

Angry lawmakers vow action on problems with residential care for troubled youths



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Public officials on Friday reacted angrily to an ongoing Tribune investigation that found juvenile state wards were assaulted and sexually abused at government-funded residential treatment centers throughout Illinois.

Gov.-elect Bruce Rauner, state lawmakers, child welfare officials and Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart all expressed outrage at the abuse of youths at some of the state's most relied-on facilities, and they vowed swift action.

Rauner issued a statement saying he is "committed to working with the legislature in a bi-partisan fashion to closely examine what happened and ensure the necessary reforms are made to prevent future tragedies like these."

State Sen. Heather Steans, D-Chicago, said lawmakers will hold a special hearing next month to look into the unsafe conditions in the facilities, as well as forming a standing subcommittee to overhaul Illinois' frayed system for serving youths with mental health problems.

The state Department of Children and Family Services said it will immediately implement corrective actions:

- The department imposed an "intake hold" on two of the troubled facilities highlighted in the Tribune reports,

meaning the state will not authorize placing wards there.

- Agency staff began analyzing data and reports of harm to determine whether other centers should be sanctioned.
- The agency said it will hire an independent expert to review conditions of care at 50 centers used by the state, and then make public the results and recommendations of that review.

DCFS "has zero tolerance for the allegations of abuse, neglect and negligence outlined by the Chicago Tribune," said a statement from the agency. "We have taken swift action to address any issues that could impact the safety of those in our care. We are working with our partners in the child welfare system to continue to improve the quality of services and use our collective resources to better the lives of children in care."

In a separate development Friday, Dart issued a blistering letter to DCFS acting Director Bobbie Gregg demanding that the agency halt placements at additional facilities featured in the Tribune.

"I was saddened and disturbed to read the Chicago Tribune's account of the outrageous problems taking place in many DCFS residential centers across the state," Dart wrote. DCFS must "immediately install competent and aggressive monitors at each of those facilities to take charge and hold these centers accountable for the millions in tax dollars they receive and the precious souls they've pledged to protect."

Dart also asked that officers from his Child Protection Unit be able to access the facilities to safeguard youth. "Reform needs to be swift," he wrote.

At a cost to taxpayers of well over \$200 million per year, the residential centers promise therapy and constant supervision to disadvantaged youths with mental health and behavioral problems. On any given day, about 1,400 wards live in the centers, although far more cycle through each year.

The Tribune found state officials failed to act on reports of harm and continued sending youths to the most troubled facilities. In the three years from 2011 through 2013, Illinois facilities sent DCFS 428 reports alleging a ward was sexually assaulted or abused while in their care and an additional 1,052 reports that a ward was physically assaulted. The centers also notified DCFS of 29,425 incidents when a ward ran away or went missing.

Child prostitution schemes took root at some of the centers, the Tribune found, and vulnerable children were terrorized by older ones and drawn into a life of crime. Some were preyed on sexually by the adults paid to care for them.

State Sen. Julie Morrison, D-Deerfield, said she was angry that DCFS and residential facility officials had failed to disclose safety breaches at the centers during previous legislative hearings.

"I am really, really disappointed that neither the providers nor the agency were forthcoming. They had an opportunity to come before a panel that wanted to help, and they didn't do it," Morrison said. Now, she said, "people need to be called out. ... January 2015, they better buckle up."

Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, said: "I want somebody to look me in the eye and say, this is the best we can do for some of these kids. ... These problems are not just about resources — it's about mission, priorities and getting back to child welfare and child protection."

DCFS said the two facilities placed on intake holds were the 48-bed Lawrence Hall Youth Services facility on Chicago's Northwest Side and the 10-bed ERIC Family Services on the West Side. Both centers had high rates of youths running away, and some were involved in prostitution, the Tribune found.

The agency is more than a year behind in analyzing facility performance records that show how many days kids go on the run from each center, or are sent to jail or psychiatric hospitals. The Tribune also found DCFS does little to analyze or act on Unusual Incident Reports that facilities are required to submit whenever a ward is hurt or put in harm's way while in their care.

DCFS now has 16 monitors for the roughly 50 residential centers spread from the North Side of Chicago to southern Illinois. While current budget figures were not available, in recent years the agency has spent more than \$30 million annually on monitoring the facilities, according to state budget reports and interviews.

"That's a lot of money," said Mary Shahbazian, who runs the Allendale Association facility in Lake Villa. DCFS should take this opportunity to rethink how it deploys monitors, to focus on facilities with the most problems.

"That system's broken," Shahbazian said.

State Sen. Mattie Hunter, D-Chicago, also expressed frustration that DCFS has not previously acknowledged the chronic violence and runaways at some facilities. "The situation in the newspaper didn't happen overnight. Where has the monitoring been?" Hunter asked.

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