Expert says child abuse tracking system needed

By SONNY ALBARADO
Advocate staff writer

The state’s failure to recognize the danger to Joshua Gagnie before he died proves the need for a centralized system for reporting and tracking child abuse cases, a local child welfare expert said recently.

A pilot central registry program existed in Baton Rouge at the time of the 3-year-old’s death, and a child protection caseworker and her immediate supervisor were fired partly because they overlooked a notice from the registry office that cited inadequacies in their investigation of earlier reports of abuse involving the child.

"It really realized the effectiveness of the central registry because of all the forms generated by it pinpointing the Gagnie case, saying there were some deficiencies, and it didn’t get followed through,” said Dr. Larry Hebert, chief of pediatrics at Earl K. Long Hospital.

But other experts said that the Department of Health and Human Resources is ill-prepared to deal with the deluge of new cases such a system will produce. For proof they point to the strain placed on DHHR programs by the 134 percent jump in child abuse reports received in March after the Gagnie case was published.

Hebert, who first proposed a state central registry and hotline in 1972, was a member of a committee that investigated the Gagnie case. The committee recommended that DHHR fully implement the SCR and hotline, but the agency is awaiting the start of the new fiscal year July 1 before going forward with the program.

That recommendation has provoked angry reactions from some DHHR employees who feel that the Baton Rouge pilot program was a failure.

The employees, who asked not to be identified, point to a constant stream of memos between field workers and supervisors and between supervisors and regional and state administrators complaining about confusing forms, inadequately explained procedures and reams of notices regarding field workers’ investigations reports.

A letter circulated among DHHR supervisors in April said that child welfare workers were assurance in 1984 that SCR would not be implemented without an analysis of the impact it would have on other programs and agencies, such as foster care, adoption and family services.

"SCR simulation has been a disaster, and yet, there is consideration of a premature implementation of SCR,” the letter said.

Hebert disagreed, saying that the paperwork generated in the Gagnie case by the pilot registry proved that "you can pick up deficiencies if somebody would have responded to it.

The implementation of SCR scares and should scare the supervisory staff because it will show the extent of inefficiency,” Hebert added.

Mel Meyers, DHHR’s assistant secretary in charge of child welfare programs, said the SCR is misunderstood by his employees.

The registry is nothing more than a computer system that is going to track cases. The child welfare system and hopefully keep people from falling through the cracks, he said.

"It will enable us to cross parish lines and different areas of the state, an ability we don’t have now, to track people who are abusers who may be moving, say, from New Orleans in Baton Rouge,” Meyers said.

The registry also will track on a timely basis what is happening to the investigation of child abuse cases and to the child, he said.

"We don’t have that now. If a worker does not follow up on a case, we don’t know whether it’s followed up,” he said.

"That’s what happened in East Baton Rouge. The central registry sent out a letter stating that this was a case that should have been followed up,” he added.

Critics of the local pilot registry said that the letter telling the local office about deficiencies in the investigation of an early abuse complaint on Joshua Gagnie was included in a stack of hundreds of such letters that all arrived on the same day in November 1984, several months after the caseworker had dropped the case.

DHHR employees, who asked not to be identified, said the paperwork involved was burdensome and often petty and could not be completed timely because of investigative caseloads that constantly ran over the standard of 14 per worker.

Meyers acknowledged that some of the forms were complicated and said that some employees have resisted the program because of the paperwork.

But, he said, the SCR is an effective management tool and can promote accountability among workers.

"The other problem, which may be real or unreal, is that it will remove the local office’s capability of screening reports, sort of taking some decision-making power away from them,” Meyers said.

Other states that have central registries also encountered such resistance, he said.

Pepper Schaeles-Elkins, a 10-year veteran DHHR employee who recently left the agency, agreed that others that there likely has been some resistance, "which has to do with feeling like Big Brother is watching you."

"But I felt some concern that the staff had not had the SCR system adequately explained to them about what its role would be in terms of monitoring,” she added.

Schaeles-Elkins also questioned attempts to make the public believe that the SCR will prevent cases like Joshua’s from occurring.

"That’s not its function,” she said. "It can tell you after the fact that, OK, this worker didn’t do these things or this office wasn’t meeting its deadlines."

"But I personally never saw how you could make the correlation that SCR could, in fact, prevent what happened in Joshua’s case."

"Not its function" she said. "It can tell you after the fact that, OK, this worker didn’t do these things or this office wasn’t meeting its deadlines."

"But I personally never saw how you could make the correlation that SCR could, in fact, prevent what happened in Joshua’s case."