Child protection moves stir debate

By SONNY ALBARADO
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If a pre-schooler wanders away from home late at night while his parents are asleep, the state could accuse the parents of child neglect and force them to attend counseling sessions.

If a child is bruised while engaged in horseplay with a parent, the state could accuse the parent of abuse.

If a child living with a foster family wears worn clothing or badly stretched socks, the state could accuse the foster parents of abuse or neglect.

Those are some of the interpretations being derived from new Department of Health and Human Resources policies regarding the investigation of child abuse and neglect.

Some child welfare experts have expressed dismay over such interpretations, which they say are typical of DHHR's reaction to the public criticism it received in the

(See CHILD, 10A)
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The committee also recommended the firing of the crisis intervention worker initially assigned to the Gnagie investigation and of her supervisor and the suspension of another supervisor.

Representatives of the supervisors’ group have met with Mel Meyers, assistant secretary for the Office of Human Development, and with Robinson to express those concerns.

The supervisors have decided at this time not to make their list of concerns public, president Topper Johnson of Shreveport said.

The letter, signed “Other Concerned Supervisors,” called DHHR’s decision to implement the committee’s recommendations “rapid and premature.”

The letter said DHHR’s reactions to the Gnagie crisis have “been excessive, precipitous, and irresponsible.”

Individuals outside DHHR have also questioned DHHR’s reactions to the Gnagie crisis.

The panel itself was chosen on the basis of its members’ historic knowledge of the child protection system and their ability to look into future problems, Meyers said.

Robinson defended the performance of OHD’s child protection system, saying it “has done well considering the pressure under which it has had to work.”

But she said that the system had become outdated and was going to be changed regardless of whether a Joshua Gnagie incident would have called attention to its faults.

“The best system you could have created in the 1960s probably would give anybody a problem if you tried to put it together in 1985,” Robinson said.

The changing nature of the child abuse problem and the tightness of legislative funding for dealing with the issue have made it difficult to keep up with improved methods of handling the state’s problem, she said.

Robinson, a pedestrian by profession, said that in hindsight, she would have preferred that the state had improved its child protection system more rapidly.

“But that kind of thing comes with everybody being willing to cooperate and admit there’s a problem, and we have just now gotten there,” she said.

The state’s child protection system has done well, considering the complexity of the issue, the numbers of people and different agencies involved and that it has had to work against public opinion at every level of the years, Robinson said.

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