

# No surprise: Cutting child services has had negative consequences <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

A new independent analysis of Arizona's child welfare has found evidence of what many in the field already know to be true: during the recession, the Legislature cut funding for the vital safety net services, like subsidized day care, precisely when an increasing number of struggling families needed them most.

And as the number of child neglect reports increased, Arizona cut staffing levels and funding for child protection services. The result was an overwhelmed system that didn't screen abuse and neglect reports in a uniform way and couldn't offer families support services that would have kept children at home, so moving a large number of kids into foster care, where they waited many months for a custody decision.

The review by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago states that not only did the number of reports to the state's child abuse hotline increase by 44 percent between 2010 and 2014 — (there were 48,032 reports in 2014) but the number of substantiated cases has increased. Historically, 6 to 8 percent of reports of abuse or neglect were determined to be true, but the number has risen to 12 percent.

The child-safety crisis that eventually prompted taking the agency out of the Department of Economic Security and making it into its own freestanding Department of Child Safety did not come out of the blue. Cutting social-service programs that helped families and children in crisis was a short-term budget fix that made the problem worse. It was a predictable outcome.

"The well-being of children is tied generally to poverty because families without material resources often struggle to raise children without assistance. In Arizona, the socio-economic status of families suggests that more and more children were living in vulnerable circumstances," the report states.

"Even if there were no specific increase in risk, a simple increase in numbers would predict a rising demand for services from human service systems, including the child welfare system."

For example, in 2009, about 45,000 Arizona children were in subsidized child care, and the state budgeted \$193.7 million. The subsidies helped working parents in particular. But lawmakers cut the program's budget by almost half to \$100 million by 2014, and fewer than 25,000 kids were covered.

These numbers are not a secret. Arizonans have watched this crisis unfold over the past several years. The reports of child abuse have declined while neglect reports have skyrocketed. It's an illustration of how budget decisions don't happen in isolation. They have consequences far broader than on the balance sheet and should be evaluated in their fuller financial and social context.

It's true that the dollars to hire child welfare workers have increased over the past two years, but additional positions have existed more on paper than in reality because of slow hiring processes and lack of training. About 25 percent of the positions are empty, according to the report.

The report authors identify the "front door" of the entire system as one of the most serious problems. Screeners who answer calls on the child-abuse and neglect hotline haven't had a uniform or easily shareable way to evaluate potential danger a child might be in.

Greg McKay, the DCS director, says in his response letter that the agency is considering ways to be more consistent and methodical in evaluating initial reports.

The report states, "When states absorb shocks to the system's front door as a result of low worker capacity, the impact is usually measured as a sharp increase in the number of children placed in foster care. Inevitably the same forces that stripped the system's front door of its capacity shift to the systems back door. As it stands, the DCS has to find permanency for 17,000 children. Five years ago that number was just 10,000."

Arizona has developed a three-part plan to address the high number of children who have been removed from their homes because of

neglect or abuse and are living in shelters or group homes. The plan calls for having families who have successful experience in the child welfare system mentor others who are dealing with problems now, address the effects of trauma with parents and children, and train child-welfare workers on better interviewing approaches.

The plan is a good start, but doesn't go far enough, experts say. Efforts to strengthen families and address addiction and mental-health problems could help struggling families in a way that better serves the children's needs.

The neglect report is illuminating and comprehensive, and every lawmaker should read it. It goes into far more detail than we can include here, and its recommendations are solid, documented and also make common sense.

Fixing the child safety system isn't only a matter of more funding. But this report importantly makes the connection between how lawmakers allocate money and the real-world effects cuts to the safety net have on Arizona's most vulnerable children.

-reprinted from Arizona Daily Star

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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