

As required by the Legislature, the Department developed recommendations in 2015 for implementing a new differential response system, and as of February 2016, the Department was moving forward with implementing the system. The Legislature also instructed the Auditor General to complete a special report to evaluate the merits and disadvantages of a differential response system, include best practices from other states, and recommend improvements for implementing such a system. Accordingly, our March 2016 special report provided information on the potential benefits and drawbacks of a differential response system, identified best and other state practices, and made 15 recommendations to the Department to help guide its implementation of a differential response system. The Department's status in implementing the recommendations is as follows:

Status of 15 recommendations

Not implemented:

15

Unless otherwise directed by the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, this report concludes our follow-up work on the Department's efforts to implement the recommendations from the March 2016 report.

As explained in our March 2016 special report, a differential response system provides an alternative to a traditional investigative response for lower-risk reports of child abuse or neglect. This alternative approach focuses on engaging families to assess their needs and connect them with services, such as substance abuse treatment and mental health counseling, without first investigating the report of child abuse or neglect. Our report outlined various potential benefits and drawbacks to implementing a differential response system. Specifically, allowing for alternatives to investigation may provide benefits for families involved in the child welfare system. For example, in some jurisdictions, families that participated in an alternative response experienced higher levels of satisfaction with the child welfare agency and were more cooperative than families who participated in investigations of reported abuse and neglect. Additionally, both literature and experts reported that children were found to be as safe through an alternative response compared to an investigative response, and for some states, the child removal rate was lower among alternative response families than those served through the investigative response. Further, although alternative responses may have increased up-front costs, one study indicated that alternative responses may lead to cost savings over time for child welfare agencies. However, we also reported that implementing an alternative response system can be complicated and take time. Finally, we reported that the impact of alternative responses on caseworker caseloads is not easily determined, although one study indicated that alternative response cases may be more time intensive for caseworkers.

Although our March 2016 report did not outline any other potential benefits or drawbacks of implementing an alternative response, according to the Department, it believes differential response systems are typically used by child welfare agencies to expand capacity for child safety assessment and improve access to services aimed at preventing repeated reports of abuse and neglect. The Department reported it has improved the quality of and its capacity to conduct child safety assessments and expanded its continuum of services for families, such as parent skill building and substance abuse and behavioral health treatments. As a result, the Department reported that implementing a differential response system is no longer necessary, and thus, it will not implement the 15 recommendations from our report. Instead, the Department plans to continue to investigate all reports of abuse and neglect with Department staff trained in child safety assessment and only then provide services to families aimed at preventing repeated reports of abuse and neglect.