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Auditor General DePasquale Says Audit Leads to Major Changes at ChildLine, Helping Protect More At-Risk Children

Says DHS has made significant improvements, but more must still be done

HARRISBURG – Auditor General Eugene DePasquale today said major changes at the Department of Human Services’ (DHS) child-abuse hotline, ChildLine, are making a significant difference in helping children who might be victims of abuse or neglect.

“When we first began our audit of ChildLine, we were so concerned by what we found that I issued an interim report in May,” DePasquale said. “Because of that interim report, DHS implemented numerous changes that are having a measurable impact on ChildLine’s ability to function as it should.

“I am very pleased DHS took our recommendations seriously and acted swiftly to improve the myriad of problems that were leaving at-risk children in potentially dangerous situations.”

DePasquale pointed out, however, that challenges remain at ChildLine, such as the 58,000 calls that went unanswered between Jan. 1, 2014, and June 30, 2016.

“In the first six months of 2016 alone, more than 9,000 calls went unanswered,” DePasquale said. “That’s an improvement from my interim audit report, but it is still 11 percent of all calls — and that remains unacceptable. Any one of those calls could be a life-or-death situation for a child.

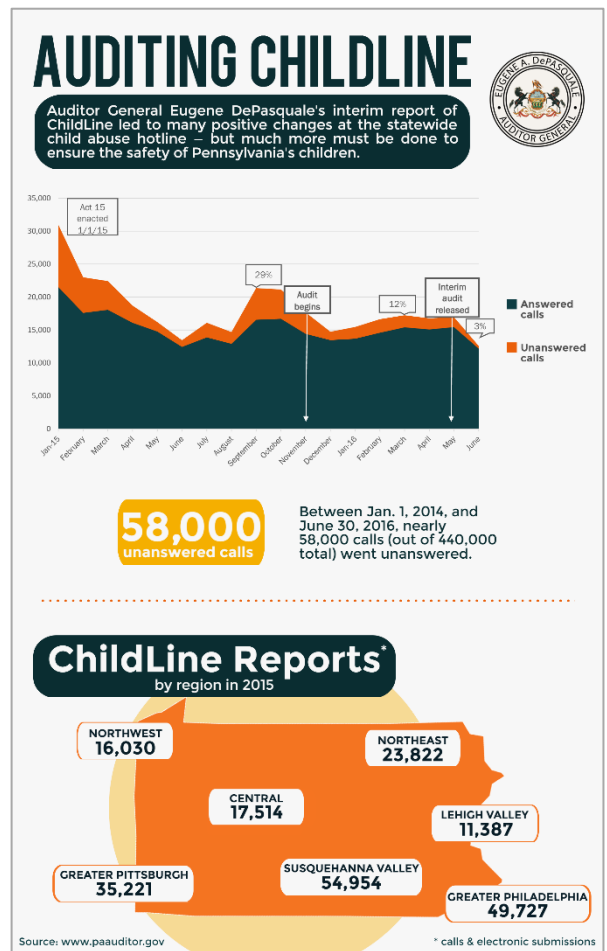
“One further action DHS should take immediately is appoint an independent child protection ombudsman, who would review complaints and would recommend system improvements.”

The final audit of ChildLine includes eight findings and 24 recommendations for continued improvement.

“DHS needs to remain vigilant and proactive in addressing problems that arise at ChildLine,” DePasquale said. “When we’re talking about the safety of Pennsylvania’s children, there can be no hesitation in doing what’s right.”

Verifiable improvement

DHS officials took several actions to address major problems pointed out in the May interim audit report. For example:



- **Understaffing:** After a robust round of hiring and a new policy on required minimum staffing levels, DHS met the minimum call staffing level 90 percent of the time during the last two weeks of June. In comparison, the interim report found that at no time in 2015 was ChildLine adequately staffed.

“DHS did the right thing by communicating its staffing needs to the legislature and then quickly bringing on a bevy of new employees,” DePasquale said. “But it must do more, because as of June, 17 percent of ChildLine’s caseworker positions had yet to be filled.”

- **Tracking all calls:** Following the recommendations of the interim report, on Aug. 1, 2016, DHS began tracking the reason for all calls. Until then, the reasons for 124,000 calls that did not result in referral reports were simply not documented.

“The improved tracking of calls comes directly from one of the interim report’s recommendations,” DePasquale said. “I applaud DHS for taking such swift action.”

- **Monitoring calls:** In July, DHS implemented a new policy that formally requires supervisors to monitor at least one call per caseworker per month. As of the end of June, 47 calls had been monitored in 2016 — most of them in late June after our interim report demonstrated that just 56 calls were monitored in 2014 and 2015 combined.

“Obviously there’s still room for improvement, but I am heartened by DHS’ concerted effort to improve its supervisory monitoring of calls,” DePasquale said.

Other issues need improvement

While the interim audit report in May focused on abuse allegations getting through to ChildLine, the final audit report also focused on DHS’ handling of the abuse allegations once received by ChildLine. Ensuring that referrals to appropriate agencies happen in a timely manner and investigations are completed is obviously crucial, as children’s lives and well-being are potentially at risk the longer the process is drawn out.

The final audit report highlights several new areas where DHS needs to make improvements:

- **Delayed referrals:** DHS’ goal is to transmit ChildLine reports to county and law enforcement agencies within two hours, yet auditors found 22 of the 85 referrals reviewed were delayed longer than two hours, a couple took more than 24 hours to be transmitted.
- **Late investigation outcomes:** County agencies and law enforcement are required by the Child Protective Services Law to complete investigations of child abuse within 60 calendar days of the initial report. Twenty of the 85 referrals auditors reviewed which required investigation outcomes, did not have outcomes as of March 15, 2016, ranging from 35 days to 375 days past the 60-day timeframe. Another 20 of the 85 referrals reviewed had investigation outcomes which were received from one day to 296 days after the 60-day deadline. DHS regulations call for reports with no investigation outcome recorded after 60 days to be recorded as “unfounded” in the DHS system used for background checks.
- **Inadequate staff training:** Auditors found that DHS did not have established, ongoing training for ChildLine employees, nor did it document whether individual employees successfully completed the required seven-week introductory training.
- **Missing records and outcomes:** Auditors reviewed the data for all 217,278 records of ChildLine reports received in 2015 and found 10,789 report numbers were missing. DHS reported that 352 were skipped by the automatic numbering system, and the rest were deleted by caseworkers because the referral did not result in a child abuse or neglect report; however, auditors could not validate this information since the reports were deleted.

As of March 2016, ChildLine did not receive investigation outcomes for 12,153, or 10 percent, of all report of child abuse and neglect requiring an investigation outcome.

“When child abuse reports come in to ChildLine every minute counts,” DePasquale said. “When the report of suspected abuse is not sent for investigation immediately or the investigation’s outcome is not reported, it could allow a child abuser to continue undetected. That is inexcusable.

“The delays could also mean that people seeking background checks might not be able to receive clearance because the system could mark that there’s an investigation pending.

“Thankfully, because of the questions we asked during our audit, DHS has already revised its procedures several times to help ensure outcomes are reported in a timely manner,” DePasquale said.

In fact, DHS agreed with all of the audit findings and is already working to implement recommendations. For example, the agency recently hired a training supervisor and put measures in place to ensure all ChildLine employees are properly trained.

DePasquale said that, as the hub through which all child abuse and neglect are reported in Pennsylvania, ChildLine must be adequately staffed at all times by properly trained caseworkers who are using a reliable tracking system.

“Failure to provide these factors results in vulnerable children remaining in at-risk situations,” DePasquale said. “As a commonwealth, we must ensure we are doing everything in our power to protect our children from abuse and neglect.”

The ChildLine audit report is available online at: www.PaAuditor.gov.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: A high-resolution PDF version of the “Auditing ChildLine” [infographic can be downloaded here](#).