La. reinstates checks on anonymous child abuse calls

By EDWARD PRATT
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The state will again accept anonymous tips about child abuse and will abandon a recent rule that declared such calls would be ignored because of a lack of staff and money.

However, the state Department of Social Services won't necessarily investigate all of the calls. Calls deemed ‘low-risk’ probably won't be investigated, DSS officials said Monday.

A low-risk case would include complaints that a parent is not adequately clothing a child or not sending the child to school, compared to a “high-risk” complaint about, for instance, head injuries or broken bones.

Still, the change was applauded by child advocacy groups who had criticized the rule, complaining that ignoring anonymous tips could be deadly for hundreds of abused and neglected children.

Nearly 500 anonymous calls resulted in valid abuse cases last year, according state figures.

"I'm cautiously thrilled and very relieved," said Maggie Tidwell, with the New Orleans-based Agenda for Children. "What this means is that two children a day, who anonymous callers report abused, will receive the attention that they need."

The executive director of the Louisiana Council on Child Abuse, Sherry Spivey, said Monday her organization is pleased that "the department is willing to respond to public concerns in the midst of economic restraints."

The Edwards administration announced the abandonment of the rule Monday, nine days after it took effect.

The administration also announced plans to hold a series of public hearings on the matter. No dates or locations for the hearings were
outlined in the announcement by Gov. Edwin Edwards' Chief of Staff Ben Jeffers.

"When you look at the fact that 80 percent of the anonymous calls are invalid, you can clearly see why the decision was initially made to discontinue them," Jeffers said. DSS statistics show 77 percent of the anonymously reported cases in 1992 were deemed invalid.

"That's a fact that everybody, even those with child advocacy groups, is not thinking about tonight. We are so happy that the state will investigate anonymous calls," Twidwell said.

Marder said that before Aug. 1, DSS investigated each call as it was reported and no ranking system was used. DSS Assistant Secretary Brenda Kelley said the hearings will give the public an idea of how the personnel problems are affecting her department.

"We believe it is best to take proven legitimate reports from law enforcement and other reporters who provide their names and follow-up thoroughly and completely, rather than using our manpower on an overload of invalid claims. This puts all children in danger," Kelley said.

"However, we will now turn to the public to inform us on what they want done," she said.

DSS officials said Monday that providing a complete program for the 2,000 additional cases would take about $5.3 million to hire 16 investigators, 3 supervisors, 6 clerical workers; to provide training; to provide such things as medical care for the victims; and to provide foster care for some of the children.