



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS PERFORMANCE AUDIT

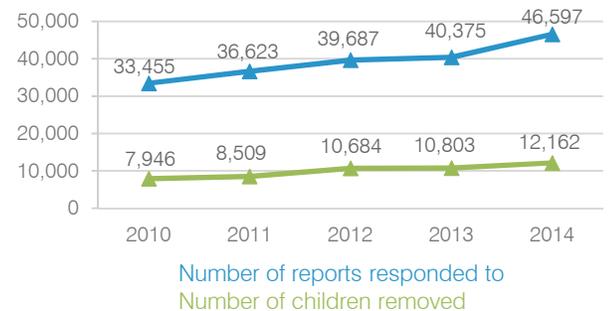
Department, like other child welfare agencies, considers three common factors to assess child safety, but agencies' risk assessment processes are more varied

Our Conclusion

This report addresses the Arizona Department of Child Safety's (Department) child safety and risk assessment practices, including its approach for determining whether to remove a child from his/her home. Similar to other child welfare agencies, the Department uses three common factors to assess child safety. Agencies' risk assessment processes are more varied, and the Department uses multiple factors and relies on caseworker judgment to assess risk. However, the Department's child safety and risk assessment tool does not sufficiently guide caseworkers in making child safety decisions. Insufficient training has also limited caseworkers' ability to conduct child safety and risk assessments. The Department needs to modify or replace its child safety and risk assessment tool, provide adequate training for caseworkers and supervisors, and improve safety planning.

Department uses common factors to assess child safety—Assessing child safety and risk is a primary department responsibility. As such, and similar to other child welfare agencies, the Department assesses child safety based on threats of danger to the child, child vulnerabilities, and the ability of the caregiver to protect the child. If a child is determined to be unsafe through the assessment of these factors, a safety plan must be implemented. The safety plan describes actions the Department will take to mitigate current safety threats, which may include removing the child from the home. The safety planning process involves Team Decision Making (TDM), which is a meeting of caseworkers, family members, and other stakeholders to address the safety and placement of the child. Appropriately assessing child safety and risk is critical because the removal of a child can have a significant impact on the child and family. In Arizona, child removals have been increasing.

Annual number of Arizona child abuse and neglect reports responded to compared to number of children removed from the home Federal fiscal years 2010 through 2014



Department uses multiple risk factors and caseworker judgment to assess risk to children—In addition to evaluating child safety, child welfare agencies gather and assess information about families to determine whether children are at risk for future maltreatment so that action may be taken to prevent it, such as providing services to improve family functioning. Child welfare agencies' risk assessment models encompass similar overarching components, such as using forms or tools to capture and record information. However, despite sharing similar components, child welfare agencies vary in how they assess risk, including variation in the specific risk factors used. In addition, child welfare agencies generally use two distinct risk assessment approaches, an actuarial-based or a consensus-based risk approach. The Department uses a consensus-based risk approach, whereby department staff rely on their professional judgment, experience, guidance documents, and training to determine what risk factors are present and what actions would best address a particular situation.

Department has inadequately implemented critical components of its child safety and risk assessment process

Deficiencies in the child safety and risk assessment process impact effectiveness—The Department's child safety and risk assessment (CSRA) tool lacks the



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structure to guide caseworkers in documenting and assessing child safety and risk. The CSRA tool does not effectively tell caseworkers what specific information should be considered or documented, which could lead to poor and inconsistent decision making. We found that department staff did not consistently document information in the CSRAs and did not always meet the Department's documentation requirements. Other reviews have identified similar concerns regarding how the structure of the Department's CSRA tool can affect documentation and decision making around child safety and risk.

Further, although critical to a determining whether to remove a child, the CSRA tool does not require caseworkers to explicitly list and explain the safety factors. Consequently, the Department cannot identify how frequently a specific factor or set of conditions affects the decision to remove a child and does not have this data available to make improvements to its child safety and risk assessment process.

The Department's safety planning practices may also be inadequate. The Department uses a TDM meeting to consider the safety plan for a child, which may include removal from the home. Participants can all discuss their safety concerns for the child. Although caseworkers and supervisors should come to these meetings with open minds, some indicated that they come with their decision already made regarding the child-removal decision and may not adequately engage with families during the meeting. This approach is counterproductive and may result in unnecessary child removals. Although a TDM facilitator manages the meeting, the ultimate decision of whether to remove a child rests with the caseworker and supervisor. In addition, services that could mitigate child removal, such as parenting education and crisis intervention, have long waiting lists in some parts of the State.

Mentoring and coaching are also an important part of caseworker and supervisor preparation to properly conduct safety and risk assessments. Between fiscal years 2013 and 2015, the Department hired about 1,550 new caseworkers. Part of new caseworker training includes accompanying a mentor to do investigations and attend TDMs. However, because of the lack of access to mentors, some of these caseworkers may not receive critical mentoring opportunities. In addition, the Department does not provide formal mentoring or coaching to new supervisors as part of their training to oversee caseworkers.

Department plans to improve some child safety and risk assessment practices—These plans include revising the CSRA tool to be more structured and better guide caseworkers through the safety and risk assessment process. The Department is also in the early stages of piloting a field guide, which supplements the CSRA and contains checkboxes describing the information needed and narrative responses to improve answers' details. Additionally, the Department plans to reduce the time families will have to wait for services.

Department could learn from other agencies' child safety and risk assessment practices—The Breakthrough Series Collaborative is a program that involved 21 public and tribal welfare agencies aimed at improving the way they assessed child safety and risk. For example, the Carver County, Minnesota, child welfare agency has focused on further engaging children and families in safety and risk assessments and safety planning by adopting age-appropriate interviewing tools; using family safety networks comprising relatives, friends, and neighbors; and engaging families to identify safety concerns and family strengths, which lead to more accurate safety assessments.

Recommendations

The Department should:

- Review other agencies' efforts to improve safety and risk assessments and determine whether these actions would improve its practices;
- Continue efforts to modify or replace its CSRA tool to better guide caseworkers in assessing child safety and risk;
- Reduce waitlists for in-home family services to improve safety planning; and
- Ensure caseworkers and supervisors have adequate training and mentoring.