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State Child Welfare Officials Launch Effort to Improve Safety in Foster Care

Two weeks after being appointed the permanent Director of the Children, Adults and Families Division of Oregon Department of Human Services, Erinn Kelley-Siel announced today that the agency will be aggressively working to reduce child abuse and neglect, beginning with the children in state foster care.

In 2008, almost 14,000 Oregon children spent at least one day in foster care, usually in foster family settings. Kelley-Siel said Oregon should have no tolerance for neglect or abuse of children in foster care, and her goal is to make the state's foster care system the best and safest in the country.

As part of this effort, Kelley-Siel has called for a new focus on Oregon's innovative Critical Incident Review Teams (CIRT), convened when a child known to the agency has been seriously injured or killed as a result of abuse or neglect. Immediately after an incident, the CIRT process brings together agency staff, law enforcement and others to review whether there were systemic problems or gaps in practice or procedures that happened in the case. Reports are made public and posted on the DHS website.

"Nothing we do is more important than protecting children in foster care," said Kelley-Siel. "It is difficult to read reports of injuries to children the state is responsible for. When something goes wrong, we must respond quickly."

This week, in response to a CIRT report about a long-time foster parent who was arrested and convicted of child abuse, Kelley-Siel convened a rapid-response team of law enforcement, child advocates, and other concerned Oregonians to look not only at cases after abuse has happened, but to help prevent future abuse.

"Abuse of children in foster care is unacceptable – to me and to all Oregonians. Building on the immediate steps we are already taking, the team will provide us

with additional information to strengthen our action plan to ensure children in foster care will be safer,” Kelley-Siel said.

The Foster Care Safety Team members will include: Don Darland, Oregon Foster Parent Association; Chief Jerry Moore, Salem Police Department; Leola McKenzie, Department of Justice Juvenile Courts Programs; Megan Shultz, CASA Director; Pamela Butler, former foster youth and founder of the Oregon Foster Youth Coalition; Kevin George and Cyndi Kallstrom, Oregon Department of Human Services. Kelley-Siel has charged the team with the following four tasks:

- Review and analyze incidents of abuse or neglect in foster care in 2008 to identify changes in practice or policy that should be made to help prevent it.
- Review a statewide representative sample of foster home certification files involving foster parents who have been serving children for at least 5 years to determine whether the issues presented in recent reports are also identified in cases in different parts of the state.
- Review a random sample of reports of abuse in foster care that were closed to identify whether cases of abuse are being properly responded to.
- Review all efforts for the last 10 years, including those currently in place, to ensure the safety of children in foster care and make recommendations of any additional improvements that may be needed.

Kelley-Siel also points out that over the past year Oregon’s child welfare system has made several changes that will help keep children safer, including the addition of 130 caseworkers approved by the Oregon legislature in July.

“No policy or practice will be enough to keep children safe if we don’t have enough workers to see children and families face-to-face and to support our foster families,” said Kelley-Siel.

The Foster Care Safety Team is part of the overall child safety improvement effort launched by DHS over the past year, based on past efforts to build a system that provides more protection for children who have been victims of abuse or neglect. The department has also begun a strategic partnership with communities and Casey Family Programs to strengthen its work on behalf of Oregon’s children and to safely reduce the number of children who need foster care in the first place.

The “K.T. CIRT Report” that spurred the creation of the Foster Care Safety Team can be found at www.oregon.gov/DHS/children/publications/abuse/cirt/.

The CIRT process began in 2004 as a way to quickly review incidents and determine what improvements need to be made in order to keep children safe. CIRT reports

have already resulted in improvements to the child welfare system, and Kelley-Siel has called for CIRT reports to be more thorough and transparent, starting immediately.

Note: Under state confidentiality laws, the identities of children and families are protected in CIRT reports.