

## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS SPECIAL REPORT

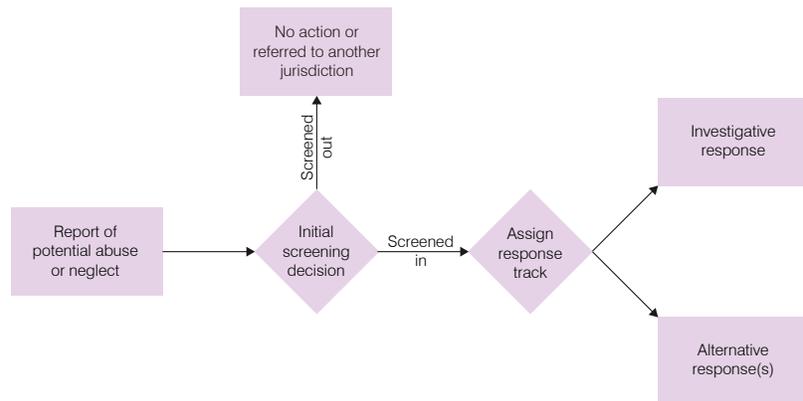
### Our Conclusion

This report addresses the use of a differential response system and set screening criteria to manage reports of child abuse and neglect. A differential response system provides a method other than investigation for responding to child abuse and neglect reports through the provision of family services. Arizona used a differential response system in the past called Family Builders, but this program ended in 2004. Under legislative direction, the Arizona Department of Child Safety (Department) developed recommendations in 2015 for implementing a new differential response system in Arizona. As it moves forward with implementing the differential response system, the Department should continue working with the Legislature to develop statutory changes allowing for differential response. It should also adopt common practices other jurisdictions have used to implement their differential response systems.

## Differential response systems

A differential response system provides for either (1) a traditional investigative response to a report of child abuse or neglect or (2) an alternative response that focuses on engaging families to assess needs and then connecting them with appropriate services. The alternative response track is designed for cases where there is a low and/or moderate risk of imminent danger to a child, such as neglect. However, the system permits a change to the investigative response track if necessary.

### General process for decisions about allegations of child abuse and neglect in a differential response system



The Department does not have a differential response system and must investigate all reports of child abuse or neglect. One potential advantage of differential response is that families may feel more engaged and satisfied with the child welfare system than they do going through an investigative response. Further, jurisdictions have found that using an alternative response did not compromise child safety. Although an alternative response may have higher up-front costs than an investigative response, it may be less costly over time.

## Other jurisdictions' practices can help guide Arizona's re-implementation of differential response

**Arizona formerly used differential response and may do so again using a new system**—The Arizona Department of Economic Security (ADES) implemented a differential response program from 1998 to 2004 called Family Builders. Under this program, ADES referred low-risk child abuse and neglect reports to contractors for potential services, while it still investigated moderate- to high-risk reports. Family participation in the program was voluntary. The program had some positive outcomes, but ADES lacked information on whether contractors were providing adequate services at appropriate rates. After high-profile cases of child death or abuse, the program ended as an alternative response in 2004 but continued as a referral for services until 2010.



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In 2014, the Legislature directed the Department to examine a system that would permit an alternative to investigating all child abuse and neglect reports. In its July 2015 report to the Legislature, the Department recommended a two-track system including investigation of high- to moderate-risk reports and criminal conduct reports, and a family assessment response for low- and potential-risk reports. The recommendations also included a two-step process for assigning reports: (1) continue to screen allegations to determine those that require a department response and (2) determine an appropriate response, either investigation or family assessment, based on established criteria. The report also noted several actions needed to set up the infrastructure to support differential response.

**Statutory changes needed to implement differential response**—Statute requires the Department to investigate all child abuse and neglect reports, and statutory changes would be needed to allow for differential response. The Department has provided potential statutory changes to the Legislature, but it reported that it was working to address stakeholder concerns with the proposed language. The Department should continue to address stakeholder concerns and work with the Legislature to pursue any needed statutory changes that allow for differential response.

**Common practices exist for implementing differential response**—Although we did not identify a single best practice model for a differential response system, the Department should adopt common practices other jurisdictions used for implementing their differential response systems. Specifically:

- Like other jurisdictions, Arizona has criteria for determining whether to accept or screen out allegations of child abuse or neglect. Jurisdictions have also adopted criteria for determining which reports are ineligible for alternative response and must be investigated, and the Department has proposed such criteria. Jurisdictions' programs also permit switching from one response track to another track, which the Department has also recommended for its new differential response system.
- Some jurisdictions adopted a practice model that includes expectations and guidance for workers, and many jurisdictions also trained staff on their differential response systems.
- Although the services offered vary by jurisdiction, the Department will need to determine the array of services that should be available to families in the alternative response track, contract for these services as needed, and address any potential barriers to service accessibility. It should also monitor contracted service providers.
- Like other jurisdictions, the Department should decide on key implementation strategies, including determining whether additional funding is needed, dedicating staff positions to oversee implementation, phasing in the implementation, and determining whether additional peer expertise would be helpful.
- Internal and external stakeholders should be engaged in developing and implementing the differential response system, similar to other jurisdictions' practices. The Department has already used various strategies to include stakeholders, such as forming the initial multidisciplinary study team and drafting a communication plan that targets specific stakeholders.
- Similar to other jurisdictions, the Department should evaluate the differential response system to determine whether the system is implemented as intended and to measure program outcomes.

## Recommendations

The Department should:

- Continue working with the Legislature on any necessary legislation that allows for differential response;
- Finalize and implement criteria and policies and procedures for making response assignment decisions and response track switching;
- Develop well-defined practices to guide workers and implement training for appropriate staff;
- Determine services that should be provided, address any potential barriers to service accessibility, and monitor contracted service providers;
- Decide on key implementation strategies such as phasing in the differential response system;
- Finalize its communication plan and allow stakeholder feedback during implementation; and
- Develop and implement processes for evaluating the differential response system.