



Executive Office of Health and Human Services

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DCF Releases Report Regarding Auburn Case

Report Details Department Failures, Outlines Recommendations and Recently Announced Reforms

BOSTON – The Department of Children and Families (DCF) today [released a report](#) on the tragedy involving the death of a two-year-old girl and near death of a 22-month-old girl living in an Auburn licensed foster home.

The Department's Case Investigation Unit (CIU) conducted an investigation of all critical incidents within DCF involving children in the foster mother's care, including a full chronology of DCF contacts with the home, an analysis of events, case practice and agency operations.

This investigation demonstrates the importance of the initial screening of a foster home, the importance of accurate documentation, the need for vigilant supervision, and the shared responsibility of DCF staff to ensure the safety of children. It reinforces that recruitment, support and oversight of families providing foster/pre-adoptive care to children in DCF custody require the same protective lens as DCF's clinical work. Further, this report outlines the critical need to thoroughly assess foster parents, including, most importantly, their ability to provide an appropriate home that is safe and stable for the children in their care.

Findings reveal several instances where DCF staff failed to appropriately assess the foster mother and identify risks to the children in her care. As a result, a corrective action plan will be implemented in conjunction with the reform efforts already underway as a result of the findings of last year's CWLA quality review, the recently released report on the Hardwick case, and recently announced priorities between Local SEIU 509 and the Administration.

Corrective Action Plan

System Level Action Items

- Retrain all family resource workers, supervisors, and managers on the requirements and compliance expectations embedded in family resource policy and EEC licensing standards. This includes reinforcement of the expectations that:
 - all license studies include an interview with each household member, including children and individuals frequently visiting the home.
 - a tape measure be used to ensure adherence to physical standards.
- Issue guidance on use of medical and behavioral health histories to assess impact on a caregiver's ability to safely provide quality care.
- Clarify existing policy regarding the approval of requests to place more than two children under 24 months or to increase the capacity of the home to more than 6 children in a single foster home.
- Modify the foster home approval process to require contact with local law enforcement agencies to obtain information related to police or emergency responses to potential foster homes.
- Incorporate into policy the use of social media in the foster home approval and re-assessment process.

- Develop an internal audit process to ensure foster home approvals and licensing assessments are completed in accordance with DCF policy.

Regional Level Action Items

- Following the rollout of the retraining on family resource policy and EEC licensing standards, area program managers and supervisors managing family resource units will meet regionally on a bi-monthly basis to ensure consistent application of and compliance with policy and EEC licensing standards.
- Regional quality assurance staff will conduct ongoing and regular reviews of existing foster home approvals, with an immediate focus on overcapacity approvals and ensuring that enhanced safety assessments are complete and comprehensive.

Area Office Level Action Items: Worcester East

- Each foster home in the Worcester East area office will complete an enhanced safety assessment during the next assessment period. This assessment may occur earlier in the event of issues arising from the

Central/Regional audit. Pursuant to the assessment, all bedrooms will be measured with a tape measure and measurements recorded in the DCF file.

Determine Disciplinary Action Consistent with the Findings in this Report

- Two individuals involved in this case have been reassigned from their ongoing responsibilities to administrative duties pending the outcome of either show cause hearings or further investigation to determine the appropriate disciplinary action.

Recently Announced Reforms by Governor Baker and Front Line Workers:

- **New DCF Intake Policy:** The Department's intake policy covering the period of time from when an allegation of abuse or neglect is filed (51a) through the investigation, substantiation of a claim and opening of a case has not been updated in 12 years. Through negotiations with SEIU Local 509 leadership already underway, the policy will be **updated by November 17, 2015**. Reforms will include:
 - Standardized risk assessment tools for social workers
 - CORI checks in all DCF cases (Currently used in approximately 70% of cases)
 - Review of the entire family or household's prior or current involvement with DCF
 - Review of frequency and type of emergency (9-1-1 calls) responses to the home
 - Parental capacity assessment
- **New Supervisor Policy:** The new supervisor policy to be **implemented by November 17, 2015** consistently across all DCF offices, will include detailed, mandated steps for case review and management support necessary to working with all families and especially those with complex conditions, ensuring all information about the family is understood and special consultation is provided for thorough understanding of a case and decisions to protect the children involved.
- **Examine All Complex Cases Within the Department:** Regional Directors began examining more complex in-home cases where there are multiple abuse reports. DCF directors will use a nationally developed child welfare continuous quality improvement (CQI) tool to assess several facets of cases including: safety, stability, placement needs, permanency, wellbeing, engagement of service providers, understanding of case situation and context.

- **Retention and Recruitment of Social Workers; Reinstating Technicians:** The stress of high caseloads at an average of 20.66:1 in July is cited as a primary reason for the loss of social workers and the Department continues to target an 18:1 average caseload. DCF management and union leadership will make a concerted effort to develop strategies for retention and recruitment of social workers **by Fall of 2015**, as the Department continues to hire new social workers with the \$35.5 million increase provided in the Fiscal Year 2016 budget. DCF will also work towards **reinstating social work technicians**, first eliminated due to budget reductions in 2009 and critical to providing non-clinical support for caseworkers and families.
- **Reestablishing the Central Massachusetts Regional Office:** Budget reductions in 2009 also forced the closing of DCF's Central MA Regional Office, resulting in the Western Office taking on more than 50% of the state's geography and caseload. The Department will reinstate the Central Regional Office in Worcester by January 1, 2016, with managerial, administrative, legal, nursing and other staff to increase frontline workers' access to supervision and other support resources.
- **Reduce Backlog for Foster Home Applicants:** The Department will initiate further efforts by this fall to meet the immediate needs for placing children in safe, caring foster homes, working with social service providers to review applicants and reduce the applicant backlog.

Additional Department Reforms:

- **300 New Social Workers:** Additional field staff brought on since January 2014.
- **New Communication Technology:** Cell phones and over 3,000 iPads have been distributed to social workers, supervisors and managers to allow for remote access of case information, timely reporting and higher quality documentation and more efficient communication with clients, supervisors and staff.
- **Licensing Improvements:** Over 80% of social workers have become licensed with the remainder in the process of completion, while the Department has expanded the availability of training and hired professional development staff to oversee and implement the licensing requirements.

- **Policy Reform Recommendations:** This includes: strengthening policies for education of children in care and case transfers; distribution of new DCF guides for social workers to provide parents; and the pending rollout of newly approved policies and processes for comprehensive assessment and action planning for how social workers assess family function and child safety and ensure services and support are consistent with family needs.
- **Foster and Kinship Caregiver Restrictions:** Mandatory background checks and a no exceptions policy for certain criminal violations.
- **Quality Improvement:** The Department is hiring 5 new personnel to serve as a Continuous Quality Improvement team monitoring the quality of statewide casework and tracking case trends.
- **Medical Director:** The Department has selected a candidate for a newly created position of Medical Director to help manage difficult medical cases and implement the recommendations above, including documenting children's medical information for case assessment. That announcement will be coming soon.
- **Workforce Support and Training:** The Department and employee representatives continue to work collaboratively to negotiate and implement fundamental policy and practice improvements.

The full report can be found at mass.gov/dcf.

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