



Spending on children at risk halved: report

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THE amount of money the NSW Government spends on helping children at risk has almost halved over the past five years, making it one of the most parsimonious states when it comes to child protection.

A report by the NSW Auditor-General, tabled in Parliament yesterday, found that spending on each case notified to the Department of Community Services dropped to \$1383 in the year to June 2006, the most recently data available, down from \$2671 five years ago.

The audit added fuel to criticism of the department, where a series of problems has emerged in recent months. The Government fended off accusations from the Opposition that children were dying because of its failure to manage DOCS.

"That is why, a fortnight ago, [the Government] appointed Justice Wood to review the system," the Premier, Morris Iemma, told Parliament. "It will continue to be a priority."

The inquiry's trigger was the death of Shellay Ward, 7, although disturbing cases involving other children have since emerged.

The Auditor-General's report showed that the rate of case notifications was higher in NSW than in other states, at 56.2 children per 1000, compared with the national average of 36.5.

Notifications of indigenous children at risk, at 181.2 cases per 1000 children, were almost double the national average of 100.9.

Child-protection reports reached 241,003 in the year to June 2006, up from 185,198 two years earlier. Of these, more than 160,000 cases were referred for further investigation.

Only a third of cases were substantiated, indicating either considerable wasted effort or a failure in successfully pursuing reported cases, the report said.

"Our concern is that this is another independent report showing that despite the \$1.2 billion improvement package, NSW substantiation is running at half the rate of Victoria and Queensland, and is further evidence of the crisis in the state's DOCS system," the Opposition Leader, Barry O'Farrell, said.

Julie Cashmore, a child-protection expert and associate professor of law at Sydney University, said there were concerns the Western-style protection systems were unsustainable.

"We probably won't have enough people to handle all the reports, and hopefully Justice Wood will address this," Ms Cashmore said.

NSW's system of mandatory reporting of child abuse, with a \$22,000 fine for failure to report

might be triggering much of the reporting, she said.

"DOCS has done a lot of work to put in place various processes that may take some time to show results but it may not be the best use of resources to continue to try to make the current system more efficient and effective if it needs a radical overhaul," she said.

"Departmental statistics indicate that one in every five children will be reported to the department at some point before they turn 18," the Auditor-General noted. "In response to the increasing rate of reported child abuse and neglect, the department has commenced a major review of the child-protection system."

The review was "one of the key priorities for 2007-08".

The report found that NSW police also compared poorly with interstate forces. The number of investigations completed within 30 days fell below the national average in all categories - homicide, robbery, unlawful entry with intent, motor vehicle theft and other forms of theft.

The number of prisoners returning to jail within two years of their release in NSW was also well above the national average, at 43.3 per cent compared with the national average of 38.3 per cent.