlier that year in a report from Public Knowledge, LLC. All 10 tasks are intended to enhance child safety, but DHS' primary focus of late has been centralizing Oregon's 15 child abuse hotlines into a single hotline. The central hotline, called the Oregon Child Abuse Hotline (ORCAH), is intended to speed up and standardize responses and provide around-the-clock hotline availability.

The central hotline has had substantial transition issues. DHS says 70% of the screeners staffing the central hotline are new to screening, creating challenges for hotline operation and requiring training before they can take calls independently. As calls to the central hotline increased, the number of dropped calls rose from 8% of the total in January 2019 to 42% of the total in the first half of April 2019. Total calls to the central hotline rose from 5,174 in January 2019 to over 8,000 in the first two weeks of April.

It is also uncertain whether the budget for the 2019-21 biennium will provide enough resources to handle an expected increase in cases. The agency requested 119 staff to support ORCAH, including some 70 field staff needed to handle additional child welfare investigations, but the Governor's Budget included only 46 additional staff requested for the hotline itself.

Under the Unified plan, Child Welfare has also standardized its review of children's well-being and safety in foster homes, and has taken steps to implement the remaining tasks. Those tasks include reviewing and updating policies and procedures, developing core supervisor training, and better coordinating agency response to incidents of abuse.

Sub-Recommendation #1c

Per the Public Knowledge report: Adopt data-driven decision making.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS opened a new office, the Office of Reporting, Research, Analytics and Implementation (ORRAI), to spearhead using data for decision making.

ORRAI is beginning to introduce four predictive analytics tools to Child Welfare services, with the long term goal of better focusing child safety services on children most at risk of abuse, and cutting caseworker response and workload on low-risk cases.

In December 2018, Child Welfare began to pilot a Screening Predictive Analytics tool. The tool is designed to predict the likelihood of children being removed from their homes, and the likelihood that the child will be the subject of an abuse report in the next two years. If successful, this could help hotline call screeners and caseworkers better assess reports of abuse and neglect.

Three additional predictive analytics tools are tentatively scheduled for staff training or pilot projects in 2019 and early 2020, including a project that helps identify the best placement for each child entering care outside the family home.

Sub-Recommendation #1d

Per the Public Knowledge report: Increase staffing resources for Child Protective Services and other DHS entities.

**Partially
implemented**

Child Welfare received 186 additional positions in 2018, and another 297 are proposed under the Governor’s Budget for 2019-21. However, the division remains substantially short of staff needed to conduct the work under national caseload standards and its own outdated workload model.

In its budget request, the agency said it needed 375 more Child Welfare staff to reach full field staffing, including 199 caseworkers. However, that estimate used the outdated workload model, which generates low estimates of staffing needs compared to national standards. (See discussion in recommendation no. 4.)

The agency also proposed increasing Child Welfare’s central office program staff by 98 positions. However, the Governor’s proposed budget did not include either the field staff or central office additions, which would have cost \$77 million in General Fund dollars for the biennium.

Without additional staff to reduce workload, other efforts to improve culture, field staff practices, and child safety could be compromised.

Some bills introduced in the 2019 session could also profoundly impact child welfare programming and services if passed, and could require far more staff than estimated or budgeted.

Recommendation #2

Cultivate a culture of transparency, responsibility, respectful communication, and professionalism using an array of leadership tools and measurable through an independent work environment survey.

**Partially
implemented**

As noted in sub-recommendation no. 1a, the agency has taken important steps toward improving its culture. The agency plans an independent work environment survey in 2020 to measure the effectiveness of initial efforts.

In addition to the steps noted in sub-recommendation no. 1a, the agency has:

- Hired six new managers at the Central Office to lead cultural transformation work.
- Delivered trauma-informed care training, which emphasizes methods of caring for traumatized clients as well as staff self-care, to district managers and project managers in 2018. This training is scheduled to roll out to field staff in April 2019.
- Instituted quarterly training for supervisors on clinical supervision. Supervisors are now required to meet with staff with less than two years of experience for an hour every week to support staff and discuss their clinical work.
- Provided monthly status reports to the Governor’s Office that update the numbers of foster homes and children entering and exiting foster care.

Recommendation #3

Review the structure and organization of key child welfare programs to identify and understand long-standing issues and system weaknesses; set policy and communicate expectations to ensure appropriate implementation of changes; and ensure that changes are not simply reorganizations or movement of employees, but help management to address root problems.

**Implemented/
Resolved**

DHS and Child Welfare have focused on identifying the root problems behind system weaknesses. This review and associated policy changes meet the requirements of this

recommendation. However, the agency needs diligent follow-up to make sure root causes — such as communication breakdowns and data shortfalls — are adequately addressed.

Structure and organization

In 2018, Child Welfare reintroduced the Field Services Administration function to support enhanced communication between the central office and the field and deliver administrative support services statewide.

Child Welfare also established an executive leadership team in February 2018 that combines central office and district leaders to help improve communication.

Policy and communication

Child Welfare management updated the existing Child Welfare Procedure Manual and made it available to all staff on the agency intranet. The agency is also using newsletters to highlight policy changes.

Management addressing root causes

Senior management at the central office meets weekly to discuss and review strategic planning efforts and budget priorities. Management plans to create a 12- to 18-month strategic plan to address root problems identified by an agencywide organizational assessment.

The agency is also working on a cross-systems Continuum of Care plan that includes DHS developmental disabilities programs, Oregon Health Authority programs, and Oregon Youth Authority programs as well as Child Welfare. The goal is to have the programs work together to ensure that children and youth are placed in appropriate care, not inappropriate settings such as emergency departments and institutions.

Recommendation #4

To advocate more effectively for program and staffing needs to the Legislature, use clear and accurate data to support budget requests and show the effects of under budgeting on program stability.

**Partially
implemented**

For the current legislative session, DHS requested a substantial infusion of new staff beyond current service levels. However, the Governor’s Budget did not include that request, which indicates program stability may not improve substantially. The agency is beginning to implement caseload and workload reduction measures, but their impact is uncertain and could take time.

DHS has also begun to update its existing workload model, but the work was not far enough along to inform the agency’s requests for increased staffing to the Legislature. The agency instead relied on an outdated workload model that our 2018 audit found understates staffing needs. Aside from conversations with individual legislators, agency officials did not note that context in budget communications with the Legislature this year.

DHS introduced several proposals for increased staffing in 2019-2021. In its budget proposal, DHS said a 375-position increase would achieve 100% of Child Welfare’s staffing needs, including needs for more caseworkers. The Governor’s Budget eliminated that proposal, but stated that staffing would continue to meet roughly 88% of the need.

However, both estimates are based on the flawed and outdated workload model. In spring 2019, DHS estimated that staffing would be closer to a 67% level under the Governor’s proposed budget using national caseload standards, well below the 88% level predicted in

communications with the Legislature. Using these standards, Child Welfare would need about 570 additional caseworkers and 800 support workers to meet its staffing needs. DHS also did not note this estimate in its testimony to the Legislature.

These omissions are worrisome given prior management’s practice of not providing key details to the Legislature. DHS leaders say the total staffing needed under the national standards is unrealistic. Budget officials noted that the agency still has significant vacancies and high turnover, increasing risks that additional positions added by the Legislature would remain vacant through the biennium. While it may not be feasible or practical to expect such extensive funding over the short term, it is important that the Legislature have a full and complete understanding of the agency’s staffing needs, from both transparency and long-term planning perspectives.

DHS has made progress toward updating its workload model. The agency is also taking some steps to streamline workloads to try to reduce the need for more staff, including:

- Developing and beginning to implement predictive analytics to help the agency reduce caseload and workload (see additional discussion in sub-recommendation no. 1b).
- Changing procedures to clarify how screeners and caseworkers make crucial decisions regarding child safety that ultimately affect caseloads.
- Providing more support to struggling families to prevent removal of their children or shorten their children’s time in alternative care.
- Implementing abbreviated child abuse case assessments, designed for cases when an initial investigation clearly found no abuse, and assigning central office staff to help field offices reduce their backlog of overdue assessments.

These efforts are important, but the extent and timing of their impacts is uncertain.

DHS has a five-year plan to increase staff and reduce caseloads. The majority of the Governor’s Budget increases go to field staffing. However, these new staff will primarily help the agency keep up with projected growth in hotline calls and caseloads under current service levels. The proposed budget falls well short of the staffing increase called for in the first two years of the five-year plan.

Recommendation #5

Implement a thorough and ongoing evaluation process for agency programs and initiatives, including the following actions: (See below)	Partially implemented
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DHS has implemented two of the four sub-recommendations in this category and partially implemented the other two.

Sub-Recommendation #5a

Consider overhauling or replacing the OR-Kids case management system, and continue to apply lessons learned from this and other projects to future information systems projects.	Implemented/ Resolved
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DHS considered whether to overhaul or replace OR-Kids, as recommended, and is making some needed improvements to system usability, although the system continues to be a major area of concern.

The DHS Executive Projects team recommended to agency leadership in February 2018 that OR-Kids be replaced. The team also presented a less costly option to update the current system. Agency leaders chose to update the system.

The agency is soliciting more user input and says it has made some improvements to improve user experience. It is also working to reduce the number of reports the system requires of caseworkers, which could save caseworker time and reduce frustration.

The Secretary of State Audits Division is conducting an Information Technology audit of OR-Kids. That audit is scheduled to be released in late 2019.

Sub-Recommendation #5b

Review the Oregon Safety Model to ensure that staff fully understand and can apply key concepts and more effectively safeguard child safety.	Implemented/ Resolved
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DHS met this recommendation by completing its latest review of how workers applied the Oregon Safety Model (OSM) to cases in 2018. The review found significant gaps in caseworker adherence to the model that the agency still must address.

The safety model details required practices for screeners and caseworkers to properly assess child safety. In 2018, the agency completed reviews of roughly 300 cases and found a significant lack of fidelity to the OSM. For example, the safety threshold — a multi-faceted gauge of when a child is considered safe — was correctly and completely applied in just 38% of cases.

DHS officials say the results of safety model reviews are presented to branches. A new training design is being rolled out this year for all supervisors that will include OSM compliance. The reviews did help increase compliance with the safety model by child protective services caseworkers in some districts from 2017 to 2018, agency officials say.

Sub-Recommendation #5c

Assess the true impact of the move to centralized screening on statewide staffing resources and the consistency of the screening function.	Partially implemented
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DHS reviewed the consistency of the screening function in 2018, in conjunction with Casey Family Programs. It moved to the central hotline, ORCAH, in 2019.

However, the agency did not perform the staff impact analysis we recommended. Agency officials said it made more sense to defer study on staff impacts until after the central hotline is implemented and staffing needs can be better gauged.

Sub-Recommendation #5d

Assess the two-track investigative model used by CPS and OAPPI to ensure all identified gaps are addressed and consistency of response to reports of child abuse and neglect.	Partially implemented
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The agency has made strong progress addressing identified gaps in the two-track model, and is close to meeting the requirements of this sub-recommendation. DHS has still not demonstrated that the two-track investigative model used by the agency is supported by evidence and improves child safety.

As we noted in our original audit, the Child Protective Services unit at DHS handles most child abuse and neglect complaints. OAPPI (now OTIS, the Office of Training, Investigations, and Safety) handles most reports of abuse of children cared for in Child Caring Agencies that provide care outside traditional foster homes.

A DHS internal audit in 2016 identified 54 gaps in regulation and oversight of Child Caring Agencies. Since that internal audit, OTIS and Child Welfare have resolved 52 of the 54 gaps by updating rules and policies, DHS documents indicate.

Some issues with fully documenting investigations and properly flagging abuse findings at certain facilities remain. The agency reports that it is close to resolving the final two gaps.

Recommendation #6

Establish safe mechanisms for staff to provide input, and develop a transparent process for reporting concerns, tracking them, and ensuring top management takes action to resolve them.

**Partially
implemented**

As noted previously, DHS leaders have conducted listening tours and are conducting more. They implemented a staff engagement survey and an organizational assessment that separately surveyed staff, and are sending a monthly newsletter to staff that acknowledges problems. They have also set up a suggestion email box, with specific response protocols.

The agency has not yet developed a mechanism for anonymous staff input, which may deter some staff from sharing concerns and can affect the accuracy of staff surveys about issues that impact their jobs. This is of particular concern for staff who might fear retaliation or exposure, a common problem at the agency, as noted in our audit.

Foster Parent Retention and Recruitment Recommendations

We recommended that DHS and Child Welfare build a far more robust foster care system by increasing the numbers of foster parents and residential treatment beds, better recruiting and supporting foster parents, tracking performance data, and reducing the numbers of children temporarily placed in hotels.

DHS has taken some steps to improve foster care retention and recruitment efforts, though the total number of foster homes has not increased since our audit. The agency is using a mobile team to help process foster parent applications. It initiated child care reimbursements for foster parents, expanded respite care, reduced the number of children staying in hotels, and took steps to increase the placement capacity for neglected and abused children. The Governor's Budget includes a proposal to establish a foster parent recruitment team within DHS.

Substantial work remains. The state continues to face a shortfall in foster parent homes and residential treatment facilities, particularly for high-needs children. A statewide strategic plan to increase foster care capacity and ensure safe and appropriate placements for all children is not finished. Caseworkers continue to have limited time to build relationships with foster parents. System performance is not adequately tracked. The state also relies heavily on one contractor for retention and recruitment, though this contractor does not cover the entire state.

Recommendation #7

Develop and implement a statewide strategic plan to increase foster care capacity that includes using data analytics and tracking to target the recruitment of foster care placements for every district in the state. The strategy should include targeted recruitment of specific types of placements (career foster parents, therapeutic foster beds, and culturally appropriate placements).

**Partially
implemented**

DHS is developing a statewide strategic plan to improve retention and recruitment, but is not done yet and the early draft includes little detail on improving targeted recruitment. Data analytics work to support retention and recruitment has begun.

The ongoing lack of appropriate foster placements in Oregon is a serious risk to the safety and wellbeing of children in the foster system. More high-needs children are being placed in out-of-state facilities and repurposed juvenile detention facilities than in previous years. These placement decisions are driven, in part, by declining residential treatment options in Oregon for children with high needs.

There is also a shortfall between available foster families and the number of children and youth who need specific types of placements, including children of color, LTBTQ+ youth, and children with advanced behavioral and medical challenges.

A shortage of beds

The agency estimates it needs over 150 more residential treatment beds than are currently available, a substantial gap. These types of placements are more costly, whether they are group homes, specialized care centers, or therapeutic foster homes. Foster homes that specialize in high-needs youth must be supported by rapid access to mental health services, 24/7 crisis support, and enhanced training for foster parents.

DHS’s capacity research project suggests about 40% of children in the system have high medical or behavioral needs. The research also suggests the majority of youth in the system, even those with higher needs, are most appropriately placed in foster homes, not more restrictive care.

However, the total number of foster homes actually fell by 137 since our audit, from 4,209 in January 2018 to 4,072 in January 2019.

Work to date

The agency is beginning to address foster parent recruitment. DHS is developing the Statewide Strategic Foster Family Retention Recruitment Plan, which is scheduled to be finalized in summer 2019 and later implemented statewide. A key part of the draft plan is to create a separate program for foster family retention and recruitment within Child Welfare. It would also seek to better match the foster homes available to the needs of children coming into the system.

A staffing proposal to fully fund the retention and recruitment program is still in draft. Separately, the 2019-21 Governor’s Budget has requested \$3.7 million to fund a Foster Family Recruitment Team that would help the program. The team would operate in all districts across the state and focus on recruiting and providing support for foster families.

The Office of Reporting, Research, Analytics, and Implementation (ORRAI) completed 1,000 case reviews of foster youth to gauge the varying needs of children in care. This data may support targeted foster parent recruitment. DHS is also working with Every Child, a non-profit contractor, to support agency recruitment efforts through outreach to local communities.

Recommendation #8

Collect and use data to improve the foster care system, including: (See below)	Partially implemented
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DHS has made varying progress on the three sub-recommendations.

Sub-Recommendation #8a

Collect and use data on the availability of foster homes and the true capacity of available beds in the system.	Partially implemented
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The agency is making progress tracking bed capacity and availability, but has substantial work left to meet this basic informational need for the foster care system.

ORRAI is working on a Capacity Research project to estimate the number and type of placement beds needed for the foster care system as a whole and compare that to the system's current placement options. Initial results indicate that 40% of children in substitute care have high behavioral or medical needs. The project has not yet identified the system's capacity to house those children.

In the coming months, DHS is also scheduled to launch a software application that will allow the agency to centrally review residential care placement recommendations from the field. Central review should help ensure that children with high needs receive appropriate residential care.

Recommendation #8b

Collect and use data on the rate of foster parent turnover and the number of foster parents trained per year.

**Partially
implemented**

Progress in tracking the rate of foster parent turnover and the number of foster parents trained per year is very limited. Each district tracks their own foster parent training data. This may work for districts with data-oriented leadership, but in our audit we found wide disparities in the ability to analyze data across districts. The central office could assist the field with monitoring performance data related to foster parent retention, recruitment and training, but has not fully adopted this role.

The agency's foster parent recruitment contractor, Every Child Oregon, has made progress tracking data by creating their own dashboard. Every Child also tracks the outcome of inquiries from potential foster parents through their program. However, Every Child has not yet expanded statewide and does not serve all parents and care providers in the system.

Recommendation #8c

Collect and use data on a statewide dashboard to compare district performance on key measures.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has made very limited progress on a performance dashboard that could allow district managers and other field staff to easily and quickly track critical performance measures. For example, managers could easily monitor the status of their district's required face-to-face contact with children, and compare it to the status in other districts.

The agency is beginning to use Geographic Information Systems mapping to collect and analyze district data, one step the agency says is needed to develop the dashboard. However, there is no timeline for dashboard development and roll-out.

Recommendation #9

Remove unnecessary barriers that impede timely recruitment of foster families; track certification of career foster parents from inquiry through certification, and keep foster parents engaged during the entire process to increase the likelihood of certification.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has made progress removing barriers, but is in the beginning stages of improving recruitment and engagement of foster parents.

In May 2018, DHS created a Mobile Certification and Training Team to reduce a backlog of certifications and provide on-site training for new foster parents. The agency says the team's efforts also freed up workers to process foster parent applications relatively quickly.

DHS is not tracking inquiry through certification for all prospective foster parents. The agency is talking with Every Child about using its tracking technology.

DHS has reached out to local communities and foster families in their statewide listening tours, focus group discussions and surveys — all good first steps to better understand the needs of prospective foster parents. However, beyond drafting plans, the agency has not yet made more detailed improvements in engagement.

Recommendation #10

Build a robust support system to retain career foster parents and reduce placement instability. This should include a foster care payment that fully covers that cost of caring for a foster child, options for respite care providers and encouraging foster families to use respite care, and ongoing training and support to foster parents so they can continue to meet the challenges of fostering.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has taken some promising steps toward building a better support system for foster families. More work is needed to help families cover the full cost of care and to ensure that both new and experienced foster families are sufficiently trained and have adequate support.

Payments and respite care

The 2017 Legislature increased basic rates for reimbursement of foster parents by 14% as of January 1, 2018, but DHS estimated at the time that the increased rates would cover about 60% of the actual cost. No additional rate increases have come since then. Also in that session, the Legislature approved a monthly child-care reimbursement of \$375 per child for working foster parents with foster children up to age 5.

The Legislature also approved more funding for respite care and immediate needs, such as purchasing cribs and car seats. Foster parents can apply for respite care reimbursements of \$55 per day for three days per month.

DHS also worked with Every Child to expand “night out” respite care for foster parents once a month.

Training and other support

The 2019-21 Governor's Budget requests funding for increased foster parent training.

An Every Child wraparound program for foster parents called the "Neighborhood" is scheduled to launch in Clackamas County in 2019, with community members providing meals and other support. Every Child is also planning to pilot a mentorship program for first-time foster families in the Portland area.

Child Welfare is working on a “Safe Families” pilot in 12 counties that has volunteers provide family-like support to families in crisis. DHS has also provided interpreters for foster parents and developed a foster parent newsletter that highlights policy changes and provides caregiver tips.

Recommendation #11

Create and maintain a culture of respectful communication between foster parents and DHS caseworkers, and allow staff time for caseworkers to build relationships with foster parents. Use foster parent satisfaction and exit surveys to measure the quality of the program over time to understand and address foster parents' concerns.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has made progress on enhancing communication between the agency as a whole and the foster community, through surveys, newsletters, and listening tours. The agency has developed and implemented a foster parent satisfaction survey and has finalized an online exit survey that will be required statewide. Agency officials say they are also developing a more comprehensive satisfaction survey.

Limited progress has been made to allow caseworkers sufficient time to build relationships with foster parents and to address foster parent concerns in real time. An Enhanced Community Engagement Workgroup made recommendations to improve overall community engagement, which could improve the agency's engagement with foster families.

Recommendation #12

Design a robust internal policy to reduce the risks of hoteling children by providing district caseworkers and office staff with clear protocols and operational support.

**Implemented/
Resolved**

In July 2018, DHS developed a Temporary Placement Protocol to help settle a lawsuit filed on behalf of youth housed in hotels. The protocols have also been clearly communicated to field staff statewide.

Agency data indicate the number of children and youth housed in hotels has dropped from a high of 51 in February 2018 to six in January 2019, the last month of data DHS provided. The more extensive protocols include requiring approval from the Child Welfare director to put a youth in a hotel.

The protocols have led the agency to find more alternatives, such as sending children home with additional services, locating relatives, and working with residential centers to take high-needs children. However, the reduction in hoteling, combined with limited placement options for high needs children across the child welfare system, appears to have contributed to the agency sending children to repurposed juvenile detention centers and other institutions in higher numbers.

The Governor's Budget proposes spending \$25.5 million in the 2019-21 biennium to provide more appropriate placement settings for children with significant needs. DHS would use the funds to create an "enhanced foster care" level, expand residential group home capacity, and expand support for children with intensive medical needs to stay in their family homes.

Recommendation #13

Commit to building foster placement capacity across the whole system for children with a range of behavioral, health-related, and cultural needs.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has initiated new efforts to identify and increase appropriate placement options in the foster care system. This work is ongoing and long-term. As detailed in recommendation no. 7, the agency and the state as a whole have made limited progress to expand the number of appropriate placement options.

The state, DHS, and partner agencies such as the Oregon Health Authority have taken some initial steps. Their actions include:

- Expanding the River Rock enhanced supervision facility and opened a Regional Crisis Center, a secure psychiatric treatment program, in February 2019 with a planned 14-bed capacity.
- Forming new partnerships with mental health providers, adding residential beds and treatment for younger youth.
- Beginning work with the Foster-PLUS program in October 2018 to connect children, teenagers, and young adults who need extra support with care that's a step up from traditional foster care.

Recommendation #14

Develop a strategy for ending the practice of placing children in hotels.

**Implemented/
Resolved**

As noted in recommendation no. 12, DHS entered into a legal settlement in 2018 to reduce hoteling. That settlement included a strategy, protocol, and specific targets. By December 2020, DHS must reduce temporary lodging to no more than 12 children or young adults in each six-month period.

Staffing Issues Recommendations

We recommended that DHS update its workload model, define staffing needs more clearly, communicate those needs to the Legislature, and take steps to reduce staff stress and workload.

The agency substantially reduced overtime in Child Welfare by reducing placement of children in hotels. It hired new support workers to help reduce caseworker burdens, added training across the board, built more promotional opportunities for staff, worked with Department of Justice attorneys to back up staff in court, and improved communication with district and field offices. It also revived a field service office to improve communication between the central office and the field, and attend to space and technology needs.

However, the agency has not clearly disclosed its staffing deficits to the Legislature. It is not centrally monitoring key staff metrics, such as turnover and family leave use. Leaders say they do not have the staff to ensure that teams, rather than individuals, respond to potentially dangerous calls. Turnover of field staff remains high, a long-running problem that will require sustained efforts to address.

Recommendation #15

Understand and clearly communicate child welfare field staffing needs to the Legislature.

**Partially
implemented**

As noted previously, DHS requested 375 additional positions for Child Welfare in 2019-21 to meet staffing needs under its old workload model, and developed a separate staffing estimate based on national caseload standards.

The agency staffing request to the Legislature, however, was based on the outdated model, which substantially underestimates staffing needs relative to national standards and is currently being updated. DHS did not communicate that context to the Legislature.

Recommendation #16

Review, revise, and update the current workload model to reflect recent policy and procedure changes and field staffing needs

**Partially
implemented**

The agency has taken steps to review and revise the workload model. In August 2018, Random Moment Surveys were sent to the field for the purpose of beginning that work, with an update tentatively scheduled in summer 2019. The agency is also working on a new methodology for the workload model to more closely align with national standards. However, the staffing estimates used in budget request materials remain outdated and do not accurately reflect policy and procedure changes or Child Welfare staffing needs.

Recommendation #17

Work with the Legislature to increase Child Welfare field staffing according to the revised workload model and reduce the number of field positions held vacant to balance the budget, in order to reduce Child Welfare caseloads to manageable levels.

**Partially
implemented**

As noted previously, DHS used an outdated workload model to estimate staffing needs for the 2019-21 biennium. The agency is still working on updating its workload model.

The Department of Administrative Services reported that Child Welfare reduced vacancies after a peak in May 2018, but vacancies were still about 10% of Child Welfare staff as of January 2019.

Recommendation #18

Monitor caseworker caseloads, district staffing allocations, and the impact of turnover, overtime use, lack of experience, and FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) use on caseloads to support equitable staffing allocations across the state.

**Partially
implemented**

DHS has made little progress in meeting this recommendation, limiting the agency's ability to obtain a clear picture of staff coverage in districts and field offices statewide.

The agency has made some progress on creating a data tool that would allow for more equitable, centrally administered staffing allocations that take the needs of individual districts into account. A newly hired Child Welfare Business Manager should be able to accelerate this process while working with individual district managers.

The agency is currently using a vacancy tracking tool to help monitor and fill vacant positions, one of the key metrics DHS needs to track. However, the agency still cannot accurately track and monitor caseloads through OR-Kids or reliably identify which cases are being worked on by which staff.

Recommendation #19

Develop and implement strategies to reduce and mitigate workload stress factors, reduce staff turnover, and reduce the use of paid and unpaid overtime by Child Welfare staff.

**Implemented/
Resolved**

DHS has developed and implemented strategies to address this recommendation. Overtime has dropped. Worker turnover remains high, however, and recent employee surveys suggest the majority of caseworkers are frustrated and emotionally drained, though they believe their work is worthwhile.

Among other steps, the agency has:

- Cut overtime by reducing the number of youth housed in hotels. Overtime hours peaked for staff in March 2018, at nearly 28,000 hours, but declined to 11,640 hours by November 2018.
- Hired 50 Mentoring, Assisting and Promoting Success (MAPS) positions and added 28 case aids to help with caseworker retention and provide support to front-line staff.
- Begun to implement a program to have retired caseworkers and other field staff handle the work of staff on vacation or family or medical leave.
- Required Child Welfare supervisors to meet at least one hour a week with field staff with less than two years of experience. For more experienced staff, the requirement is to meet for at least one hour a month.
- Developed a trauma response project to support both staff and clients facing traumatic experiences. Management has been trained on appropriate steps, and caseworker training started in April 2018.

Recommendation #20

Take the following actions to improve caseworker staffing and training: (See below)

Partially implemented

Child Welfare has yet to begin work on one of the three sub-recommendations, but has fully implemented the remaining two.

Recommendation #20a

Work with the Department of Administrative Services to review the Social Service Specialist 1 Classification and consider separating casework positions into separate classes.

Not implemented

DHS has yet to make progress on this sub-recommendation, which would allow for improved turnover data and other statistics on DHS's five categories of caseworkers. The agency says DHS Human Resources will draft a business case for this change and present it to the Department of Administrative Services by the end of May.

Recommendation #20b

Consider developing a career ladder for skilled caseworkers, supervisors and support staff.

Implemented/ Resolved

DHS has developed a career ladder for skilled caseworkers and support staff, and considered developing a career ladder for supervisors.

MAPS positions allow caseworkers to develop skills that can lead to supervisor or program consultant positions. Case aide positions allow support staff to gain skills with casework and advance to caseworker.

House Bill 2033, filed in the 2019 session at the Governor's request, removes a bachelor's degree requirement for caseworkers, and could allow more support staff to move into case work.

DHS supervisors continue to be able to promote into program manager, consultant, and analyst positions, but there are limited openings. The agency has not developed new positions to support career advancement for supervisors. Instead, DHS has focused on improving professional development as a way to assist supervisors in furthering their careers.

Recommendation #20c

Continue to develop and review training and professional development of casework staff and supervisors in conjunction with community partners.

**Implemented/
Resolved**

The agency has added to the frequency and variety of training and professional development for staff and supervisors, and is reviewing the effectiveness of these efforts.

Many of Child Welfare's recent trainings are focused on preparing and supporting caseworkers. New and updated trainings provide caseworkers a better understanding of the realities of the work and how to manage them.

- Supervisors are receiving clinical supervision training at quarterly meetings, which should help them better support caseworkers and better ensure they are following best practices.
- Staff in MAPS positions are also receiving quarterly training. Subjects include OR-Kids, the Oregon Safety Model, facilitating meetings, field observation, and clarification of roles and responsibilities for MAPS positions.
- New caseworkers are receiving more training from agency staff and Portland State University's training unit. Portland State has also updated its core training for caseworkers.

The Portland State University training unit completed an analysis of the last three biennia, including a comparison between expected training needs and actual demand. Portland State reports participants' ratings of the trainings provided to DHS. For the 3rd quarter of 2018, participants rated the university's extensive sessions for new staff as fair to good overall, and good for usefulness.

Recommendation #21

Ensure adequate facility space and technological support throughout the state to absorb needed Child Welfare staffing increases and support quality casework.

**Implemented/
Resolved**

Child Welfare revived the Field Services Administration unit to improve communication between the central office and field offices, and meet the numerous administrative support needs of field staff.

The Facilities Committee monitors space availability and technological support needs through lease tracking and staff allocation data from the divisions. Committee members must now review business cases submitted from district offices to expand or update space. Committee members also work with the DHS Office of Facilities Management to improve the use of space in the field and, if needed, shorten lease renewal timelines and identify or build new facilities.

The agency reports that additional technology has been and will be provided for Child Welfare staff. Caseworkers and case aides received cell phones in 2017 and more recently caseworkers received tablet computers for field work. Staff in MAPS and Supervisor positions will also receive tablet computers in the future.

Child Welfare is also working with the Office of Facilities Management to meet federal compliance standards for criminal justice information in current and planned facilities, so caseworkers can continue to access this important data.

Recommendation #22

Work with the Department of Justice and the Legislature to improve caseworker access to legal representation and legal case management support.	Implemented/ Resolved
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DHS, through the Oregon Department of Justice, has taken substantial steps to increase the depth of legal representation for caseworkers, crucial since appearing in court is a major part of a caseworker's job.

Implementation of full legal representation of caseworkers by the Department of Justice is occurring in three phases covering caseworkers in different counties. The first two phases have been completed, with the third phase scheduled for July 2019. Initial reports from 127 caseworkers affected in phase one found 55% agreed that their overall experience of the court process has been more positive since this representation began.

Recommendation #23

Consider implementing casework teams for responding to potentially dangerous calls and managing unusually complex or difficult cases.	Implemented/ Resolved
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DHS leadership considered implementing casework teams, meeting the requirements of this recommendation. The agency concluded that it doesn't have enough staff to implement a uniform policy on sending casework teams out on potentially dangerous calls. Leaders say they do encourage staff to recruit partners, including law enforcement and if possible another CPS worker, an agency consultant, a MAPS worker, or a supervisor.

The agency says it is taking some steps to address worker safety. A legislative mandate required the agency to make Protective Stalking Orders available for staff experiencing unwanted contact from someone as a result of work duties. In addition, Portland State University is developing a Child Welfare worker safety training.

Recommendation #24

Ensure that the central and district offices are in regular communication with field offices throughout the state and provide necessary support and resources to field offices when requested.	Implemented/ Resolved
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DHS and Child Welfare leaders have taken steps to better support field offices and open new lines of communication. As with responses to our other recommendations, these are steps that the agency will need to sustain over the long term.

Child Welfare reintroduced a Field Services unit in early 2018, adding a field services administrator and 11 staff to support field operations and provide a bridge from the central office to the field. The unit is running monthly meetings with district managers and program managers, managing the relief worker pool, and handling field office facility, technological, and training needs.

The Field Services unit is also supporting field offices by working with:

- the DHS self-sufficiency program on shared clients;
- ORRAI on worker retention data analysis; and
- the DHS Office of Equity and Multicultural Services on providing interpreters for work with clients.

DHS also started a Child Welfare internal newsletter in September 2018 that includes information on ways field offices can request and access central office services.

Conclusion

In the 15 months since our audit was released, DHS's new management has taken important steps to address problems with Oregon's troubled foster care system. Agency and Child Welfare leaders fully implemented eight of our recommendations and partially implemented the remaining 16. Progress included steps to improve the agency's culture, increased training, increased support for caseworkers, reduced housing of children in hotels, and new initiatives to use data to help screeners and caseworkers better gauge which children are most at risk.

Substantial work remains, however, as expected given the breadth of our recommendations and the complexity of the child welfare system. Remaining issues include a shortfall of foster homes and in-state residential treatment beds, low worker adherence to child safety protocols, transition issues with the agency's new centralized hotline, the need for more effective statewide efforts to retain and recruit foster parents and, perhaps most important, high caseworker turnover and workload.

In our view, it will take several years of consistent focus by DHS leadership, likely combined with increased staffing and legislative and community support, to lock in improvements. Fully implementing all of our recommendations should help the agency retain more staff and foster parents and better ensure the well-being of children in the foster care system.



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