

## **State audit turns up host of problems at DCF**

More than two dozen registered sex offenders lived at addresses that matched those of homes with children receiving DCF care, according to a state audit that turned up a host of management problems at the state Department of Children and Families.

The review, conducted by state Auditor Suzanne M. Bump, examined the period between July 2010 and September 2012, a year before the department came under intense scrutiny for losing track of Jeremiah Oliver, a 5-year-old boy from Fitchburg who is now feared dead.

The findings add to a growing list of concerns about the agency, which is charged with protecting 36,000 abused and neglected children in Massachusetts.

Bump said the fact that there were children living in two foster homes and 23 homes with children receiving DCF care that had the same addresses as Level 2 and Level 3 sex offenders posed a “significant risk” to those youngsters.

In one instance, a Level 3 sex offender who had been convicted of child rape was found to be living in the same eight-unit building in Salem as a 3-year-old child under department care. The sex offender was a maintenance man who had access to the other units in the building, and the child’s mother had warned the man to stay away, according to the audit.

In Northampton, a 12-year-old in foster care was living in the same building as both a Level 2 sex offender who had been convicted of child rape and a Level 3 offender convicted of indecent assault and battery on a child. The child’s guardian was unaware that either offender was living in the building.

The audit also found that children entering the foster care system were not receiving initial medical screenings within 7 days and more comprehensive medical examinations within 30 days, as required by agency rules. As a result, children could have suffered from undetected health problems, trauma, and injury caused by their abuse and neglect, the audit said.

The department, the report said, did not adequately document all the criminal background checks it was supposed to perform on individuals living in foster homes. In some instances, it was destroying those records, in violation of state rules.

In other cases, the agency appeared to be suffering from shoddy record-keeping.

The auditor's report contains photographs of department offices with stacks of cardboard boxes and open recycling bins filled with criminal record information on foster families. The documents should have been placed in locked rooms to prevent identity theft, the report said.

Bump said her findings pointed to "significant management deficiencies" at the department, but stopped short of calling for the resignation of Olga I. Roche, the agency's commissioner.

"DCF does indeed work miracles on a daily basis," Bump said at a State House news conference. "It is, however, an agency whose frontline workers and managers need better guidance and better tools in order to effectively protect children entrusted to their care."

Governor Deval Patrick, who has steadfastly defended the agency and Roche, downplayed the significance of the audit.

"I don't think there is really anything new there," he told reporters. "It's mostly technical and about record-keeping, for example."

He added that the "larger issues" at the department, such as the need for more social workers and better technology, were not addressed by the audit. "And we're working on that," he said.

Department officials said that the agency is taking steps to increase medical visits and to improve the documentation of criminal background checks. Roche said the department also reviewed all its foster homes and found that although sex offenders may have been living in the same building as the children, they were not sharing the same household.

"Our number one priority is the safety of our children at all times," Roche said.

The audit prompted some criticism from Gregory W. Sullivan, a former state inspector general, who pointed out that Bump released an audit in May 2011 that found that the department was properly complying with federal spending rules. He said Bump missed an opportunity then to examine more serious management concerns at the agency.

"The auditor's office failed to look for these kinds of problems, but that's the job of the auditor," said Sullivan, who is now research director at the Pioneer Institute, a conservative think tank. "Otherwise, who's doing it?"

Christopher Thompson, a Bump spokesman, said the May 2011 report was what is known as a "single audit" designed only to look at federal spending issues.

“Today’s audit is a performance audit, the scope of which we have discretion to set,” he said in a statement. “Performance audits review an agency’s effectiveness at achieving its mission.”

Jason Stephany, a spokesman for the union that represents department social workers, criticized Bump for not speaking to social workers as part of her audit, relying instead on department managers.

“Had the state auditor formally engaged front-line workers in the audit process, this report would have identified today’s real barriers to successful child protection, from the worsening caseload crisis to disjointed implementation of key directives and policies,” he said.

**By Michael Levenson**