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High Turnover, Caseloads in Louisiana Foster Care Program

A new audit finds Louisiana's social services agency has been so short-staffed amid repeated budget cuts that it didn't ensure the safety of its foster children.

Aug. 14, 2017, at 6:00 p.m.



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AP

By MELINDA DESLATTE, Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — [Louisiana \(/news/best-states/louisiana/\)](/news/best-states/louisiana/)'s social services agency was so understaffed amid repeated budget cuts that it short-changed its foster children, skipping some background checks on foster parents and placing children with people accused of abuse, according to an audit released Monday.

Legislative Auditor Daryl Purpera's office reviewed the Department of Children and Family Services' handling of the foster care program during former Gov. Bobby Jindal's administration, saying that high caseloads, hefty employee turnover and ineffective computer systems damaged the agency's oversight of children placed in its care.

"These challenges may impact (the agency's) ability to ensure the safety and well-being of children in foster care in Louisiana," the report says.

Auditors reviewed the program from Jan. 1, 2012, through Jan. 1, 2016, finding that although the number of children in foster care increased by nearly 4 percent over the period, field staff for the program dropped by more than 3 percent.

By 2016, caseworkers carried an average of 16 cases, higher than the 10-case maximum established in agency policy, the audit says. More than 4,400 children were in the foster care program on Jan. 1 of that year.

Auditors found that 29 percent of those who took in children because they were family members or someone known by the foster child didn't receive background checks. A handful of providers were allowed to care for children though they had prior "valid cases of abuse and neglect," the audit says. Also, the department didn't make sure foster children were getting the medical and behavioral health treatments they needed.

The Department of Children and Family Services — which oversees child welfare, food stamps, the welfare program and child support enforcement — had a more than \$1.2 billion budget with 5,200 jobs when Jindal took office. By the end of his tenure, spending was down to nearly half, and the department had fewer than 3,500 employees.

Marketa Garner Walters took over as agency secretary in January 2016, appointed by Gov. John Bel Edwards. She wasn't surprised by the audit, which came after an Edwards transition committee determined the department couldn't properly manage its child welfare mission.

"We knew that coming in we had inherited a mess," she said.

Since then, the department's budget has edged up. Walters said she's reorganized, shuffled foster care caseworkers to address shortage areas and bolstered employee coaching. She enacted a policy that no child will be placed with someone with a prior case of abuse or neglect.

"We have cleaned up so much. We are not where we want to be by any stretch of the imagination, but in 18 months we're in a world of difference," Walters said.

Walters said the department also has changed its approach to foster parenting, beefing up education and seeking to build more community support from church organizations, nonprofits and businesses.

"The kids we get are hard, and they come with lots of trauma. So, we're giving the parents trauma training," Walters said. "We're being more candid and upfront."

Still, the agency has trouble, according to the audit, retaining enough foster care providers — paying foster parents less than the estimated cost to care for children. The average payment rate of \$15.20 per day hasn't been increased since 2007, and no rate hike is on the horizon amid continued state budget gaps.

Follow Melinda Deslatte on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/melindadeslatte>

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An American Indian activist accused of inciting a riot during protests in North Dakota against the Dakota Access oil pipeline wants a judge to force prosecutors to obtain and turn over evidence from private security firms.

Drugs Seized, Truck Driver Arrested in Eastern Nebraska (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/nebraska/articles/2018-02-14/drugs-seized-truck-driver-arrested-in-eastern-nebraska?int=news-rec>)

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Officers have arrested a California man after marijuana, hashish oil and hashish wax were found in the truck he was driving down Interstate 80 in eastern Nebraska.



(<https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2018-02-14/ap-sources-mitt-romney-to-launch-senate-campaign-thursday?int=news-rec>)

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Governor Marks New Attraction at Ski Resort Hit by Fraud (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/vermont/articles/2018-02-14/governor-to-mark-new-attraction-at-ski-resort-hit-by-fraud?int=news-rec>)
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Vermont Republican Gov. Phil marks the opening of a new attraction at the Jay Peak ski area that is continuing to recover from an investment fraud.

Court: Execution OK for Inmate Claiming Damaged Veins (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/alabama/articles/2018-02-14/court-execution-ok-for-inmate-claiming-damaged-veins?int=news-rec>)

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A federal appeals court overturns stay of lethal injection for Alabama murder convict who says his veins are damaged.

Man Arrested in Connection With Salvation Army Robbery (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-hampshire/articles/2018-02-14/man-arrested-in-connection-with-salvation-army-robbery?int=news-rec>)

Feb. 14, 2018

Police in New Hampshire have arrested a man in connection with the armed robbery of a Salvation Army store in December.

Puerto Rico Cancels \$133M Post-Hurricane Housing Contract (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-york/articles/2018-02-14/puerto-rico-cancels-133m-post-hurricane-housing-contract?int=news-rec>)

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Puerto Rico's Housing Department says it will cancel a \$133 million deal with a U.S. company hired to repair homes damaged by Hurricane Maria because a review board found the contract was improperly awarded.

Colorado Closes Funeral Home After Multiple Complaints (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/colorado/articles/2018-02-14/colorado-closes-funeral-home-after-multiple-complaints?int=news-rec>)

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Colorado regulators have shut down a funeral home after investigations showed it misplaced one person's ashes and gave a family dry concrete instead of their loved one's ashes.

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