

# DCF ends its 2-tier child-welfare monitoring process



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

**Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders (left) and Governor Charlie Baker conferred during Tuesday's press conference.**

**By David Scharfenberg** | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 17, 2015

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Governor Charlie Baker announced Tuesday that he is scrapping a controversial state policy that triages child welfare cases, arguing that it exposes some of the state's most vulnerable children to abuse.

The Department of Children and Families has divided cases into high-risk and lower-risk categories since 2009, a system that has long made front-line social workers skittish.

The two-track approach faced sharp scrutiny this fall when The New England Center for Investigative Reporting, in a story published in the Globe, found that 10 children assigned to the lower-risk track died between 2009 and 2013.

Eliminating the system is one of a bundle of changes Baker announced Tuesday in a bid to improve a department buffeted by years of high-profile tragedies involving children under its watch.

“As a father of three children, I understand there’s nothing more important than the safety and the security of our kids,” the governor said at a State House news conference.

The changes, which also include speedier screening of some abuse and neglect reports and the department’s first formal policy for supervising social workers, won high marks from some prominent child welfare advocates.

“I’m happy to see that systemic reform . . . is finally taking root,” said Erin G. Bradley, executive director of the Children’s League of Massachusetts. “I mean, this is what we’ve been wanting.”

But there were critics, too.

Susan Elsen, <sup>Comments</sup>director of the child welfare reform project for the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, acknowledged the two-tiered system — in place in several states — was not well implemented here. But it is a good concept, she said, and should be “improved rather than eliminated.”

The policy allows an agency with limited resources to allocate them wisely, she said, directing more time and staff to high-risk cases. A lighter touch with families on the lower-risk track, she added, can lead to less adversarial, more productive relationships.

“If done right, it can really allow the child welfare agency to partner with the family on behalf of the children,” she said.

Michael Dsida, deputy chief counsel for the state’s public defender agency, said the success of any system — one-track or two-track — rides on the quality of services the state provides for families under stress.

“I know that the department has struggled at times with their implementation of the [two-track] system, but I think a lot of those struggles have stemmed from the lack of services available to families and children,” he said.

Dsida said a dearth of affordable housing and addiction treatment, for instance, has posed substantial challenges.

Baker administration officials note the state has added dozens of drug treatment beds since the governor took office in January. And they are slowly chipping away at caseloads for DCF social workers.

But the governor argues that the two-track system has its own intrinsic flaws. Front-line workers make too-hasty decisions about whether a case is high-risk or lower-risk, he says, decisions that have long-term consequences for the intensity of DCF's intervention.

The new system will require that all cases passing an initial screen are fully investigated, with a decision about what level of services to provide coming only after the investigation is complete.

"Every family will be treated the same," said Peter MacKinnon, a social work supervisor and union official who appeared alongside Baker at the news conference. "They won't be treated differently."

All the policies Baker announced Tuesday, taken together, are an attempt to create what the governor has called a standardized playbook for screening and investigating allegations of abuse and neglect. Previously, he said, the agency's 29 area offices took their own approaches, some more successful than others.

The new rules, to be implemented in February after training is complete, require staff to perform an initial screen in one day, rather than three, on nonemergency reports of abuse and neglect — a bruise, for instance, as opposed to a broken bone. Emergency reports, as always, must be screened in two hours.

DCF will also require staff to conduct criminal and sexual offender background checks on parents, caregivers, and others over age 15 in a household at the center of an abuse or neglect allegation. A review of 911 calls and police responses will also be required.

Many social workers are already conducting these checks, but they will

now be mandated.  
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The Baker administration said weeks ago that it intended to pursue some of these policies, but it has now codified them. Bradley, of the Children's League of Massachusetts, said that stick-to-itiveness was among the most heartening parts of the announcement Tuesday.

"The fact that we're still moving forward," she said. "He came out a month ago and said, 'This is what I want to do.' And now here we are with some action steps. . . . He's really taking this to heart. And that is something we haven't seen in at least eight years."

Gregory W. Sullivan, research director for the conservative-leaning Pioneer Institute and coauthor of a recent study critical of the two-track system, applauded the Baker administration for taking a systemic, rather than reactive, approach to fixing DCF.

"It's an agency that's covered in band-aids," he said.

MacKinnon, the union official, said the changes announced Tuesday are just a start.

The administration and union, having developed new screening and investigative protocols on the front end, must now develop new policies for the long-term, day-to-day management of cases.

And the push for new policies, he said, has not yet cured rank-and-file DCF workers of their skepticism about the state's commitment to their work. "Caseloads are still bad, morale is still bad," he said.

But there is growing hope, MacKinnon said, that after years of empty talk about reform, this time might be different.

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