

## **AUDIT PROPOSAL**

### **Evaluating the Department for Children and Families' Processes for Tracking, Investigating, and Communicating Allegations of Abuse and Neglect by a Parent**

#### **SOURCE**

This audit proposal was requested by Representative David Buehler.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Department for Children and Families (DCF) operates the Kansas Protection Report Center (KPRC). The center receives reports about children who may be victims of abuse or neglect. Anyone can submit a report to the KPRC. This includes mandated reporters like teachers and doctors, family members, or members of the public. The report is required to include specific information such as the reasons the reporter suspects a child may be being abused or neglected, the nature and extent of harm to the child, and the identity of the person(s) responsible for the abuse. In fiscal year 2025, the KPRC received more than 51,500 reports of abuse and neglect.

DCF staff review and investigate reports to determine whether they are valid and if action is required to protect the child from further abuse or neglect. When DCF staff receive a report, they first determine if it meets the criteria for DCF involvement. Reports that meet the criteria are assigned to DCF staff for investigation. In certain cases, DCF staff may coordinate with law enforcement to conduct the investigation. The investigator assesses the safety of the child by completing a risk and safety assessment. This assessment may include interviews with the person who reported the abuse or neglect and the alleged perpetrator among other things. The investigator uses this assessment to determine whether the report is substantiated, meaning the evidence suggests that it's likely the perpetrator's actions meet the legal definition of abuse or neglect. If the alleged perpetrator is a parent or household member and DCF staff determine a report isn't substantiated, they may determine the child is safe to remain in the home but they may refer the family to receive family preservation services or other services available in the community. If DCF staff determine the report is substantiated and the child is unsafe in the home, they can request the county or district attorney to file a petition to remove the child from the home. The district court, not DCF, ultimately decides whether the child should be returned to or removed from their parents' care. In fiscal year 2025, DCF staff determined that almost 97% of the roughly 51,500 reports of abuse and neglect were unsubstantiated. Only 3% were substantiated.

DCF issues a formal written notification to the perpetrator of the abuse or neglect for reports they determine are substantiated. That person then has the right to file an appeal if they disagree with DCF's determination. The appeals process starts with DCF but may escalate to the courts.

Legislators have expressed concern that some parents may make false allegations about another parent abusing or neglecting their child, and that DCF does not have adequate processes for identifying and ending false accusations. Because those allegations can have

significant repercussions that lead to a child being removed from their home and denied time with a parent, legislators want to know if DCF has adequate processes to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect and if parents have adequate processes to appeal allegations against them.

### **AUDIT OBJECTIVES AND TENTATIVE METHODOLOGY**

*The audit objectives listed below are the questions we would answer through our audit work. The steps listed for each objective convey the type of work we would do. These may change as we learn more about the audit issues.*

**Objective 1: Does the Department for Children and Families (DCF) have an adequate process for tracking, investigating, and communicating allegations of abuse and neglect by a parent?** Our tentative methodology would include the following:

- Read state law, DCF's policies and templates, and interview DCF staff to understand the department's process to track and investigate allegations of abuse and neglect by a parent and to determine whether the allegations are substantiated or unsubstantiated. This would include understanding the department's process for referring allegations to or coordinating with law enforcement.
- Compare DCF's policies and templates to federal and state laws and best practices to evaluate whether DCF's investigation and tracking processes are adequately designed.
- Review a selection of allegations from the most recent couple of years to determine whether DCF staff followed the investigation and tracking processes the department designed.
- Review DCF's data to determine how many allegations of abuse and neglect by a parent from another parent DCF received and how many allegations were substantiated and unsubstantiated in the most recent couple of years. This would include reviewing any data DCF maintains on who made the allegations to look for patterns in repeat reporters that resulted in unsubstantiated findings. If possible, identify the reason the findings were unsubstantiated for a selection of reports to determine which allegations DCF investigators thought may have been false reports and which ones they thought were valid but did not meet the evidentiary threshold. Also identify whether the families in those cases were receiving DCF services like family preservation or foster care services.
- Review DCF's policies and interview DCF staff to determine if the department has a process for identifying and tracking false allegations of abuse and neglect, especially repeat reporters. Also ask DCF staff about any repeat allegations they identified as potential false reports in our review of DCF's data and what, if anything, they communicated to other entities about these allegations (e.g., courts, parents, and law enforcement).

- Note: LPA's ability to answer this question depends on our access to KPRC reporting details such as reporter names.

**Objective 2: Does DCF have an appropriate process for parents to appeal allegations of abuse and neglect?** Our tentative methodology would include the following:

- Read DCF's policies and templates and interview DCF staff to understand the department's process for parents to appeal allegations of abuse and neglect. This would include developing an understanding of what DCF staff do to ensure parents' appeals are handled timely and appropriately.
- Review DCF's data to determine how many parents appealed allegations of abuse and neglect and what the outcomes of those appeals were in the most recent couple of years.
- Compare DCF's policies and templates to state law, regulations, and other relevant best practices to evaluate whether DCF's appeals process for parents is appropriately designed.

**Objective 3: Does DCF train its staff on tracking, investigating, and communicating allegations of abuse and neglect by a parent?** Our tentative methodology would include the following:

- Read the department's training policies to determine the types and frequency of training DCF staff are required to receive related to tracking, investigating, and communicating allegations of abuse and neglect by a parent.
- Review the department's training records for the most recent couple of years to determine if the relevant staff received all training they were supposed to related to tracking, investigating, and communicating abuse and neglect allegations.
- Survey relevant DCF staff about their opinions on whether the training they received is adequate and what improvements they think the department could make.

### **ESTIMATED RESOURCES**

We estimate this audit would require a team of **4 auditors** for a total of **6 months** (from the time the audit starts to our best estimate of when it would be ready for the committee).