**FOSTER CARE SYSTEM STILL WORKING ON IMPROVEMENTS**

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LITTLE ROCK, AR -- The following information was released by the Arkansas State Senate:

During the first three months of this year 1,093 children in Arkansas were placed in foster care.

During the same period 808 children were released from foster care and most of them, 70 percent, were reunited with parents or went to live with a relative. About 20 percent left foster homes because they were adopted.

When previous admissions are counted, at the end of March there were 4,791 Arkansas children in foster homes. That was an increase of 4 percent over the total number of foster children in Arkansas at the end of December.

The most common reason for removing children from their homes was drug or alcohol abuse by their parents, combined with neglect. Physical abuse was the reason that 12 percent of the children were removed from their homes, and sexual abuse accounted for 4 percent of the removals.

About 3 percent of the children had been abandoned and about 10 percent were removed from their families due to inadequate housing.

Of the children in foster care in Arkansas, 91 percent are visited monthly by a case worker or another employee of the Division of Children and Family Services.

State law requires that a DCFS employee initiate an investigation within 24 hours when the division receives a Priority I report, and within 72 hours when it gets a Priority II report.

The division met this requirement in 84 percent of reported cases during the first three months of 2016, which is a 2 percent improvement over the final three months of 2015, according to a report from DCFS to the Senate Committee on Children and Youth.

Failure to carry out prompt investigations and timely assessments can result in tragedy. Texas is trying to fix a child protection system that a federal judge has called "broken," and which is plagued with high staff turnover and low morale.

In Dallas, 40 percent of reported cases were delinquent, either because of a lack of regular visits by case workers or a slow response after initial allegations were made. Child deaths in reported cases of abuse and neglect in Dallas County went up 71 percent last year.

Most reports of child abuse and neglect are unfounded, but even so they must be investigated. Arkansas received 9,071 reports during the first three months of the year. Of those, 1,568 were considered the most serious and were referred to the State Police, which has a Crime Against Children Division. The other 7,503 were investigated by the Division of Children and Family Services.

Of all the cases reported, 25 percent were substantiated.

In 2013 the state began placing the moderate and low-risk cases in a category called "Differential Response." For example, children were allowed to skip school, their clothing was inadequate or they didn't get medical care when they were sick. In those cases, a DCFS worker will visit the family within 72 hours and will offer services. The goal is to keep the child out of the system.

Participation by the family is voluntary, but if the family refuses the DCFS staff may then open a case, especially if during the visit to the family the worker has reason to be concerned about the child's safety.

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