



Senate Ways and Means

February 13, 2019

Update on missing children and investigations by case workers

Presented by:

Laura Howard

Secretary

Kansas Department for Children and Families

Rebekah Gaston, Director of Policy and Director of Economic and Employment Services

DCF Administration Building, 6th Floor

(785) 296-4475 rebekah.gaston2@ks.gov

www.dcf.ks.gov

Testimony of:

Laura Howard, Secretary
Kansas Department for Children and Families

Update on:

Missing children and investigations by case workers

Chair McGinn, Vice Chair Billinger, Ranking Member Hawk and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the investigative work done by the Kansas Department for Children and Families. Many of our investigations start with reports made to the Kansas Protection Report Center, our 24-hour hotline. In FY 2018, the KPRC received 72,683 reports alleging child abuse or neglect, and 40,623 were sent to field offices for follow-up investigation. Depending on the severity of the allegations, staff have same-day or 72-hour deadlines to respond to the family; staff are meeting these deadlines in 96% of cases. During their investigations, staff members assess the family to determine whether there are risks in the home that would prevent the children from remaining safely in the home, or if additional services are needed to allow the family to remain together and ensure the children's safety.

Most of our investigation work is completed before children enter DCF custody, but we have recently increased our investigative capacity to locate missing and runaway children and youth in the foster care system. Currently, DCF has an investigative unit with two full-time special investigators. These investigators work with local law enforcement, contractor staff and other community partners to locate and ensure the safety of children and youth who are missing or have run away from their foster care placement.

Investigators complete daily tasks to attempt to locate the youths, including:

- Processing critical incident reports from child welfare contractors. These reports provide important details about the missing children, including their case manager's contact information, the circumstances surrounding their disappearances, and possible current locations.
- Searching internet sources, including social media, DCF databases, the National Center for Missing and Endangered Children and other databases for possible leads and addresses where a youth may be staying.
- Going out in the field and actively surveilling specific addresses where a youth might be located.
- Taking photographs and calling law enforcement once a youth is located. (Law enforcement recovers the youth and returns them to foster care.)

- Completing documentation and updating our missing youth spreadsheet for tracking.
- Maintaining contact with contractor staff to see if youth have returned on their own.

I receive daily updates on missing and runaway children and youth in DCF custody. The updates detail the children's ages and last known locations, dates they were last seen, and efforts made by DCF staff to locate them.

As of Monday, February 11, 2019, there were 86 missing or runaway children and youth in DCF custody; 84 of the 86 are runaways, all aged 13 or older (22 were 13- to 15-years-old, 59 were 16- or 17-years-old, and 3 were 18 or older). Some have been missing for a few hours, while others have been missing for years; 32 children have been missing for less than one month, 41 have been missing for 1-6 months, 7 children have been missing for 6-12 months, and 4 children have been missing for over a year.

Since the first week of 2019, 128 missing children have been returned to their foster placements.

While the investigative team looks for missing children daily, the agency has also launched targeted sweeps in which large groups of DCF staff, contractor staff, DCF's Anti-Human Trafficking Coordinator, local law enforcement, and federal agencies spend entire days aggressively looking for youths. The teams have participated in three large-scale sweeps in the Kansas City Metro area and two in the Wichita area. Several youths were located during the sweeps, and investigators gathered additional information on the whereabouts of other missing youth. The investigators are planning more sweeps for this year.

DCF remains committed to serving the children and families of Kansas. I thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue and I am happy to answer your questions.