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CHILD WELFARE | BROWARD COUNTY

## Child-removal figures rising

■ In contrast to other counties, the number of Broward children removed from their homes has increased in the last year.

BY MIKE CLARY  
Sun Sentinel

The number of Broward children removed from their homes over abuse and neglect concerns has increased in the past year, confounding child welfare officials who are struggling to pinpoint the reasons for the rise.

Investigators working for the Broward Sheriff's Office removed more than 1,525 children from their families during the 12 months ending June 30 this year, compared with 1,129 in the same

period the prior year, according to figures from ChildNet.

"I am not saying there is anything wrong, but what is going on here?" said Emilio Benitez, CEO of ChildNet, the private agency contracted by the state's Department of Children & Families to oversee foster care in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

"It's a significant spike, especially compared to other counties, where removals are going down."

Why the increase? Offi-

cial aren't sure, but cite a number of possibilities:

A rise in hotline calls of suspected abuse by mandatory reporters, such as teachers, medical providers and social workers. A change in administration at the Broward Sheriff's Office in January that coincides with an accelerated rate of removals. Highly publicized cases of children who died while in the custody of parents who had been investigated by DCF.

Howard Talenfeld, president of Florida's Children First, an advocacy group, said the removal numbers represent "a disturbing trend."

"When they take a child from a family they are harmed. It's traumatic," he said. "There are lots of things we hope they are doing before they take the children away."

In Palm Beach County, where complaints of abuse are investigated by the Florida Department of Children & Families, not the sheriff's office, removals are up only slightly from last year. There were 566 removals during an 11-month period ending in May this year, or 33 more compared with the same period the prior year.

In August, ChildNet took over as foster care provider in Palm Beach County, re-

placing an agency rated by DCF as the worst in Florida.

Dennis Miles, DCF's southeast regional managing director, said he also is at a loss to explain the increase in child removals in Broward.

"When we see a spike in removals, we start to ask questions," he said. "Are we doing the right thing; have we removed children who should have stayed?"

Hilary Creary, executive director of the county's Guardian ad Litem Program, which provides volunteers to advocate for abused and neglected chil-

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• CHILDREN, FROM 1B

dren, said she was "alarmed" by the numbers, because they may signal "an increase in violence."

"There is more abuse in general with economic hard times," Creary said. "Parents are frustrated and taking it out on children."

Creary said one reason for the increase in child removals may be a mandatory-reporting law that went into effect last year. That state law requires any adult who suspects child abuse or neglect to report it to a child-abuse hotline.

"We have so many people coming into care that we have stepped up recruiting

for volunteers, especially those who speak Creole and Spanish," Creary said.

The rise in removals comes at a time when DCF is under fire for failing to keep track of Broward children who died while in the care of parents who had been investigated by the agency. One such case came to light in January, when the remains of infant Dontrell Melvin were unearthed from the backyard of a Hallandale Beach home where he once lived with his parents, Brittney Sierra, 21, and Calvin Melvin, 27.

Three months before the remains were found, DCF had received a report that Dontrell Melvin had long

been missing. But no one at the time — not his parents, not police and not DCF — went looking for the infant, who disappeared when he was about 5 months old.

Sierra and Melvin have been jailed, charged with felony child neglect. Though Dontrell's death was ruled a killing, no homicide-related charges have been filed in the case.

Both Miles and Benitez said a high-profile case, such as Dontrell's, may influence investigators' decisions on removals. "They see that from a simple mistake they may get prosecuted," Benitez said. "That sends a chill down your spine. It sends a chill across the whole

system."

Child-abuse investigators are required to remove a child from a home when the child is in imminent danger. The case is then to go before a dependency court judge for a shelter hearing within 24 hours. Investigators face balancing the need to remove children when abuse or neglect is suspected, and the benefit of leaving them with their families when possible.

Miles said that he and Benitez agree that leaving a child with parents is preferable, but only if it's safe.

"That's what we want to do," Miles said. "But sometimes gut-wrenching decisions have to be made."

Miles, a former child protective investigator himself, said he tells his staff, "I can defend your actions, but I can't defend inaction."

Often, said Miles, "It's damned if you do, damned if you don't."

So far, social workers have been able to place most removed children with relatives or in foster homes, Benitez said. But the roster of licensed foster homes is being depleted rapidly, he added.

"When I look to the future, at a pace of over 30 percent increase year to year, we probably will outpace the capacity we have built up," he said. "We had 43 removals in Broward last week. That's crazy. That's a lot."