



STATE OF TEXAS

October 12, 2016

Mr. Henry "Hank" Whitman, Jr.
Commissioner
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
701 West 51st Street
Austin, Texas 78751

Dear Commissioner Whitman:

As previously expressed, it is critical that children who are at risk of abuse or neglect are seen in a timely manner, and we know you share our concerns. State investigators should be making timely contact with a child who is the subject of an allegation of abuse or neglect without fail. Anything less is completely unacceptable. While we appreciate your proactive approach to trying to address these concerns, a lack of timely contact only exacerbates backlogs throughout the entire system and potentially leaves a child in a dangerous situation.

It is critical that the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) eliminate the backlog of children not seen within the statutory guidelines. Action plans must be demanded from DFPS regional management in order to address the current situation and proactively prevent additional lapses in the required face-to-face visitations and interventions.

While the Texas Legislature has taken significant steps to provide the requested resources to DFPS in the past several biennia, the increasing number of reports of abuse and neglect are beyond what the agency's current workforce can support. We understand that additional resources are required in order for you to begin to address the increasing number of children requiring the state's intervention. We are confident that the Legislature will make judicious budgetary decisions in the 85th Legislative Session to address the ongoing resource needs for the future biennium. However, we must act now to protect our children who are in harm's way.

To that end, we are directing that you immediately initiate the following actions as a focused effort to apply expedient stop-gap measures to the problem while legislators prepare for and make funding decisions for the next biennium.

- Develop a plan to hire and train more special investigators, building on their law enforcement backgrounds and utilizing the safety and risk assessment tools available to find the children that the agency has been previously unable to locate. This will assist in reducing the backlog of initial face-to-face visits.

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- Develop a plan, including a strategic hiring and training schedule, which will ensure DFPS is staffing an increased number of the necessary caseworkers to account for the increase in workload and system backlog of serving children and families. In addition, DFPS should prioritize these hires in the most critical regions across the state.
- Reinforce the culture of accountability at all levels of management by inspiring your workforce to rise to the challenge and embrace the commitment to the safety and risk assessment tools as an aid in their critical decision making.
- Build upon your ongoing efforts to enhance more partnerships with local faith-based communities. Their assistance in recruiting amazing families is mission critical, and we need their support within the child welfare community now more than ever.

Many thoughtful initiatives to improve the agency have begun in the last year. We encourage you to remain steadfast to those transformation principles as you work toward building a healthier system.

By the end of next week, please report to us your plan for — and any immediate progress towards — carrying out the directives above. Some will, of course, have associated financial costs, but we have a responsibility to find and protect these vulnerable Texans as soon as possible.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that quality capacity should be a high priority. It is unacceptable that children are sleeping in Child Protective Services offices. We also will not tolerate inferior residential foster care operations. The state's residential providers must be held to the highest standards while caring for our most vulnerable or no longer operate in our system. In the coming weeks, develop an innovative plan as to how the agency and high-quality providers can partner in solving this challenge. We have faith that there are opportunities available if we call upon the many Texans who have expressed their commitment to lend a hand.

We appreciate your shared concern and dedication to the children of Texas. We have much work to do; and while we wish we could give you and your team more time to do so, too much is at stake. We must act now.

Sincerely,



Greg Abbott
Governor



Dan Patrick
Lieutenant Governor



Joe Straus
Speaker of the House

cc: Commissioner Charles Smith, Texas Department of Health and Human Services