

Arizona Department of Child Safety Licensed Foster Care Provider Oversight

Department problems related to investigating, taking enforcement action against, and monitoring licensed out-of-home care providers could result in risky or unhealthy environments for children in out-of-home care

Audit purpose

To determine whether the Department investigated and resolved licensing complaints against and conducted ongoing monitoring of licensed child welfare agencies and foster homes consistent with State law and best practices.

Key findings

The Department:

- Is responsible for overseeing licensed child welfare agencies/group homes (group homes) and foster homes that care for children placed under the Department's legal custody. This responsibility includes investigating licensing complaints, taking enforcement action when necessary, and conducting ongoing monitoring of licensees.
- Was slow to investigate 15 of 28 licensing complaints we reviewed, taking 158, 171, and 406 days to investigate 3 of these licensing complaints. Slow investigations may have (1) allowed licensees to continue operating with unhealthy or risky environments that do not meet licensing standards and (2) contributed to the Department not fully investigating licensing complaints due to an inability to interview or obtain information from involved individuals.
- Did not interview most children involved in 4 of 28 licensing complaints we reviewed and did not investigate all allegations in 1 of these licensing complaints, which could have compromised investigation outcomes and the Department's determinations of potential licensing violations that could pose risks to children.
- Did not take timely enforcement action for 6 validated foster home licensing complaints we reviewed and did not effectively use its enforcement authority for 6 validated group home licensing complaints we reviewed, such as not reviewing licensees' violation history when determining enforcement actions. This may have allowed licensees to continue operating with uncorrected violations that could have contributed to risky or unhealthy environments.
- Did not perform any ongoing monitoring of 35 group homes during the 16-month period we reviewed.
- Lacked written guidance and time frames for key parts of its licensing complaint investigation and enforcement processes, including procedures for risk-based prioritization of licensing complaint investigations and determining appropriate enforcement actions.

Key recommendations

The Department should develop and implement policies, procedures, and/or written guidance that include:

- Time frames for each key step of its licensing complaint investigation and enforcement processes, risk-based prioritization of investigations, guidance for researching foster home and group home licensee violation history, and procedures for interviewing staff and children during licensing complaint investigations.
- A graduated system of enforcement actions for validated licensing complaints that specifies the violations that would lead to different enforcement actions and mitigating and/or aggravating factors staff should consider.
- Procedures for ongoing group home monitoring.
- Processes for tracking and ensuring staff compliance with its licensing complaint investigation and enforcement processes and group home monitoring, including supervisory review and managerial oversight.