



**Testimony Regarding DCYF Caseloads
Presented to the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
Wednesday, December 13, 2006
By Jill Beckwith, Policy Analyst
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT**

Madame Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am here to testify about Rhode Island KIDS COUNT's concerns regarding several aspects of Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) policies and operations and their implications for the health and well-being of children in Rhode Island.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
401/351-9400
401/351/1758

As you know, DCYF is the State agency charged with primary responsibility to mobilize available resources to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive and integrated statewide program of services designed to ensure the opportunity for children to reach their full potential in safe and nurturing environments. The Department has responsibility for child welfare, children's behavioral health, and juvenile justice functions.

Today's hearing concerns the issue of child welfare. According to the 2006 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook, there were 2,260 indicated investigations of child abuse and neglect involving 3,125 children in Rhode Island in 2005. (Indicated cases are those in which allegations of abuse or neglect were substantiated through investigation by DCYF staff). There were 13,114 unduplicated child maltreatment reports to DCYF during 2005 and 7,188 (55%) completed investigations of those reports. Of the 13,114 maltreatment reports, 4,583 were classified as "early warnings," in which an essential criterion for investigation is not present. Approximately one-third (31%) of completed investigations resulted in findings of indicated abuse and/or neglect. Additionally, four children died as the result of child abuse and/or neglect during 2005 in Rhode Island.

In 2005, rates of indicated investigations of child abuse and neglect per 1,000 children were higher in each core city than for the state as a whole. The six core cities (Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick, and Woonsocket) had the highest rates of child abuse and neglect among all Rhode Island communities, with Woonsocket having had the highest rate of indicated investigations over the past several years.

**Rates of Indicated Investigations per 1,000 children
in Core Cities and Rhode Island, 2005**

Central Falls	15.4
Newport	11.6
Pawtucket	10.5
Providence	9.3
West Warwick	13.3
Woonsocket	16.6
Rhode Island	7.5

Nearly 3 in 5 (59%) of all indicated investigations of child abuse and neglect occurred in the six core cities, which contain 39% of the state's population under age 21.

It is clear that DCYF needs adequate numbers of well-trained and experienced staff members to respond to the numbers of child maltreatment reports that the Department receives each year. Investigations and follow-up services with the children and families involved in those investigations are important opportunities to ensure that families in Rhode Island have the skills and resources that they need to raise their children safely.

In a letter to the DCYF Director dated November 6, 2006, DCYF supervisors stated that high caseloads and staff turnover have created a situation in which children's safety is being put at risk. It is clear that in the past year, DCYF Director Patricia Martinez hired caseworkers and implemented Department policies that resulted in temporary improvements in caseloads for DCYF caseworkers and which began to approach the "best practice" levels.

However, due to staff turnover, caseloads are rising again (particularly in the Woonsocket region, which has the highest rate of indicated child abuse and neglect in the state). DCYF must address these caseloads so that caseworkers have adequate time and other resources to provide the assistance needed by the families with whom they are working. These represent Rhode Island's most vulnerable families and the future health and safety of the children are often in the hands of these caseworkers. Rhode Island can not afford to allow these identified families who are within the reach of help to languish such that abuse and/or neglect continues and behavioral health needs of the children and family members go unaddressed.

DCYF also has the important responsibility for licensing foster care homes. The Fatality Review Panel, convened by the Child Advocate and on which Rhode Island KIDS COUNT participated, that investigated the death of TJ Wright, a child in foster care who was beaten to death by his relative caregivers, conducted a thorough investigation into the procedures followed by the Department in that case. On the one year anniversary of TJ Wright's death, the Panel issued a detailed report that outlined changes that must be made in the areas of screening, licensing, training and supporting foster homes that would prevent future child deaths and improve Rhode Island's child welfare system. This past October, on the second anniversary of TJ Wright's death, the Office of the Child Advocate recently released a follow-up report that noted that many of the systemic issues identified in its initial report remain unaddressed.

The two issues of adequate staffing and improving process for licensing foster care homes are inter-connected. Efficiently licensing qualified foster care homes allows children to be cared for in the most responsive and responsible manner possible. DCYF staff members are responsible for placing children in suitable foster care families and for ensuring that the needs of children requiring foster care are met. Having a licensing process that works will ensure a sufficient supply of foster care homes that can adequately serve children in the care of DCYF. Fixing foster care licensing problems will go a long way to ensuring the retention of DCYF caseworkers and the building of the skills, relationships, and community connections they need to do their jobs well.

Again, thank you to the Committee for allowing the public to testify today and for your continuing commitment to the safety of Rhode Island's children.