

Social workers' fears, frustrations detailed in report to state

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — State social workers are so overwhelmed that Kentucky "can no longer assure the safety" of those who need adult and child protective services, according to a report released yesterday that was based on telephone interviews with more than 150 social workers.

Social workers say they are overworked, underpaid, and unloved by top officials in the state Cabinet for Human Resources and feel handcuffed by state and federal laws that make it difficult to help those they

are charged with protecting.

Office supervisors sometimes don't have time to help their less-experienced employees. And paper work is often six months behind.

The report, compiled by Kentucky Youth Advocates, is part of the ongoing review of child and adult protective services that CHR Secretary Masten Childers II ordered in June. It provided a frightening glimpse of problems in the department assigned to protect the state's most vulnerable residents.

The cabinet paid for a toll-free hot line in hopes of learning what problems face front-line social

workers, foster parents and others who deal with the system each day. In all, 219 people called during three weeks in July and August.

David Richart, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, presented the report yesterday morning to the 26-member social-services work group that Childers appointed.

It cites numerous problems within the state Department of Social Services, including some incompetent workers and an "organizational culture" that resists change.

But Richart said social workers point to larger issues: There aren't enough foster homes, judges don't

take time to deal with protection cases, and support services for families are often not available.

Social workers — with a starting salary of just over \$16,000 annually — say they aren't paid enough for stressful jobs that keep them on-call around the clock and often finishing paperwork at home.

But most of all, they are concerned about the increasing workload brought on by more and more reports of abuse and neglect. Since 1988, the number of reports of child and adult abuse and neglect rose from 40,586 to 76,649 last year.

During the same time, the num-

ber of social workers in the state has dropped. In child protective services, which has seen the number of case reports increase by nearly 50 percent, the number of social workers fell from 660 to 406.

Childers is quick to point out that he has added 138 social workers — about 47 of whom are assigned to child protective services — since he became secretary last year.

Childers — who social workers say is a frequent critic of social services but provides little support — defended himself yesterday, saying his criticisms have mainly been focused on mid-level managers and

top officials in the Department of Social Services. And he said he fought to raise social workers' pay above the poverty level earlier in the Jones administration.

Although he said he was pleased with Richart's report, Childers noted that it relates the content of the phone calls through Richart's perspective, which he said could be clouded. Richart has advocated hiring more social workers.

Richart defended the report, saying the issues presented are identical to ones other members of the committee have found when talking to social workers in the state.