



STATE OF MICHIGAN

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

ELIZABETH HERTEL
DIRECTOR

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CONTACT: Lynn Sutfin
517-241-2112
Sutfin1@michigan.gov

Child welfare audit confirms major progress at MDHHS

- *Findings document “significant and measurable progress” from scathing Snyder-era audit.*
- *Hertel: “We’ll never stop transforming how we keep kids safe and families together.”*
- *Agency calls OAG’s lack of focus on MDHHS reforms “a disservice to the people of Michigan.”*

LANSING, Mich. – A new state audit shows “significant and measurable progress” in how the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) investigates child abuse allegations, Director Elizabeth Hertel said today in response to the Office of the Auditor General’s (OAG) formal update to a 2018 audit that uncovered serious issues during the Snyder administration.

Of the OAG’s 17 findings, auditors found that MDHHS had fully or partially complied in 15 of them, an 88% success rate. MDHHS strongly disagreed with one of only two findings labeled as non-compliant and questioned why auditors focused on process and paperwork rather than progress made by MDHHS since the Snyder audit.

“These findings confirm our focus and fuel our resolve,” Hertel said. “We welcome the opportunity and responsibility to work with the legislature, law enforcement, judges and other partners to transform Michigan’s child welfare system into a national model for competence and caring.”

The audit represents a bold pattern of reform at MDHHS: Independent monitors recently found nearly 100% compliance for the timeliness and staffing of child abuse investigations. As a result, Judge Nancy G. Edmunds of the U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of Michigan signed a stipulated order to modify the Modified Implementation, Sustainability and Exit Plan (MISEP) that dramatically reduces the remaining requirements MDHHS must meet for the department to be released from court oversight.

Last Tuesday, at the most recent court conference, Edmunds determined that the state met the performance standards for six additional areas of oversight, moving these areas

closer to the removal of court oversight, and praised MDHHS for making "tremendous progress."

In 2018, the OAG issued a "scathing report" on Children's Protective Services (CPS), a division of MDHHS, finding numerous and systemic deficiencies in the way child abuse investigations were conducted. Gov. Rick Snyder called the findings "unacceptable" and promised corrective action. A historically underfunded agency under federal court oversight since 2008, this was arguably the lowest point in the history of CPS and the broader child welfare system in Michigan.

Five years later, MDHHS is in a much stronger position, according to the audit and court oversight, thanks in part to the "Keep Kids Safe Action Agenda" shaped by Hertel after she was appointed in 2021.

Progress documented

The OAG's report, which included agency responses, repeatedly shows progress from 2018 to 2023. According to the audit report, MDHHS:

- Increased the frequency and effectiveness of supervisory reviews of CPS investigation activities. While the 2018 audit found 82% of investigations were reviewed within 14 days and 85% of cases documented a consultation prior to disposition, both numbers jumped in the new audit – to 94% and 98%, respectively.
- Improved the agency's use of a Central Registry clearance for people associated with CPS investigations, from 28% compliance to 86% compliance.
- Improved how CPS conducts background reviews of family members, from 48% compliance to 73% compliance.
- Improved documentation of communication with mandated reporters of child abuse, like police and teachers, from 31% compliance to 90% compliance.
- Made face-to-face contact with alleged child victims within 24 to 72 hours for 95% of the cases reviewed by the OAG. At times, extenuating circumstances, such as the inability to locate youth after multiple attempts, impacted staff's ability to make timely face-to-face contact 100% of the time.
- Exceeded investigative performance standards required by the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. The OAG concluded that the department commenced 100% of required investigations within the required timeframes. MDHHS' commencement policy requirements exceed best practices in other jurisdictions such as Washington, North Carolina and Oklahoma.

OAG focus flawed

Unfortunately, there are portions of the audit where the auditor focused on bureaucratic minutia rather than bottom-line results and improvements, the agency noted. In some cases, the auditor's observations were agenda-driven and based on arbitrary standards, resulting in a biased report that attempts to mislead the public about the agency's actual performance. Director Hertel also sent a letter to the OAG expressing her concerns with the audit process, highlighting these issues.

“We aren’t perfect. We have more work to do. But it’s a disservice to the people of Michigan to hold MDHHS accountable to disconnected administrative standards rather than our ability to keep kids safe and families together,” Hertel said.

Agency reforms paying off

MDHHS is an agency devoted to an important and challenging mission: Keeping kids safe and families together. Caseworkers balance these goals 24/7, sometimes in difficult conditions, as they investigate nearly 70,000 child abuse allegations per year. A champion of systemic reform, Hertel’s agenda is broader than the limited scope of state auditors. It addresses issues raised in the audit – and many more. The agenda includes:

Prevention:

- Investing millions of dollars to create more Family Resource Centers to work with families that are at-risk of abuse and neglect to meet their needs sooner. The investment allowed Michigan to become one of only five states to receive the Child Safety Forward grant from the federal Office of Victims of Crime. This project focused on reducing and preventing child deaths that result from crime.
- Created Family Impact Teams that embed an MDHHS family resource specialist with the department’s children’s protective services staff so they can support families in applying for benefits and Medicaid and connect them to other economic supports.
- Developed a firearm safety protocol to provide guidance for child welfare staff to talk with families about firearm safety. This includes creating a website with information about where families can get free trigger locks and appropriating \$2 million to support initiatives related to misuse of guns, including gun locks and other available options.
- Expanding home visits by nurses and other professionals to proactively identify and help families who may benefit from better parenting strategies and coping skills.
- A vulnerable child protocol was implemented in August 2023 that provides additional safety reviews of cases in which the child that is injured is too young to fully speak for themselves.
- Analyzing data in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to determine which families are most at risk so the department can provide services sooner for the well-being of children.
- Continuing to invest in prevention services annually to better serve at-risk families.
- Worked with the State Legislature to make it easier for caregivers to determine whether another caregiver for their child is on the state’s Central Registry for child abuse and neglect. A new law, referred to as Wyatt’s Law, was signed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in May 2022.

Intervention

- Developed an intervention tool that requires regular communication with caseworkers and their supervisors during key points of an investigation.

- Working with organizations and partners in the Legislature in supporting the child welfare system. MDHHS continues to identify policy changes to increase child safety. Some of these changes may include improved data sharing between behavioral health, substance use disorder service providers, domestic violence providers and the child welfare system.
- Learning more from child deaths by participating in multi-disciplinary child death review teams that involve MDHHS, prosecutors, law enforcement, medical professionals and others.

“MDHHS is devoted to an important and challenging mission: Keeping kids safe and families together. We won’t be satisfied until Michigan is the best place in America to raise kids and build families,” Hertel said.

[Read Director Hertel’s letter to the OAG.](#)

[Read MDHHS’ responses to the OAG’s findings.](#)

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