**Arizona child-abuse allegations not investigated**

Thousands of reports came into state's child-abuse hotline and "misclassified

**By Mary Jo Pitzl and Mary K. Reinhart**The Republic | azcentral.comThu Nov 21, 2013 6:09 PM

Arizona’s Child Protective Services division has uncovered thousands of uninvestigated child abuse allegations dating back to 2009, Department of Economic Security director Clarence Carter said Thursday morning.

Carter said the allegations were made to the state’s child-abuse hotline and came as CPS caseloads were on the rise, adding to the pressure on an already over-burdened staff.

In total, 6,000 of the abuse allegations were “misclassifed” as “not investigated,” meaning a staffer in the agency’s call center determined the situation did not warrant a formal investigation. Of the 6,000 reports, 5,000 have come into the state hotline in the last 20 months. CPS caseloads are 77 percent above standards.

When he presented the startling findings to Gov. Jan Brewer, Carter said the governor’s reaction was “unprintable.”

“I have never seen my boss with such a combination of anger and sadness,” Carter said. He said he had not felt a loss of support from the governor, but “I did get the sense she is holding me responsible.”

In a statement released early Thursday afternoon, Brewer called today's revelations "heartbreaking" and "unconscionable" in a statement.

"This is absolutely unacceptable. The most urgent priority is to ensure that each one of the children involved in these cases is safe. Every case must be investigated - no exceptions, no excuses. It is not only the right thing, but it is the law."

Brewer added, "I do not want to see the lights off at CPS until this is done."

Brewer stated she requested Carter to immediately investigate each case and asked that state police conduct an independent administrative review of the cases and CPS' procedures.

Carter said he has launched his own review of how so many reports could go unexamined, and vowed that all 6,000 calls will be investigated. By law, all allegations of abuse must be investigated.

“We will do our own review of each of those 6,000 cases, to determine child safety,” he said. “In addition, we will ask DPS to do an independent review of both process and cases to ensure that we are seeing the same thing here.”

Dana Wolfe Naimark, president and CEO of the Children’s Action Alliance, said as “surprising and disturbing” as today’s revelations are, it’s important CPS not neglect the thousands of other cases already before it. For example, there are 10,000 inactive cases, and dozens of other cases that haven’t been looked at in months.

“Who’s stopping what to get this done?” she asked of Carter’s pledge to look at all 6,000 newly found complaint calls. “They really need to triage and prioritize.”

Carter didn’t have an immediate answer Thursday morning on how the agency would tackle the task.

“I can’t tell you exactly at this moment how we’ll do this,” he told reporters at a news briefing. But it must be done, he added.

At a CPS oversight committee hearing Thursday afternoon, a visibly angry Maricopa County Attorney Bill Montgomery said the revelations show where the "hole" is in Child Protective Services' safety net. The discovery justifies the creation of the Office of Child Welfare Investigations, which was started after a task force Montgomery chaired recommended the need for a bureau to investigate criminal allegations involving child abuse, he said.

At the hearing, Rep. Debbie McCune Davis, D-Phoenix, asked Carter if he asked the governor for more money to pay for the investigations he is promising. "Did you ask for more money to cover this investigation? Or is this somethign that is going to push something else to second on the list?"

“This has to come out,” said state Rep. Kate Brophy McGee, R-Phoenix and co-chair of the oversight committee on CPS. “I am hopeful it’s the start to finding solutions to what the heck is going on.”

“I’ve just had this horrible feeling that something is so wrong, and has been so for so very long,” she said. “This seems to be a systemic issue, and maybe this is the start of unwinding the problems. We can fix them. This is an enormous finding, an enormous one.”

The uninvestigated cases came to light when CPS’ Office of Child Welfare Investigation was asked to look into a case a Valley police department was examining, since it involved allegations of sibling-on-sibling sexual abuse.

Gregory McKay, the Phoenix homicide detective who is on loan to CPS to direct its Child Welfare Investigation office, said he found the incident had been reported to CPS and labeled “NI” — “not investigated” — a term he didn’t understand at the time. It apparently has been in use since 2009.

Soon after, McKay said he ran across another “NI” case that involved a report of a father burning his son with an iron. It was unclear whether the burn was intentional or an accident. But McKay said the complaint definitely warranted an examination by his office since it involved possible criminal activity — something that didn’t happen since it had been classified as not investigated.

That prompted a review of all calls that had come into the hotline. The calls were cataloged in database, and McKay said that review showed the “NI” designation had been used 5,000 times in the last 20 months.

He and Carter emphasized that none of the neglected calls resulted in fatalities, something that would have turned up in a subsequent CPS investigation.

Beth Rosenberg of the Children’s Action Alliance, questioned why it took a special examination by an office charged with investigating criminal complaints to turn up problems that the agency’s quality-assurance process should have detected.

“Any good quality-assurance program would have caught this,” she said.

Brewer’s spokesman did not immediately respond to a request to interview the governor or a member of her staff. Brewer is attending the Republican Governor’s Association conference in Scottsdale, where many of the nation’s GOP governors are meeting.

As part of his budget request for the next fiscal year, Carter has requested 444 new workers and more than $115 million to reduce caseloads and keep pace with the unabated growth in the number of abused and neglected children entering foster care.

The Department of Economic Security’s budget request for the coming fiscal year comes as the agency is training and deploying 200 new Child Protective Services case managers and support staff that lawmakers approved last session, but anticipates growth of 7 to 8 percent in the number of kids in care — now 15,132 — over the next two years.

Arizona continues to be an outlier among states, with national statistics showing the state with by far the largest percentage increase in foster-care population. State child-welfare officials attribute the growth to an increase in reports to a statewide hotline.

In his request submitted to Brewer in September, Carter said more children would be leaving foster care than entering the system by 2016.

Brewer uses state agency budget requests to form a spending plan, which she will release in January, and they are developed with guidance from her office.

Brewer has identified CPS as a top priority. She created a task force in 2011 in response to the brutal deaths of children who had been the subject of prior CPS reports. Legislation in 2012, following a task-force recommendation, created a separate investigative unit for the most serious abuse cases.

According to the budget documents, the Office of Child Welfare Investigations, led by a Phoenix homicide detective, has investigated just 17 percent of such cases. Carter is seeking 50 additional staffers for the office, which has 28 law-enforcement-trained investigators and supervisors and is charged with investigating cases where criminal conduct is alleged.

Nationwide, the number of children in foster care has gone down dramatically, along with reports of abuse and neglect. In Arizona and in the U.S., about two-thirds of all child-welfare cases involved neglect.

*Republic reporters Yvonne Wingett Sanchez and Alia Beard Rau contributed to this article.*