



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INVESTIGATION: MONTEZUMA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

On April 28, 2018, the Office of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman (CPO) received a call from a Montezuma County citizen who was concerned that a Montezuma County Department of Social Services (MCDSS) caseworker failed to assess 28 child abuse and neglect cases. Two of those involved allegations of sexual assaults on children. The CPO immediately reviewed the concerns and found that two months lapsed between when the MCDSS received the two reports of possible sexual assault and when a caseworker contacted the children for the first time. During those two months, law enforcement in Montezuma County was not notified of the allegations.

These findings sparked a nine-month investigation by the CPO into the MCDSS' child welfare case practices. That investigation revealed that the MCDSS' case practices impacted the safety of at least a dozen children. In total, the investigation revealed that the MCDSS violated state law and regulations 67 times in the handling of 21 referrals and assessments. The most concerning issues with the MCDSS' case practices were:

- ▶ **Delayed response to reports of abuse and neglect**
- ▶ **Non-compliance with state law requiring information sharing with law enforcement**
- ▶ **Inadequate supervision of child welfare cases**

MCDSS' practices impacted more than just their casework. Such practices eroded some community members' trust in MCDSS. The CPO's investigation also detailed systemic issues identified by citizens and child protection stakeholders in Montezuma County. Interviews with 23 Montezuma County residents revealed four key systemic issues:

- ▶ **Lack of responsiveness to children and families' needs**
- ▶ **Lack of objectivity in the assessment of child abuse and neglect cases**
- ▶ **Lack of transparency surrounding MCDSS case practices**
- ▶ **Lack of trauma-informed practices**

I CPO's RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the issues identified in the investigation, the CPO issued six recommendations to the MCDSS and the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), which serves as the MCDSS' supervising entity. The recommendations are designed to help the MCDSS identify ways to improve its case practices, ensure compliance with state law and regulations and improve its relationship with citizens and child protection stakeholders.

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- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION 1**
The CDHS should conduct an on-site audit of the MCDSS' child welfare cases. The audit should assess MCDSS' compliance with various state regulations, including requirements that child victims be seen in-person in a timely manner. The audit should also assess whether the MCDSS is providing thorough and accurate documentation.
 - ✓ **RECOMMENDATION 2**
The CDHS should provide MCDSS technical assistance to develop protocols and ensure the MCDSS is in compliance with state laws requiring the agency provide reports of child abuse to law enforcement agencies.
 - ✓ **RECOMMENDATION 3**
The CDHS should provide technical assistance to MCDSS staff to ensure they can demonstrate a clear understanding of state regulations and requirements for: (1) Initial response and assessment of reports of child abuse and neglect; and (2) Requirements for handling ongoing cases.
 - ✓ **RECOMMENDATION 4**
The CDHS should ensure the MCDSS is in compliance with state laws requiring all county human services departments maintain a conflict resolution process.
 - ✓ **RECOMMENDATION 5**
The MCDSS should expand its conflict of interest policy to address certain circumstances, including when a staff member has a personal relationship with individuals involved in child welfare cases.
 - ✓ **RECOMMENDATION 6**
The MCDSS should evaluate its relationship with citizens and child protection stakeholders. Such efforts should include the use of an independent mediator during community meetings in which citizens and stakeholders may provide the MCDSS feedback.

The CPO monitors the implementation of all of its recommendations. Public updates regarding this process may be found on the CPO's website: www.coloradocpo.org.

To view a complete copy of the CPO's report visit, www.coloradocpo.org.