Foster care in Oregon

Chronic management failures and high caseloads jeopardize the safety of some of the state’s most vulnerable children

National State Auditors Association
Annual conference
June 14, 2019
Why this audit matters

• Growing foster care crisis

• Slow, indecisive, and ineffective response from management at the agency responsible

• Foster children are among the most vulnerable in the state
  • Often the victims of abuse and neglect, many with acute mental and physical health needs

• Our objective:
  • Determine what changes and improvements the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) can make to better promote the wellbeing of children in foster care and ensure they are protected and cared for

OVER 11,000 CHILDREN ENTER OREGON’S FOSTER CARE SYSTEM EVERY YEAR
What we found: Management

• The agency struggles with **chronic and systemic management shortcomings** that have a detrimental effect on the agency’s ability to protect child safety

• Work culture of **blame and distrust**

• Several substantial reform efforts have been poorly planned and executed, then abandoned

• For over a decade, management’s response has been to reorganize the system, not effectively plan to fix it
  • Key example: The primary database for child welfare still has **over 1,000 outstanding IT fixes** waiting, **some of which date back to the system’s introduction** in 2011

• As a result, the foster care system is disorganized, inconsistent, and high-risk for these children
What we found: Foster parent recruitment

- Oregon does not have a robust recruitment program and struggles to retain and support the foster homes it already has.
- The agency lacks critical data regarding foster placements and capacity.
  - This inhibits the agency’s ability to fully understand the scope of the problem.
- Since 2011, the total number of available foster homes has declined by 15%.
- This has led to the agency housing more children in hotels.

From September 2016 to July 2017, DHS placed 189 individual children in hotels at least 284 times.

One child was placed in a hotel nine separate times in a 14-month period.
What we found: Caseworkers and staff

- Staffing challenges compromise the agency’s ability to perform **essential child welfare functions**
- Chronically understaffed
  - Statewide, field offices are short **approximately 770 caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, and support staff**
- Caseworkers are overwhelmed with high caseloads
  - This has led to rampant **overtime use, high turnover, medical leave for stress and burnout**
- Caseworkers are often expected to work in the field alone, which could **compromise their safety**, and are not fully prepared when going to court
What we recommended

• The agency should address deficiencies in management and organizational culture

• Substantially increase the number of caseworker positions and other field staff resources

• Create a robust foster parent recruitment and retention plan

• Overhaul or replace the database and IT system used to manage these cases
Audit impact: Public outrage

• More than 100 newspaper articles in Oregon and nationwide
• Radio interviews
• Town hall meetings hosted by the Governor’s Office
• CASA & Children’s Center Events
Audit impact: Legislative and policy fixes

- 2018: Oregon’s Governor approved $14 million for an additional 186 field staff for the agency
- 2019: Both the agency’s requested budget and the Governor’s recommended budget include **further staffing increases**
  - The agency alone requested more than $100 million to add 500 additional full-time equivalent positions
- The agency has made substantial internal improvements
  - *Reduced* the number of youth placed in hotels
  - *Reduced* the use of caseworker overtime
  - Introduced a Field Services Administrator to coordinate communication between the central and field offices
- To this day, the audit continues to inform policy and child welfare practices – Release of Audit Follow Up Report
Kip R. Memmott, Audits Director
Audits Division, Oregon Secretary of State
kip.r.memmott@Oregon.gov