Budget cuts to shut down state child-abuse registry

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Budget cuts have pulled the plug on the 24-hour child-abuse hot line that began taking calls statewide after the death of 3-year-old Joshua Oglesby, state officials said Tuesday.

The State Central Registry, a phone bank and information center envisioned as a clearinghouse for all future child-abuse reports, is scheduled to shut down on Dec. 15.

Janis Simms, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Resources, said the registry needs more computer space and more personnel and has an inadequate telephone system. Since the state has no money for such things, she said, the system will be shut down.

Terry Gibson, bureau administrator of DHHR's Division of Children, Youth and Family Services, said the state could not operate the system effectively with the limited resources available.

“In the planning stages it was not realized it was extremely expensive to operate it,” Gibson said. “The state in these times just can’t afford this kind of system.”

Instead, child-abuse reports will be fielded by child protection workers in each parish, as they were before the registry was founded.

Calls made at night and on the weekends will be handled by an answering service and referred to a child protection worker on call, said John Giese, who was placed in charge of the registry to handle the shutdown.

Giese said the staff of 34, including 18 people taking phone calls, would be transferred to the field to help bolster child protection services, especially in Baton Rouge.

“We’re going to be doing direct services now and not just answering telephones,” Giese said.

Giese said the registry receives about 35 to 40 percent of the child-abuse reports statewide and was to have received all of them eventually. He said shutting down the service would be “more beneficial for the staff in the field because they’ll get the calls directly.”

The registry started in the summer of 1984 on a

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Cheryl Barton answers calls at Central Registry
trial basis in East Baton Rouge, Jefferson and Orleans parishes. After the March 1985 death in Baton Rouge of Joshua Gnagie, it was given a push by state officials who announced reforms to the child protection system, including expansion of the registry.

In July 1985, the registry began taking written reports statewide and later began receiving calls.

The registry also has had four administrators during its brief existence.

Simms said something had to be done by December because space in DHHR’s computer would have run out for the registry.

“The best thing we thought to do is go ahead and refer those calls back to the field,” she said.