



Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services

Delayed Investigations and Support Services Risk the Health and Safety of Youth

Background

State law affords youth in the foster care system various rights, such as living in a safe and respectful home, freedom from all forms of abuse, and protection from corporal punishment and exploitation. To ensure these protections, counties are responsible for investigating reports of abuse and neglect and arranging foster placements when necessary. The Department of Children and Family Services (department) within the Alameda County Social Services Agency organizes and operates its own programs for child welfare services. As of July 2024, approximately 700 youth were in foster care in the county.

Key Recommendations

- The department should promptly review and approve investigation reports, periodically track referral timelines, work with staff to address delays, and implement strategies to remove impediments to ensure that it initiates and completes investigations within required time frames.
- The department should ensure that all contracts include results-based accountability measures, such as timeliness performance metrics for service provision.

Key Findings

- From fiscal years 2019–20 through 2023–24, the department did not consistently initiate or complete investigations of child abuse and neglect referrals within the required time frames, leaving youth in potentially unsafe situations.
 - » For immediate referrals, those in which a youth is in imminent danger of physical pain, injury, disability, severe emotional harm, or death, the department initiated investigations after the prescribed 24-hour time frame in 5 percent to 11 percent of cases each year from fiscal years 2019–20 through 2023–24.
 - » For non-immediate referrals, the department initiated investigations after the prescribed 10-day time frame in 17 percent to 49 percent of cases each year during fiscal years 2019–20 through 2023–24.
- The department could not ensure that youth received necessary services in a timely manner.
 - » Our review of 36 case files, which included 125 referral services, to determine whether the youth received services in a timely manner, found that some case files lacked the necessary documentation, such as treatment summaries or detailed notes about when youth received services, to determine whether youth received 65 specific services in a timely manner.
- The department did not prioritize efforts to ensure that foster youth had ongoing connections with family members.
 - » The department did not always document necessary information about the efforts it made to identify, locate, and notify all relatives who could serve as potential caretakers for the youth.
- California Department of Social Services (CDSS) allowed the department to house youth at its transitional shelter, which the department operated until July 2024, for up to 72 hours if the department lacked immediate placement options and was awaiting stable placement.
 - » A review of 166 critical incidents reported by the department to CDSS from January 2020 through July 2024—such as injuries requiring medical attention or instances that occurred when youth were missing from care—found that the most prevalent critical incidents involved youth threatening to assault other youth or staff.

The Department Did Not Always Initiate Investigations of Referrals Within the Prescribed Time Frames

