

More funding, new strategies, but DCF is still spread thinly

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The day for a Florida Department of Children and Families investigator can change in an instant.

On a recent afternoon in the DCF Alachua County office, two new reports of child abuse sent Senior Child Protective Investigator Rachael Dougherty into a frenzy of criminal background checks, case file research and phone calls.

"When you get two cases like this, you've got to get moving," Dougherty said, waving her hands on two bulky files of kids who have been visited by DCF before. "Of course, I'm going to do everything to pull what we know to make those decisions and to know what I'm walking into before I go over there.

"But, you understand with this business, you've got to move fast."

The two calls ended an unusual morning dry spell for the DCF Alachua County office, which usually fields at least 10 reports every day of child abuse from the child welfare agency's statewide hotline in Tallahassee or local law enforcement. Usually, DCF agents like Dougherty start every shift with plenty of work to do.

"You can almost guarantee the calls have stacked up overnight — always — and that doesn't include the calls we responded to in emergencies," DCF Program Administrator Haydee Shanata said. "Oh, no, there's never a shortage of cases, unfortunately."

The Alachua County branch of Florida's embattled agency leads the 8th Judicial Circuit in caseloads, which is chiefly due to a lack of investigators and an unavoidable lengthy training process. And that ratio is not expected to decrease anytime soon, officials said.

DCF Northeast Region Administrator David Abramowitz said the deployment of a new training strategy for investigators that redirects them to probe the entire family arc rather than each case as they come in could take up to a year.

The high caseload may seem like trouble, but Abramowitz said he expects smooth sailing will follow the current rough seas. The next generation of child protective investigators will be hired under more rigorous standards and endure more extensive training to give them the same level of experience as senior-level staffers such as Dougherty.

"Until now, our best investigators learned on the job," Abramowitz said. "We recognize the gap is there, but the training will make them better and they'll want to stay longer."



Matt Stamey/Gainesville Sun

The front yard of the home where Sarah Spirit and her six children were shot and killed by Don Spirit on Thursday is seen on Saturday, Sept. 20, 2014 in Bell, Fla.

High caseloads, low pay

Data provided by DCF showed that, on average, Alachua County child protective investigators carry 18 cases, which is three more than the 15-case average seen by the agency's Northeast region. Alachua County investigators also had higher caseloads than the rest of the 8th Judicial Circuit, which sees an average caseload of 16.5.

The case average is the opposite of what was intended by state lawmakers when they spent the majority of the 2014 legislative session writing policy that provided DCF with more money for investigators, training and tougher hiring standards.

Along with the high case averages, the average of investigator salaries actually went down. Before the 2014 law took effect in July, the average investigator salary was \$40,699; as of March this year, that average went down to \$40,199.

In comparison, a salary for a newly minted Gainesville Police Department officer is \$41,932 per year, which includes a track toward a more lucrative city special-risk pension plan. Salaries for Alachua County Sheriff's Deputies start at \$38,110, and include benefits such as the special-risk Florida Retirement System pension plan.

DCF investigators also are eligible for FRS under the category of other career service office-grade employees.

The legislation led to 172 more DCF investigator positions — from 901 last year to 1,073 as of March 2015. But the increase in positions has not yet yielded a substantial amount of extra help. As of March, DCF had 990 investigators, which is only 89 more than when the law was passed.

The DCF office in Alachua County gained three investigator positions, and only one of the 23 local investigator positions is unfilled.

However, tragedies such as the Sept. 18 murder-suicide of six children and their mother in Bell by Don Spirit led to an influx in child abuse reports, which put extra stress on investigators and led some to quit, according to Abramowitz.

"Those are the investigators that, when we see that inflow of cases, they can't handle it," Abramowitz said. "Then we've got to replace the people who left."

The 2014 legislation was co-sponsored by state Sen. Denise Grimsley, R-Sebring, who said shortly after the September Bell tragedy that one of DCF's biggest headaches was finding investigators.

"A problem is that there's plenty of work to go around," Grimsley said. "DCF has wonderful people working for them but it's hard for them to keep up with the casework."

In February 2014, former Interim DCF Secretary Esther Jacobo had said she wanted to reduce the statewide average caseload from 13 to 10 and provide extra investigators for children younger than 4 who live in high-risk homes.

As of April, the average statewide caseload is 15.5, according to John Harrell, a DCF spokesman in Jacksonville.

Some sheriffs step up

Echoing Abramowitz, Grimsley said late last year it would take time to see results from the combination of tougher hiring standards and more training. In the meantime, some Florida sheriff's offices have reassigned deputies to fill the void, but no law enforcement leaders in North Central Florida have gone to that length.

For instance, Columbia County Sheriff Mark Hunter, who recently headed a homicide investigation into the Jan. 5 shooting death of 16-year-old Damien Kornegay, has no problems with DCF.

"I know the sheriff actually has been pleased with DCF, especially after recent events," Cpl. Murray Smith, Hunter's spokesman, said. "We have a very good relationship with them."

Gilchrist County Sheriff Bobby Schultz, who heads the agency that was the first to respond to the scene of the single-wide mobile home where the Bell murder-suicide occurred, also has had no complaints about DCF — nor has his agency reviewed policy in the wake of the September incident.

Gilchrist Sheriff's Lt. Jeff Manning, who was one of the first deputies at the mobile home before Don Spirit shot himself, also said his agency has no complaints.

"We've always had a liaison who works with DCF," Manning said. "We have that point person to keep everyone updated on cases as they move along. Our relationship with them has always been good."

Tougher training, already tough cases

New DCF investigators will undergo twice as much training — 12 weeks rather than roughly six weeks — as previously required. Also, prospective investigators must have a degree in social work or a similar course of study. Previously, DCF hired former law enforcement professionals who did not have a background working with kids.

"Lawmakers said we wanted to hire people who knew how to deal with children," Abramowitz said. "In Gainesville, we had hired new ones, but some of them weren't getting it.

"Those are the people who, especially after Bell, realized this wasn't the field for them," Abramowitz said.

Abramowitz said he was confident the tougher standards and lengthier training would not tear holes in the agency's net for prospective investigators, but it already has meant more work for current investigators.

Previously, investigators feverishly researched cases as they were reported and then raced out of the office to help with a plan they hastily put together. New standards mandated by the 2014 legislation and quickly introduced in the wake of the Bell murder-suicide required investigators to review each case with a supervisor before families are contacted.

Investigator Dougherty's DCF supervisor, David Bowen, said the review assures that each plan addresses all factors of a case that comes in, from criminal backgrounds to DCF case history.

"It's a chance to have a chat and make sure a case is on the right course," Bowen said. "Sometimes, it allows you to play the devil's advocate with the investigator to make sure all the bases are covered."

After meeting with a supervisor, DCF investigators then make contact with the children and all adults involved in the report. In some cases, law enforcement officers are there to maintain order, but the majority of time the DCF agent is alone. Also, the investigator usually is left relying on the accounts of children and family members, which change over time.

"You do the best you can every day," Dougherty said. "At the end of the day, you have to wash your hands of it and know you tried everything possible."

DCF uses Gainesville-based Partnership for Strong Families to carry out plans designed to fix problems in Alachua County homes, and Partnership for Strong Families also struggles with high turnover spurred by high-profile cases such as the

one near Bell, as well as seasonal spikes such as the few weeks before school lets out for the summer.

"It's usually between April and May, you'll see an increase in calls," said Stephen Pennypacker, president of Partnership for Strong Families, adding that the same exemption laws designed to protect the privacy of kids involved in welfare cases actually hurts them, too.

"The only stuff we can release publicly is the bad stuff," Pennypacker said. "We can't report on the good cases where we made things better for a child."

Pennypacker said community-based care agencies would benefit from more cash currently written into an already contentious proposed state spending plan that is up for debate in the Legislature, but prevention could be just as impactful.

"Responsibility begins in the home itself," Pennypacker said. "I would love for us to be out of business.

"The ultimate accountability," Pennypacker continued, "has to be with the parents raising the kids."