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## **Boost child-welfare caseworkers by 70 percent, study says**

**By Maureen O'Hagan**

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The state's child-welfare system is so short-handed that a recent study estimated 1,240 more workers are needed to keep up with the demand.

The Workload Study, conducted for the state and released last month, comes amid an upswing in the number of children in out-of-home care, either in foster homes or with relatives. Meanwhile, children are being neglected by their parents as overloaded state employees struggle to protect them.

Between 2004 and 2007, there was a 16 percent increase — to 10,300 — in the number of children living in foster homes or with relatives, according to Cheryl Stephani, who heads the Children's Administration.

There are a number of reasons for the increase, she said, but a significant factor is that it's taking longer to return kids to their families after they've been removed. While children can be removed because of abuse or neglect, Stephani said that most cases here involve neglect — and these cases often take longer to resolve.

"Staff are working really hard. I don't want that to get lost," said Stephani, who hopes to hire more workers in coming years.

Meanwhile, the study, conducted by Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc., and American Humane Association, two national firms that specialize in such estimates, concluded there was a lot more work than workers in the Division of Children and Family Services — the part of DSHS that deals directly with troubled families — could reasonably handle.

Commissioned as part of the Children's Administration's efforts to redesign and improve its programs, the study was a detailed snapshot of how DCFS workers spend their time. Those figures were then compared with optimal staffing ratios.

The results were stark: According to the study, the state needs to increase its estimated 1,850-person DCFS staff by 70 percent in order to keep pace.

The agency also hopes to cut DCFS workload through efficiencies. For example, caseworkers spend considerable time waiting in court for their cases to be heard; by changing court procedures, this waiting time could be avoided.

The Children's Administration has already been on a hiring binge, after receiving authorization in 2005 to hire an additional 400 workers. So far, nearly 300 have come on board.

"We're going in the right direction," Stephani said. When she took over the Children's Administration in 2005, each caseworker was carrying about 24 cases; now, each one carries about 20. The National Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children recommends one social worker per 18 cases, which Stephani hopes to surpass. The numbers recommended in the study would put the caseload at about one worker per 12 cases.

But even by the end of the current hiring period, the agency will still be short about 1,100 workers, by the study's estimates.

Meanwhile, children slip through the cracks.

In the spring of 2006, the agency began working with 4-year-old Shayne Abegg and his family on "food issues." Before that, DCFS had received reports that Shayne's father, Danny, and Danny's girlfriend, Marilea Mitchell, weren't feeding him. Both have been charged with criminal mistreatment in the case.

In March 2007, Shayne was rushed to the hospital by ambulance after sheriff's deputies discovered him weak and emaciated in his Everett home. According to an examination of the case released last week, he suffered dehydration and hypothermia and weighed just 25 pounds.

The report's experts concluded that the "pattern of abuse and neglect was missed by the department."

Over the nine months the agency was involved with the family, several caseworkers were assigned, but they were too busy to keep tabs on them, according to last week's report. Instead, they "relied on self-report of the parents (Danny Abegg and Mitchell)." Abegg and his girlfriend told the agency everything was fine, the report said.

A contract worker was assigned to help the family under a program known as Family Preservation Services. But he, too, missed clues that Shayne was starving. A week before Shayne was hospitalized, he told the agency the family was doing well.

One of the caseworkers assigned to the Abegg family told the report authors they were so swamped

that they were instructed to prioritize. Because the Abegg family had agreed to Family Preservation Services, their case got the lowest priority, and the family didn't get regular visits.

A report about Abegg's case aims to help the agency learn from its most troubling cases.

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