

State child protection agency suffers from lack of resources

■ **AGENCY:** By 1990, some caseworkers were dealing with 100 children each

The Associated Press

PORTLAND — While child abuse complaints have risen 2,200 percent since the state's child protection agency was formed in 1971, the agency has 158 fewer workers responding to those calls, *The Oregonian* reported Monday.

Efforts to reform the agency have floundered or simply failed, in part due to legislative inaction and a disinterested public, the Portland newspaper said.

In 1971, the Children's Services Division opened its doors with 1,556 workers and a two-year budget of almost \$80 million — or about \$325 million in 1995 dollars. The Legislature passed a law requiring doctors, dentists, teachers and other professionals to report suspected abuse.

In the late 1970s, the number of child abuse reports exploded. State workers in 1977 recorded 555 complaints. The number doubled in two years.

A parents' rights movement resulted in a 1980 law that forced states to document a "reasonable effort" to reunite families. What followed was a crushing load of paperwork: Every aspect of a caseworker's job required documentation. Through the years, the problem has worsened.

By the mid-1980s, a familiar pattern emerged: Officials asking for budget increases amid an ideological crossfire and demands for accountability.

As criticism mounted, so did the crush of cases — and the never-ending bureaucratic shuffle. The agency burned through nearly an administrator a year and huge numbers of workers.

By 1990, some caseworkers

were responsible for more than 100 children.

In the spring of 1991, then-administrator Bill Carey told state lawmakers they must decide which abused children would be protected because the agency simply wasn't able to respond to all those in danger.

"Every two years you give us money, and you think we've met the needs of children, but the workload requirements get bigger and bigger," Carey said.

He asked lawmakers to adopt a system called "levels of vulnerability," designed to focus on the children at greatest risk.

Level one would be severely beaten and raped children. Level seven would be teen-agers, and they would not be served at all.

Lawmakers instead increased financing by 10 percent and authorized a study of the agency's performance.

Although lawmakers didn't pass a law, the agency increasingly relied on the priority system, saying caseworkers needed a system to help them cope.

Ben DeHaan, former deputy director of the agency, now regrets creating the system. Without more caseworkers, she said, it becomes dangerous.

"What we have done is given people permission to screen out children who should be helped," said DeHaan, now deputy director of the state Department of Corrections. "That can definitely lead to more children being hurt, even killed."

The Oregonian found the agency is unable to respond to more than half the calls of warning it receives by relying on the "levels of vulnerability" system.

The newspaper found that in the deaths of at least 31 children, the agency had ignored warnings from neighbors, teachers, doctors or family members.

In 1993, the Legislature tried an overhaul and a name change.

The idea was for the state Office for Services to Children and Families (SCF), formerly the Children's Services Division, to handle the worst child abuse cases — and to administer foster care and adoption — and have newly created area commissions take over early intervention and prevention.

A recent audit says too much spending on administrative costs plagues the approach. And many caseworkers say the plan has not made a dent in the state's child abuse crisis.

"We are to blame," Sen. Jeanette Hamby, a Hillsboro Republican, said of legislators. "We failed."

Timothy Travis, staff attorney with the Juvenile Rights Project, agrees.

"If someone is drowning 10 feet from shore, they're throwing a 5-foot rope," Travis said of the child protection agency. "It's not because they're bad people. It's because they don't have money."

But critics insist reforming the agency, not funding, should be the focus.

Rep. Patti Milne, a Woodburn Republican, called the agency a bloated bureaucracy that refuses to change and wastes money. The agency's budget continues to grow, but the problem only worsens, she said.

But without a significant increase in money and radical changes, caseworkers and others fear the number of deaths will keep climbing. Even agency officials say that SCF can't solve the problem alone.

"We're talking about insufficient resources to do the job of protecting children in our state," SCF Administrator Kay Toran said. "It is a crisis, and there ought to be rage."

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Smith hopes to be appointed to committee

■ **FORTUNE:** Smith may change his business operations to eliminate any conflict of interest

By Scott Sonner

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sen.-elect Gordon Smith said Monday he'll ask the Senate Ethics Committee for guidance on handling his fortune to avoid any conflicts of interest.

The Republican also said he is optimistic he'll win an appointment to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. But he said he was unlikely to gain a seat on the influential Appropriations Committee, which has been chaired by retiring Oregon Sen. Mark Hatfield.

Smith said his first priority when he succeeds Hatfield in January will be passage of a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution.

He said he and Sen. Ron Wyden have pledged to meet on a weekly basis and he expects to develop a friendship with the Democrat. In his first Senate campaign, Smith lost a close race to Wyden in last January's special election.

In his second race in less than a year, Smith defeated millionaire-businessman Tom Bruggere in the November general election.

Many wealthy senators establish blind trusts so they don't know how their money is being invested and can avoid an appearance of conflict of interest. Smith amassed a fortune as president and chief executive of Smith Frozen Foods in Pendleton, one of the largest private label packers of frozen vegetables in the United States.

Smith said he's resigned his management posts but still owns stock.

"Whether or not I ultimately make a decision on

whether to go into a blind trust will be a decision that will be made with professional counseling," he said. Smith said he would be looking to the Ethics Committee "for counsel" regarding the proper handling of his finances.

He declined Monday to estimate his wealth, but he said he did not argue with a newspaper report that put his net worth near \$20 million.

"I don't think my assets or my holdings are something that are in any way out of the ordinary or even extraordinary in the nature of some who serve here," he said.

Smith said his first committee choice is Appropriations. Meeting with reporters in Hatfield's empty office, he said it was "not likely the first time at bat," adding Hatfield served five years before joining the panel.

He thinks the chances are "very good" he'll land on Energy and Natural Resources, his second choice because "it is so important to not just Oregon but our region."

Smith said protecting Social Security should be the highest priority as Congress struggles with the federal deficit, but that he wasn't ready to exclude those payments from spending reductions resulting from a constitutional amendment to balance the budget.

"It is one of the factors we need to debate. It is a consideration. It is a concern. But I think ultimately we have to say that everything is on the table," he said.

Smith said he prefers increased reporting requirements and full disclosure of all campaign spending rather than campaign reform proposals that include spending limits or a ban on political action committees. He said those limits often amount to a violation of freedom of speech.

He said he wants to "look at both sides" of proposals to privatize the Bonneville Power Administration but that Hatfield has made strong arguments against the idea in the past.

He also wants to restrict the ability of citizens to appeal logging on federal lands in cases where they don't live near the logging, but said he wouldn't eliminate appeals altogether.



SMITH

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