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Independent Review Outlines Steps for CPS Transformation

AUSTIN — The state can increase the time Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers spend with children by reducing paperwork requirements and unnecessary steps in the investigative process, according to a top-to-bottom review of the program released today.

The review found that caseworkers today spend only 26 percent of their time working directly with children and families and outlined changes to increase that to 40 percent. The report also recommends changes to reduce high turnover among CPS staff, improve the state's ability to find permanent homes for children in foster care, and strengthen CPS policies.

"This report gives us an expert, objective view of CPS, and some of the findings are stark," said John Specia, commissioner of the Department of Family and Protective Services, which along with the Health and Human Services Commission hired the Stephen Group to conduct the four-month review. "We now have a clear understanding of our strengths as well as where we need to improve. The review found that we have great people, and it gives us a road map to become a great program that does its absolute best to protect children."

The report recommended simplifying or eliminating burdensome policies and procedures, better matching families to workers and deploying workers in pairs to increase the amount of time caseworkers spend working directly with children and families. It also concluded that turnover, currently as high as 40 percent among frontline caseworkers in some areas, can be reduced with an aggressive focus on targeted recruiting, revamping caseworker training, and adding experienced mentors in the field.

Dramatic improvement is possible with the current workforce, the report found.

CPS "is filled with talented people who are utterly committed to the children and families of the state," wrote the study's author, John Stephen. "It is time to let them do their jobs with the tools and the empowerment they need. While our investigation found numerous areas for improvement, we came away with the overwhelming sense of optimism that when all of CPS' energies are focused in the same direction for a clear goal, the potential in the organization is outstanding."

Stephen and his team of consultants crisscrossed the state for several months, meeting with frontline workers and supervisors at their offices and accompanying them during investigations. The review team also met with judges, legislators, and a variety of stakeholders.

Among other recommendations from The Stephen Group Report:

- Implement Sunset recommendation to halt work on 13 non-essential projects, such as regional workgroups, to re-focus attention on CPS' core mission of child protection.
- Reduce the current seven-day safety assessment process to 24 hours to better assess the risk to a child and intervene more quickly in the most serious cases.
- Make better use of available state databases to more quickly locate families.
- Improve the ability to find permanent homes for foster children who cannot be reunited with families.
- Improve materials and services for Spanish-speaking families.
- Work with the Legislature to eliminate or streamline laws that create unnecessary steps for caseworkers unrelated to child protection.
- Rewrite the CPS policy guide.
- Restructure CPS headquarters staff to sharpen the lines of responsibility and accountability.
- Assign cases based on the needs of children and families, and the capabilities of individual caseworkers, instead of randomly.

Specia said work to implement many of the recommendations has already begun and he expects that some of the changes can be made within 90 days.

The final report with recommendations and the assessment of CPS is available online at http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/About_DFPS/Other_Reports/stephen_group_reports.asp.