Committee studying Oklahoma child abuse and neglect deaths releases report

OKLAHOMA CITY -- The Special Review Committee studying child abuse and neglect deaths of Oklahoma children released its report today which includes both praise and criticism regarding the performance of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services and many other entities responsible for the protection of children, and also disputes previous claims made by legislators against OKDHS.

In a 38-page report containing 50 findings and 37 recommendations which took 16 months to develop, the Committee found there were many individuals, agencies, and situations which were both ‘part of the problems and part of the solutions.’

“While our task was to review the work of DHS in the role of child abuse and neglect deaths, our Committee soon discovered that while DHS had some responsibility, the conditions leading to the children’s deaths were the results of multiple omissions and commissions by any number of many groups, agencies, individuals, conditions, and factors,” said Wes Lane, chair of the 21-member, blue ribbon committee.

The Special Review Committee, originally a subcommittee of the now-dissolved Human Services Commission, was created in late 2011 by then Commissioner and former Oklahoma County District Attorney Wes Lane. Its purpose was to review OKDHS’s role in child abuse and neglect deaths where the agency had some previous child welfare connection with the family.

The committee spent more than a year conducting a broad review of 135 child deaths which occurred between 2010 and 2012. The committee then conducted an in-depth review of 36 of those cases where the child died from either abuse or neglect and the family had some level of child welfare involvement in the 12 months preceding their deaths. Only one of the child death cases reviewed was of a child actually in state custody at the time.

“We observed instances where other agencies were involved in the complexities of cases, times when the public did not report abuse, and other situations where law enforcement or the judicial system, or others in the community bore some of the responsibility for a child’s death,” Lane said.

The committee’s report resoundingly disputes accusations made by legislators who issued a news release stating “Fifty children - on average - continue to die annually under the care of the Department of Human Services.” The release – issued in 2011 – quoted unverified numbers of child deaths, inferring the deaths occurred in the DHS foster care system.

"What we actually found was that over a 10-year period, there were an average of 12 children who died each year in state custody, and the majority died from natural causes or of the injuries they suffered at the hands of their abusers,” said Lane. "The news release issued by these legislators was clearly not based on real numbers and issued at a time when stories about some of these children's deaths were being reported by the media before the full facts surrounding their deaths were known to anyone."

Lane described the report as balanced, noting that the findings are sorted among system issues, domestic violence, drug abuse, household conditions, OKDHS administrative, policy, and performance issues, and systemic issues outside of OKDHS.

"Make no mistake about it," Lane said, "we found clear areas where DHS must improve and make changes to its policies and procedures – and we note that many changes are already underway with the Pinnacle Plan. But what we ultimately have had to sadly recognize is that there are no sure methods to predict murder or to examine the circumstances in a child’s family and be able to definitively predict what negative consequences will occur to those children."

The committee’s report also noted that in addition to improving the child protection system,
Oklahoma must find a way to address unstable family and home environments which contribute to occurrences of abuse and neglect.

“The truth is, DHS may never be able to stop children from being murdered because many times the problem is upstream from them,” said Lane. “Sadly enough, children are going to continue to die in unstable family environments. Just tweaking a government agency is not going to stop this.”

“As a state, we need to concentrate on building safe homes for our children and statistically the least-likely place for child abuse and neglect is in the home of the child’s biological, married parents,” Lane stated. “This is not the child abuse prevention ‘silver bullet,’ but if we know that children are absolutely safest in that environment, why wouldn’t we as leaders from government, business, education and the faith community do everything we can to strengthen marriage as an Oklahoma institution over the coming years?”

National statistics show the highest rate of child abuse is for a child living with a single parent who is cohabitating with a non-biological partner. The incidence of abuse and neglect for those children is almost ten times greater than for children living with their married biological parents.

Ed Lake, who became OKDHS Director on November 1, 2012, expressed his gratitude to Lane and the rest of the committee for their work.

“We are most appreciative of the work of the committee resulting in these thoughtful and action-oriented recommendations,” said Lake. “In fact, we have already implemented many of the recommendations specific to DHS and will continue to do so as we move forward with the Pinnacle Plan. It’s also critically important for all of us involved in this work to reaffirm our commitment to fostering a truly dynamic system to address the complexities of severe child abuse and neglect.”

Deborah Smith, Director of OKDHS Child Welfare Services, worked with the committee during their review of the child death cases.

"It was hard work but everyone involved was there because they want to help the children of this state,” said Smith. “In any child welfare case, we can look back and find things that could have been done differently. The benefit of this review process was that committee members gained a better understanding of our agency’s role and how we interact with the rest of the system, and helped identify areas where we could make changes that will have a positive impact on child protection."

OKDHS has issued its response to the committee’s report which outlines internal changes already made which address many of the committee’s recommendations, and how it will address further changes during implementation of the Pinnacle Plan, the five-year improvement plan for the state’s foster care system.

Lane encouraged the governor, legislature, agencies working with children, law enforcement, schools, and the public, to read the committee’s report in its entirety. He described their findings as important but the recommendations, particularly those dealing with prevention, should be a call to action for all Oklahomans.

“The work of this Committee will be in vain if our state does not act on these findings and recommendations,” Lane said. “The citizens serving on this committee brought a lot of good old Oklahoma common sense to the table. They were deeply concerned that what we have with child abuse is far beyond just a DHS problem. It’s an ‘all of our’ problem. We need to pay attention to what they had to say.”

In addition to the Special Review Committee's work, Lane and former Human Services
Commissioner Karen Waddell, have worked with prominent business and faith leaders in Oklahoma to form a clearinghouse matching needs, services, and people wanting to help abused and neglected children, called "Count Me in 4 Kids."

“The Committee’s report speaks to our belief that children suffering from abuse and neglect are not simply a DHS responsibility, but everyone’s responsibility,” said Lane. “Karen Waddell is modeling what we hope many other Oklahomans will do for at-risk children – see a piece of the problem and own it. She has launched an organization to identify the many needs of the thousands of children involved with DHS in the greater Oklahoma City area – and meet those needs with the help of thousands of citizens of good will. Our expectation is that this community partnership between DHS and Oklahoma citizens will accomplish things together for children that DHS alone could never have been able to do. These are all of our children," Lane said.

“Count Me In 4 Kids” is a grass roots collaborative matching the needs of foster kids, foster families, adoptive kids, and adoptive families with those who want to help,” Waddell said. “This is an organization where anyone in Oklahoma who wants to help kids and families can do so. We’ll connect them to the right place or help them send a donation, sign up for respite care, be a foster parent, or read to a child. The needs are many and we’re going to make sure that Oklahomans know who needs help and how to help them." The public will be able to volunteer, donate tax deductible funds or other resources to Count Me in 4 Kids at www.countmein4kids.org.