

New Mexico's repeat child abuse rate 'among worst' in US, report says

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More than 40% of children in New Mexico who had a substantiated serious injury from physical abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2022 came from families who had a prior involvement with the state's Children, Youth and Families Department in the preceding 12 months, according to new state data.

While CYFD's performance in its foster care program exceeded several of its targets, the agency "continues to underperform on targets for repeat maltreatment, maltreatment of foster care children, and serious injuries after protective services involvement," stated a report by the New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee.

"New Mexico's rates for repeat maltreatment are among the worst in the nation," the LFC reported last week.

In response, CYFD Secretary Barbara Vigil told the Journal on Friday that the agency is "incredibly proud of the ongoing improvements that are being made in our child welfare system ... but we acknowledge that improvements must continue to be made."

A key to reducing child maltreatment rates is strengthening CYFD's workforce, she said, including hiring and retaining employees.

"Our underperformance is a condition of systemic challenges that have manifested over many years," Vigil said.

The LFC reported that 14% of children substantiated by CYFD as having been maltreated were victims of another substantiated maltreatment allegation within a year.

Repeat maltreatment in New Mexico decreased from 17% in fiscal year 2019, but still remains higher than the U.S. average of about 8%.

The rate of maltreatment victimizations per 1,000 days in foster care was 10.1, better than the 14.7 the prior year but higher than the target of 8.

"Prevention and early intervention is key to reducing repeat child maltreatment," the LFC wrote in releasing its fourth quarter report card for the agency.

Over the long term, child maltreatment, which includes abuse and neglect, causes physical, psychological and behavioral consequences, the LFC reported. “The consequences when children experience repeat maltreatment are potentially devastating.”

Reducing repeat maltreatment is the primary measure of New Mexico's child welfare system, the LFC report stated, “and one on which the CYFD continues to perform poorly.”

Another troubling statistic: the turnover rate for protective services workers was 37% in the fiscal year that ended June 30.

That's the highest rate since fiscal 2019, which recorded a 39.7% turnover rate, according to the LFC.

CYFD officials on Friday said they have 67 vacant investigator and investigative supervisor positions in its protective services division, out of a total 221 positions statewide.

Vigil noted, “There's high turnover in so many sectors of our society.”

But she added, “Certainly public comments about CYFD that are critical are not helpful in improving morale of our employees. We need the support not only of the Legislature but of the public, of our stakeholder partners, our service providers and the media to help us to continue to improve our system of care.”

Vigil said the agency is increasing training of child protective workers and is examining their compensation, she said.

CYFD is also looking at ways to recognize earlier in its intervention with families those cases that might escalate into serious injuries for children.

Serious injuries include burns, human bites, starvation, wounds, internal injuries or malnutrition, according to a CYFD report in August.

The percentage of children who sustained serious injuries in FY22 within a year of their families being contacted by CYFD varied greatly from quarter to quarter. For example, 10 such cases occurred in the second quarter. The CYFD report didn't give raw numbers of serious injury cases for the other quarters.

But the overall 43% of substantiated serious injury cases exceeded the 26% goal set by CYFD and the LFC.

“It's not that CYFD causes the escalation (to a case involving serious injuries),” said CYFD Deputy Secretary Beth Gillia. “There's not a sentinel event to trigger a higher level of intervention. We offer services and for whatever reason, the family escalates.”

Gillia added, "The reason why workforce is so critical to this is that the solution to repeat maltreatment is really effective family engagement. When we have really engaged families in a meaningful way and support them through the traumas they have experienced, they do better. When we have high rates of turnover, we can't offer that level of support that we know is necessary for families."

Sarah Meadows, acting director for CYFD data and evaluation, said the vast majority of repeat maltreatment in New Mexico is neglect.

"And that's not to discount the importance of intervening when neglect is occurring," Meadows said, "but often the risk factors associated with neglect are issues that take a long time to resolve, things like housing instability, sometimes mental health concerns of the caretaker, substance abuse, things like that. We do make efforts to link our families with services in the community, trying our best not to remove children if we absolutely don't have to."

In an effort to reduce the obstacles to reducing repeat maltreatment more quickly, the LFC report card noted that the Legislature in the current fiscal year has increased appropriations to CYFD's behavioral health services by 21% and by 8% for child protective services. Since FY 18, CYFD preventive services expenditures have increased tenfold, from \$1.1 million to \$11.1 million in FY 22.

Vigil, a retired state Supreme Court justice who became CYFD secretary nearly a year ago, said support from the Legislature and the public "improves our ability to serve the public."

"We're looking for tailwinds, and not headwinds, in this work."