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## No unity on fixing children's services

Some contend more money won't solve all problems

By POLLY ROSS HUGHES

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AUSTIN - Texas spends 60 percent less than the national average to protect its children from neglect and abuse — and catching up would cost nearly \$1 billion more in state and federal spending a year.

On average in 2000, the most recent year for which comparisons are available, lawmakers spent \$110 per Texas child compared with \$277 per child nationally.

And, even when compared with the Southern state average, Texas spent 40 percent less.

The comparisons, based on U.S. Census Bureau and Urban Institute data, underscore one of the key reasons Texas' Child Protective Services is reeling from hundreds of child deaths, management ills, high turnover rates, low morale and the highest investigative caseloads in the nation. With 62 cases per worker, Texas would need to double its investigative staff just to reach the national average.

"In short, our system is terribly underfunded. If we want to take care of our kids, then we've got to invest significant

### RESOURCES

#### TEXAS CHILDREN

- **Second:** State ranking in child population — 6 million.
- **First:** State's rank in child population growth — 92,400 (added in 2003). California, with higher overall population, ranked second: 44,800 (added in 2003).
- **Second:** State's ranking in births, meaning more

resources to do the job," said Scott McCown, a former district judge handling child abuse cases and now executive director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, an Austin think tank.

## Elevating the debate

Everyone agrees fixing the systems for protecting children and the elderly from abuse, neglect and exploitation will be a top priority when state lawmakers reconvene in January.

What few agree upon, however, are the roots of the problems. Despite the huge funding disparities, some argue the debate must go deeper than money, while others call for radically new approaches.

Whether it's hiring more caseworkers or turning investigations over to local police instead of social workers, the perceived cause of systemic breakdowns in child and adult protection depend largely on one's world view.

"The scrutiny about these things has really elevated the debate," said Geoff Wool, spokesman for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

Yet the numbers tell a story that has led Health and Human Services Commissioner Albert Hawkins, Gov. Rick Perry and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst to publicly concede the state will have to increase spending for both child and adult protective services.

The question is how much and whether it will be enough.

The highest caseloads in the nation befuddle some politicians because after cutting staff by 600 in 1995, the Legislature had hired that number back by 1999 and has hired more than 500 more staffers since then.

But, it's a treadmill with the demand for services rising faster than new workers can keep up.

young children are under 5, the most vulnerable age group.

## Child protection woes

- **5,200:** Number of children in Child Protective Services care in 1985

- **16,000:** Number of children in CPS foster care in 2003

- **One half of 1 percent:** Percentage of total child population in CPS foster care.

- **8,595:** Number of children removed from homes in 2003

- **One fourth of 1 percent:** Percentage of total child population removed from homes.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, State Demographer Steve Murdock, Center for Public

CPS supervisor Tom Molnar, who worked as a caseworker the past 12 years, recently compared caseworkers' dilemma to the chaos that ensued on an episode of *I Love Lucy* in which Lucy Ricardo worked an assembly line as chocolates on a conveyor belt accelerated faster than she could box them. Policy Priorities.

Texas' trouble keeping pace partly stems from an explosion in child population, the second-highest birth rate in the nation and the large percentages of children in economically challenged families, according to McCown and state demographer Steve Murdock.

"From 2002 to 2003, Texas had the largest increase in children of any state in the country," Murdock said.

### **Other factors contribute**

If spending directly on child protection looks low compared with other states, spending on other social programs could be contributing to the problem.

Dave Wanser, deputy commissioner of behavioral and community health at the Department of State Health Services, said 75 percent of child abuse cases nationwide involve substance abuse by either a parent or a child.

Anne Heiligenstein, deputy executive commissioner for social services at the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, said she recently heard highly emotional accounts from CPS caseworkers in Houston regarding the difficulties of serving families torn apart by substance abuse.

"The complexity of cases today in adult protective and child protective service is really a reflection of what's happening in society," she said, noting substance abuse, mental illness and dissolution of families.

In the early 1970s, caseworkers saw families in which an adult drank too much or there was marijuana in the home, she said.

Now they see crack cocaine and methamphetamine, "addictions that are much harder to treat," she added.

Retiring Commissioner of the Department of Family and Protective Services Thomas Chapmond said caseworkers in Houston complained that they don't

have access to sufficient level of services for clients with substance abuse problems.

Mental illness is also a factor, whether it's in combination with substance abuse, depression or dementia in senior citizens, Heiligenstein said.

Yet, some children's advocates are advising lawmakers to drop the social worker mentality and crack down with law enforcement.

Randy Burton, a former prosecutor and president of Justice for Children, rejects the idea that protective services are starved of resources to do their work successfully.

Instead of spending more money, he favors law enforcement conducting investigations of abuse and neglect instead of social workers.

"Trying to perform a social miracle at the child's expense is shown to be an abject failure," he said. "You are having social workers investigate matters that are arguably criminal."

El Paso Probate Judge Max Higgs, who alerted Perry to appalling conditions for the elderly under adult protective services, said he doesn't agree that law enforcement should replace social workers for all investigations.

### **Better coordination sought**

He supports the idea of better coordination between the two in order to quickly assess the need for criminal prosecution versus rehabilitation.

"This goes back to our conflicted values," he said. "There are not enough places, enough adopting people to take care of the abused kids in this country. You lock (perpetrators) up, and the rest of the family loses its home. The breadwinner isn't there."

Higgs said he believes the systems for child and adult protection are reeling because both have self-interested bureaucracies with central rule coming from Austin.

He said he thinks local juvenile justice centers get more support than CPS — even though they serve "junior criminals" in the making while CPS serves

victims — because they are more responsive to the needs of their communities.

"You need local control. You need someone who could be hired and fired where the local problem exists," Higgs said.

He said he'd hand the job over to local mental health and mental retardation authorities.

"I had an epiphany. On nearly every Child Protective Services case and nearly every Adult Protective Services case, and I've been involved in thousands of both of them, there's been one consistent issue that's involved the mental health of someone in the situation," he said.

### **Boils down to money**

McCown at the think tank said the problem with the local control idea is it still comes back to money and the prospect of another unfunded mandate.

"That would be a huge train wreck for child protection," he said. "The cities and counties don't have the fiscal capacity to pay for this."

House Human Services Committee Chairman Rep. Carlos Uresti, D-San Antonio, said he thinks poor management, high caseloads and a bunker mentality at Department of Family and Protective Services have all contributed.

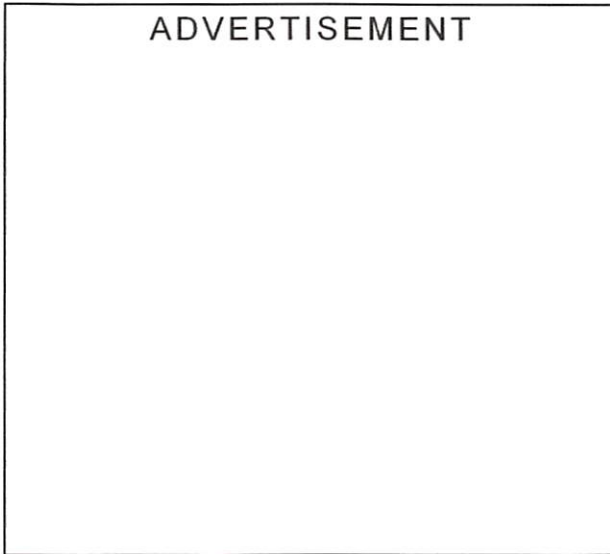
"If you're supposed to take care of our kids and our seniors, you've got to stand up and give me the bad news. They haven't had the courage for whatever reason to step up and say we have a broken system," he said.

A neglectful Legislature played a key role, too, he added, especially in 2003 when lawmakers cut \$10 billion from the state budget.

"Money's a factor. We eliminated 92 percent of child abuse prevention programs. It's not that they weren't effective. It was a way to save money so we wouldn't raise taxes," he said.

"This has never been a top priority," he said, adding lobbyists don't wait in the Capitol hallways to buttonhole lawmakers on behalf of vulnerable Texans.

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