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Calls to child ombudsman up sharply

Calls for help to the state's child ombudsman increased by 42 percent from 2010 to 2011.

An annual report released Tuesday shows Indiana Department of Child Services Ombudsman Susan Hoppe opened fewer cases in 2011. But Hoppe didn't shy away from problem-solving, probing or even poking DCS.

The independent watchdog investigated 64 cases and, in 20 of them, called out the agency for failing "to protect the physical or mental health or safety of any child or failed to follow specific laws, rules or written policies."

Hoppe did not return a call requesting comment for this story.

The ombudsman bureau -- Hoppe and a shared part-time assistant -- opened fewer cases, the report says, because more complaints were resolved before taking that formal step. Overall, Hoppe concluded as many full investigations as in 2010. The findings were nearly identical, too.

The report covered the second year of operation of the bureau, created by the General Assembly in response to growing

calls for more accountability and oversight of DCS.

In the 20 investigations in which Hoppe reached a "validity" conclusion, she reported DCS missteps. In those cases, Hoppe made recommendations -- 36 in all -- to address the issues she uncovered.

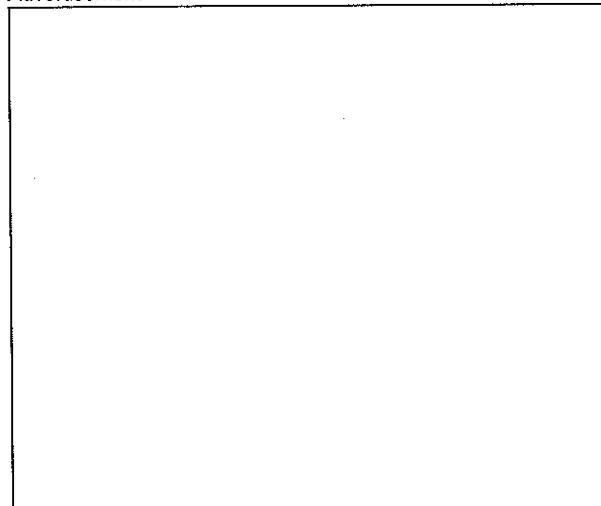
The report also includes a case-by-case explanation of the DCS response, with the agency often making or considering changes.

DCS spokeswoman Ann Houseworth said Tuesday that the agency appreciates the ombudsman and her input.

"The thorough and thoughtful review of the cases has aided this agency by offering suggestions for new and revised policies and procedures," Houseworth said. "As a result of her work, DCS is better able to support the safety and well-being of children throughout the state."

The cases Hoppe dug into during 2011

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were spurred by a major spike in pleas for help. The bureau received 516 requests for information or assistance, up from 364 in 2010.

Parents lodged more than half of those complaints. All told, nearly 85 percent came from some sort of family member.

The most common concerns -- present in more than half the complaints -- involved DCS case plans, child safety and the findings of agency investigations. Nearly a quarter of those complaints came from Marion County, which accounted for more than twice the number of complaints lodged by any other DCS region.

In the 20 "validity" cases, it wasn't always every allegation in the complaint that she substantiated, but at least one met the criteria.

Among case-specific complaints in which the ombudsman found merit:

DCS failed to fully address allegations and gather appropriate background information in an investigation.

The central hotline screened out a report "that met legal sufficiency" and should have been investigated.

A child was placed with guardians who were not providing appropriate supervision or medical care.

A child was placed in foster care and approved for adoption without considering placement with a relative who had adopted

three of the child's siblings.

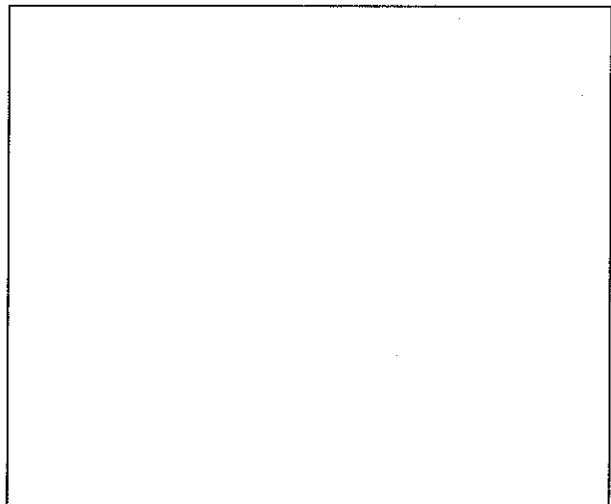
DCS put children at risk by pushing speedy reunification while parents still demonstrated substance abuse issues and lived in a shelter.

The report included 26 case-specific recommendations to address problems found by Hoppe's investigations. She also submitted 13 general recommendations to DCS "based on information derived from the volumes of information reviewed in the course of case reviews and investigations with systemic implications."

Among the general recommendations was a call for DCS to review handling of cases in which there is evidence of "serious substance abuse, and consider the question of at what point in recovery can parents be expected to provide a safe environment and appropriate parenting."

That recommendation, Hoppe reported, was prompted by the significant number of cases she reviewed that involved parental

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substance abuse.

Another recommendation called for additional training or emphasis on the policy for use of psychotropic medications on children in the state's care. "Based on practices observed with regard to this issue," the report said, "DCS staff appeared to be confused about this policy."

The report also noted that background checks for foster parents and other caregivers do not always detect "a history of involvement in high conflict or domestic violence situations." It recommends expanding the criminal background checks, such as searching protective orders, before placing children in substitute care.

The report concluded with praise for the push by DCS to keep more children with relatives and the increased use of "team" meetings. The process brings together DCS staff, family members, friends and other support sources to develop plans to address a family's problems. Hoppe also thanked DCS Director James Payne and his management staff in the report for the agency's support and cooperation.

"While we still have work to do," Hoppe concluded, "the department's commitment to improved outcomes for children and families involved in Indiana's child welfare system is recognized and shared by the bureau."

Call reporter Tim Evans at (317) 444-6204.

Reaching the ombudsman

To contact the Indiana Department of Child Services Ombudsman Bureau:

» Call (317) 234-7361 or (877) 682-0101.

» Fax (317) 232-3154.

» Email DCSOmbudsman@idoa.in.gov.

» Click on www.in.gov/idoa/2610.htm.

» Mail DCS Ombudsman Bureau, Indiana Department of Administration, 402 W. Washington St., Room 479, Indianapolis, IN 46204.


The ombudsman bureau's full report can be found under the links menu at: www.in.gov/idoa/2610.htm.

Source: DCS Ombudsman Bureau

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