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Decline in Child Abuse, Neglect

DES MOINES, Iowa – Echoing a national trend, child abuse has declined in Iowa the last two years, with “denial of critical care,” or neglect, continuing to be the most common form of abuse.

“While the trend of lower abuse is encouraging – and I truly hope we can keep it going – it is also clear that far too many Iowa children are put in harm’s way,” said Department of Human Services Director Charles J. Krogmeier.

He said there are likely several reasons for the overall downward trend in abuse, including beefed up efforts by the DHS to prevent re-abuse and continued efforts to strengthen abuse prevention at the local level.

DHS abuse investigators conducted 23,236 assessments for child abuse or neglect last year, down 2 percent from a year earlier. An assessment is launched when complaints from the public meet the legal threshold for sending an investigator.

Of all assessments, child abuse or neglect was found in 7,981 cases. Most of those – 6,141 – were “founded,” meaning the perpetrator was placed on the child abuse registry. An additional 1,840 cases were “confirmed,” meaning the abuse or neglect was isolated, minor, and unlikely to recur, with the perpetrator not listed on the registry.

Some cases of abuse involve more than one child. In 2008, a total of 11,003 children were abused or neglected, compared to 12,786 in 2007 and 13,445 in 2006. There are about 730,000 children in Iowa.

The latest DHS statistics also show:

- As usual, the vast majority of abuses – nearly 80 percent – are “denial of critical care,” better known as neglect. Many of these cases involve caretakers whose judgment is impaired by drug use.
- The percent of abuses that were physical or sexual remained about the same – 11 percent and 4 percent.
- About 53 percent of abused children were aged 5 or younger, a few percentage points more than in recent years.
- 110 abuses were for exposure to the manufacturing or use of dangerous substances, an increase from 68 in 2007. The number had been declining in recent years in the wake of legislation making it more difficult to obtain ingredients to “cook” methamphetamine.

Krogmeier said the heavy emphasis on preventing abuse and re-abuse is showing results. Since the redesign of the child welfare system launched in 2005, the DHS has concentrated on strategies to help parents overcome shortcomings that led to abuse or neglect.

One strategy is to convene “family team meetings” to surround the family with services and strengths, and to gain acceptance about what the caretakers need to do, such as to complete drug abuse treatment or to attend parenting classes.

A parent mentor program has also been started, and free and voluntary counseling is offered to parents in low-risk cases.

“More and more, we’re getting feedback that the DHS is there to help, not to punish. Obviously our top goal is safety, but we’re also keenly interested in preserving families and making them stronger, and I think that message is starting to get through,” Krogmeier said.

Another feature of the re-design is to establish local community partnerships for the protection of children. Nearly every county or group of counties now have local partnerships, which in turn work with a non-governmental provider – Prevent Child Abuse Iowa – to design and fund local programs.

Krogmeier said that despite progress in keeping Iowa children safe, familiar and stubborn obstacles remain. “Domestic violence and substance abuse continue to be the main risk factors for children in Iowa and elsewhere,” he said.

In addition to releasing calendar 2008 statistics Wednesday, the DHS released slightly adjusted figures for three prior years, with some numbers going up and others down. Krogmeier said DHS researchers discovered that there were inconsistencies in the methods used to calculate the numbers in prior years.

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Editors: The county by county report showing numbers and types of abuse for each of the past five years will be available on the DHS website, dhs.iowa.gov, later today, June 3. See the news release page at <http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/Partners/PublicInformation/Newsroom/NewsReleases.html>

Also, see a one-page “child welfare by the numbers” summary.