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Slight Decline in Child Abuse in Iowa

DES MOINES, Iowa – The number of founded child abuses in Iowa dropped 3 percent last year compared to a 14 percent recession-driven increase the year before, according to statistics compiled by the Iowa Department of Human Services.

In other findings, the percent of abuses that were physical or sexual continued a long-term downward trend, now combining for less than 13 percent of all abuses.

Also in 2010, DHS social workers determined an increase in the number of abuses considered to be minor and unlikely to reoccur. That's an important distinction because perpetrators of these isolated abuses are not listed on the child abuse registry, which is frequently used to screen prospective employees or volunteers.

DHS Director Chuck Palmer said any number of factors can contribute to the rate of child abuse, but he said the slight decline in founded abuses last year compared to the sharp uptick in 2009 is probably linked to Iowa's slow climb out of the recession.

"We know that financial stress on a family sometimes leads to neglect or mistreatment of a child. As we emerge from the recession, I'm hopeful that the downward trend continues," he said.

There were 26,413 assessments for abuse last year, an increase of about 2 percent. Investigations are launched when social workers in a central intake unit determine that a complaint would be abuse under Iowa law if proven true.

As usual, about two-thirds of all investigations last year were determined to be unfounded. The new statistics show:

- There were 6,794 founded abuses last year compared to 7,011 the year before. The recent-year low was 6,141 in 2008. The all-time high was 7,521 in calendar 2005.
- There were 2,187 abuses – an 18 percent increase – that fell in the category of minor, isolated, and unlikely to reoccur. These are called "confirmed" abuses, which are less serious than "founded."
- A majority of abuses – 51 percent – are to children under age 5. This level has held steady for many years.

As usual, the breakdown of abuse by category in 2010 shows the vast majority of abuses were neglect, known as "denial of critical care." As that category has gradually increased over the years, nearly every other category of abuse has declined.

About 81 percent of all abuses were denial of critical care in 2010. Common examples are caretakers who cannot make safety decisions for children because of alcohol or drug abuse. Other findings:

- Slightly less than 9 percent of abuses were physical last year, continuing a gradual decline. In calendar 2003, 16 percent of abuse was physical.
- Sexual abuse also declined, from 4 percent in 2009 to 3.3 percent last year. In 2003, 7 percent of abuses were sexual.

- A slight increase – 4.3 percent compared to 3.7 percent a year earlier – in the abuse category known as “presence of illegal drugs in a child’s body.” Most of these abuses are determined by drug tests at birth.

Perpetrators of founded abuses are placed on the child abuse registry.

Iowa’s child welfare system made a significant operational change last year when eight regional DHS abuse intake units were combined into a single central unit in Des Moines.

Social workers at the central unit answer calls to a single toll-free hotline. When they determine that an allegation may be abuse, local county-based DHS assessors are assigned to investigate. The intake unit was created for economic reasons and to ensure consistent evaluation of abuse evaluations.

While the number of assessments was up last year, the number of employees doing the work was down, causing an increase in caseload. In 2009, the average caseload for assessors – the veteran social workers who investigate alleged abuse – was 11 new cases a month. Last year it was 12.5 new cases a month.

There was also a decrease in the number of case managers who monitor services for families where there was abuse. The average child welfare caseload last year was 27, compared to 25 the year before.

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Editors:

See a one-page summary showing numbers of abuses, trends, and budgets for various parts of the child welfare system at <http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/docs/childwelfarebynumbers2010.pdf>

See also spreadsheets showing county-by-county abuse totals, types of abuses, abuses by age, and number of abuse assessments for 2010 at <http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/Partners/Reports/PeriodicReports/Abuse/Child.html>