



Oregon's DHS Director Didn't See Major Child Abuse Report Until A Lawmaker Sent It

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In one Oregon home, rats were coming through a rotten floor to bite children, while another kid, in need of a physician, threw their urine soaked clothing on the floor.

Parents in another home threatened their 7-year-old with a return to foster care if his behavior didn't change.

Elsewhere in the state, children were regularly exposed to methamphetamine users. They were only taken from the caregiver a year later after police found one of the children in the backseat of a car, sitting in the lap of a prostitute who was covered in meth.

In all these instances, child protective service caseworkers at the Oregon Department of Human Services were responding to reports of child abuse and either deemed the children were safe or failed to fully diagnose the dangers in the home.

"If those assessments are ending in the determination that those kids are safe, we have a very severe problem," said state Sen. Sara Gelser, who chairs the Senate Human Services Committee, [at a public hearing this week in Salem](#).

These cases illustrate failures in the state's CPS program that workers say is overwhelmed and understaffed by employees who often lack adequate training to performing time-consuming and challenging work.

The [incidents were part of an internal review by the Oregon Department of Human Services](#), which found a number of serious problems in the way its employees investigate cases of child abuse.

The report was the subject of a public hearing Monday in Salem, where lawmakers used it to [advocate for a bill they say would bring DHS back to basic assessments](#) in an effort to address some of the dangers children in some Oregon homes face on a daily basis.

"I'm incredibly depressed at this moment," said Rep. Duane Stark, who testified in favor of the bill after hearing the report.

“We have to change something and the problems need to be addressed with urgency,” Gelser said.

The report was the result of a child who died after numerous visits by CPS case workers.

DHS reviewed 101 recent cases from 11 counties, including Lane, Washington, Jackson and Clackamas.

In 47 percent of the CPS cases examined, the reviewer did not agree with the case worker’s conclusion the children were in a safe home.

DHS Director Clyde Saiki testified during the hearing that the report was not sent to him internally. Rather, he received it when Gelser emailed it to him last week.

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“The report that came out of your child safety program where you had 47 kids identified as safe that were clearly very unsafe; what is happening right now, today to address that problem to make sure that there aren’t people out assessing kids today and saying they’re safe and leaving them in those kinds of conditions?” Gelser asked during the hearing. “What’s happened since you got that report?”

Saiki responded that he only received the report last Friday.

“I haven’t even had a chance to sit down with staff and say, ‘So, tell me what this report says,’” he testified.

Gelser said it’s a report DHS has had for several months.

“Am I the only person that gave you the report?” she asked.

“What’s that?” Saiki replied.

“Did you receive the report from me?” Gelser asked.

“Yes,” he responded.

“Am I the only person who gave you the report?” she asked.

“Yes,” Saiki replied.

“Does that concern you?” Gelser asked.

“Yes, it concerns me a great deal,” Saiki said. “Those are internal issues that I need to deal with.”

Gelser, a Corvallis Democrat, is pushing a bill that would require DHS caseworkers determine whether or not a child was abused at the conclusion of each investigation.

A new program Oregon rolled out beginning in May 2014 doesn’t require case workers to make that final determination.

While its goal is well intended, Gelser said, the state’s CPS system is too understaffed and poorly resourced to adequately implement it on a regular basis.

“The way I’ve described it is you don’t install a hot tub in the backyard before you even have running water in the house,” she said during an interview. “We don’t have indoor plumbing right now.”

Without that final step where caseworkers determine if abuse occurred, Gelser said, the cases get lost and it skews child abuse statistics.

“All of the sudden in these counties, it makes it look like child abuse is falling. But just because you’re not entering the disposition, doesn’t mean it occurred,” she said in an interview. “We’re not then able to compare whether kids are safe or not safe.”

Gelser’s bill would require DHS to continue making determinations in child abuse cases until

- the agency is adequately staffed;
- DHS can show they can complete assessments on time;
- the kids are seen on time;
- DHS can operate a centralized, statewide child abuse hotline for six consecutive months.

“This is not about the workers, who are trying very hard to do this work,” she testified. “We, as a legislature, have not adequately funded our child welfare program.”

During Monday’s hearing, Saiki said the agency needs a new approach to fixing its problems.

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He said these types of situations in the past have yielded reports with dozens of recommendations that then try and get implemented simultaneously.

“And when you’re an agency that’s already under-resourced, if you try and do 20 or 30 things — especially when some of those things are significant — at once then you’re not going to be successful,” he testified. “We have to prioritize.”

Gelser said she’s pulling a series of her own bills this session to help DHS focus on improving the basics.

“These are real lives and real kids and real families and generations of families that are suffering with this,” she said. “We all talk about it for a day and go back to our regular lives. Their regular life is what was described in that report. And that’s not ok with me and it shouldn’t be OK with anybody.”

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