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# High caseloads hinder face-to-face visits with foster kids

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**3 comments**



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DCFS DIRECTOR: Mischa Martin (file photo).

Despite recent improvements in Arkansas's overloaded foster care system, the state Department of Human Services' Division of Children and Family Services is struggling to reduce the average caseload of its field staff, DCFS monthly data indicates.

One consequence of high caseloads is that some foster children have little direct contact with the child welfare agency ultimately responsible for their care. In the 2017 fiscal year, 28 percent of foster children did not receive a face-to-face monthly visit from their family service caseworker.

Also, 13 percent of foster children received no monthly face-to-face contact from any DCFS staff, regardless of their position or the purpose of the visit. That's an increase since 2014, when the figure was 4 percent. Over that same period, the number of children in the foster system swelled from about 4,100 to about 5,100.

On Wednesday, the face-to-face visit metrics became the focus of questions from state lawmakers after DCFS Director Mischa Martin presented the agency's 2017 annual report to the legislature's Joint Committee on Aging, Children and Youth.

"If someone is missed in one month, are they put in the front of the line for the next month — so that maybe in a two-month period, everyone gets visited?" Rep. Carlton Wing (R-North Little Rock) asked Martin.

"I wish I could say, 'Absolutely, yes,' but [when] we started pulling data back in the spring ... we saw kids on the list who hadn't been looked at in 60 or 90 days," she replied. The DCFS now requires local offices to prioritize those cases, Martin said: "If you didn't see them this month, you have to make it a priority to see them [next month]."

Martin took over the DCFS last year, at a time when the state foster care population was reaching record levels. Since then, she has attempted to implement a number of reforms aimed at improving placement options and retaining staff.

Sen. Stephanie Flowers (D-Pine Bluff), who co-chairs the Children and Youth committee, asked whether the DCFS was running afoul of state law by failing to visit each foster child every month. "This policy, the face-to-face visits monthly — is that in our code?" she asked.

Martin said it was not a statutory requirement, but that federal funds were tied to compliance. "And it is also good practice to see that child, to establish that relationship, to know what's going on ... ." Research shows that children who are visited monthly by caseworkers return to their biological family or get adopted more quickly, Martin said.

Over the past five years, the number of Arkansas children in foster care has increased by over 38 percent, placing greater strain on the system and its staff. There is disagreement about the cause: A report last year by an independent consultant hired by the DCFS pointed to "questionable removals" of children from their families by overzealous caseworkers and the court system, but the DCFS disputed many of its findings.

Even before the uptick in recent years, some young clients rarely saw their caseworkers.

Shannon Boney, 23, who was a foster child from age 4 to 19, told the Arkansas Nonprofit News Network that it was "very common" to not receive a visit from her caseworker for over a month. "Or, we'd see a secondary caseworker who doesn't know anything about us," she said.

Boney, who now lives in Sherwood, said she was placed in foster homes and residential facilities from Monticello to Springdale. She recalled some caseworkers who were apathetic — even hostile — and others who went above and beyond.

“Sometimes they don’t even come out to foster homes. I had some pretty bad foster homes, and I’d call and call. They’d only come out when the parents actually call and set it up — when they’re waiting for [the DCFS] to come and take the child out of the home,” Boney said.

But, she added, “Three particular caseworkers I had were very good.” She remembers each one of those three workers by name. “They made sure I had what I needed. .... They made sure they kept in contact with my foster mom, with me, with the school ... . You know, they just made sure I was A-OK, and I wasn’t going through anything I didn’t need to be going through.”

Even as a child, Boney noticed how overworked her caseworkers were, in part because she sometimes experienced the consequences. “I would get passed off to another caseworker because my old caseworker had such a big caseload,” she said.

A year ago, in December, the average family service caseload was 30; under Martin, the DCFS set a goal of reducing it to 20. (The national standard is 15.) The DCFS made progress on caseload reduction throughout most of 2017, and by the time the division released a progress report in September, the average had dipped down to 22.5.

However, Martin told the committee Wednesday that the caseload average has rebounded the past three months, to 26.

“When school started back, we started breaking records with the number of calls that we’re getting at the [child maltreatment] hotline, which upticked our caseload,” she said.

After the meeting, Martin explained that teachers and other school staff are “mandated reporters,” meaning they are required to call the hotline if they suspect an instance of neglect or abuse. Such reporting includes categories such as “environmental neglect,” meaning an unsafe or unhealthy living situation, or “educational neglect” if a parent fails to send a child to school or to provide home schooling.

“I can’t prove it, but there was new legislation related to posting the child abuse hotline number in the schools ... which could have also increased the number of reports that we’re getting,” she added.

During the meeting, Rep. Danny Watson (R-Hope) asked whether the DCFS was “adequately staffed.”

In 2017, the legislature, at the urging of Governor Hutchinson, gave the agency a funding increase. The extra money allowed the DCFS to hire additional caseworkers and implement a new state employee pay plan, effective July 1, which boosted the starting salary for family service workers from \$30,713 to \$36,155 and the starting salary for their supervisors from \$37,332 to \$45,010.

The higher pay scale was intended to address the DCFS’ dismal employee retention numbers. According to the agency’s progress report published in September, “most Division service areas in the state faced a 32 percent turnover rate among Family Service Workers” as of late 2016.

Martin said the DCFS was also improving its worker training and implementing a new “graduated”

caseload system to avoid new hires being overwhelmed by an enormous number of cases or grueling tasks such as being on-call after hours.

“We’re really trying to walk workers through the training in an appropriate timeframe, as well as not overload them with cases,” she said.

But, Martin also noted, “I think realistically you always have to remember that this work is very hard, and that it is difficult to go into homes, to remove children, to work with families, repeatedly, even when you’re trying your best. It’s a tough job for our caseworkers, and so we’ll probably always have higher [turnover] than some other professions.”

Other numbers in the DCFS annual report illustrate clear progress on stated reform goals. The percentage of children placed with relatives — rather than with a family in the broader foster care system — increased to almost 30 percent, up from half that number two years ago. The ratio of foster home beds to foster children has increased from a year ago, from 0.7 to 0.8. And the number of overdue child maltreatment investigations has plummeted, from 1,627 last December to just 67 this month.

*This reporting is courtesy of the Arkansas Nonprofit News Network, an independent, nonpartisan news project dedicated to producing journalism that matters to Arkansans. Find out more at [arknews.org](http://arknews.org).*

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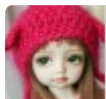
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SHINEONLIBBY

12/09/2017 AT 2:25 AM

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Thank you for keeping the public updated about the Foster Care Kids. You have done very good reporting on this over the years. It seems to be a never ending sad story.

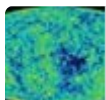
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12/09/2017 AT 6:13 AM

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We have the system the Gov and Legislature pay for. The First Lady has a genuine understanding of the issues, and needs to weigh in.

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**PATRICIA HUTCHINS**

12/11/2017 AT 12:40 PM

**2**

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I am genuinely glad it is getting better. Kudos to the reporting you have done on the foster system. Focusing a light on the issues has led to them getting better funding and leadership in my opinion.

REPORT



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