



GOVERNOR GREG ABBOTT

March 25, 2015

The Honorable John J. Specia, Jr.
Commissioner
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
701 West 51st Street
Austin, Texas 78751

Dear Commissioner Specia:

Abuse or neglect of our most vulnerable Texans — our children — is intolerable, and it is especially unacceptable when it happens to a child under the care umbrella of the State of Texas. I am deeply concerned to learn that three children under the care and supervision of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) died in the first three months of 2015. This follows the tragic deaths of nine children in 2014. Such tragedies are solemn reminders of our enduring challenge to protect children from abuse and neglect.

Children and families at risk of higher rates of abuse and neglect require greater interventions and resources. Therefore, I have proposed an increase of \$40 million in additional funding for children and families at risk and foster children by increasing access to outcome-based prevention, child safety placement oversight, and community-based family safety services. While additional funding can support measures to improve safety and prevent child fatalities, it must be accompanied by effective policy changes to have a lasting impact. Texas urgently needs comprehensive reforms to the state's struggling foster care and child protection systems to ensure we put children in safe environments, provide them with a sense of permanency, and learn from the tragedies of the past.

With these very important goals in mind, it has come to my attention that safety screenings, the review of child fatalities, and the process for closing certain types of Child Protective Services (CPS) cases are three areas of weakness within our system. I strongly support the review and implementation of additional safety measures and placement protocols to address these shortcomings. Specifically, I would like to see the following measures incorporated into the standard of care for each child in the protective care or foster care environment:

- Require CPS regional management to enforce policies regarding face-to-face visits with children and caregivers in both foster care and safety placements.

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- Require CPS staff to provide families, caregivers, and stakeholders with information to support child safety in a variety of ways, including: firearm safety, safety around water, vehicle safety, and safe sleep practices.
- Develop and implement a Parent-Child Safety Placements (PCSP) caregiver/home screening tool to thoroughly assess the appropriateness and ability of each potential PCSP caregiver.
- Develop and implement a policy to prohibit closing a PCSP investigation without wrap-around or follow-up services in place.
- Research and implement new policies as needed to address recidivism related to safety of children in PCSP placements.
- Establish a practice and protocol for conducting a thorough review of all child fatalities or critical injuries resulting in hospitalization; ensure that findings are used in a truly meaningful way to improve CPS policies and practices.
- Improve the performance evaluation and recertification process for foster care contractors to ensure the safety and well-being of foster children is in the hands of truly quality providers.
- Establish and implement caseworker protocols to educate foster children about how to anonymously report abuse and neglect.

By April 15, please report to me an update on these actions, and others you may deem necessary to improve the care we are ensuring Texas children receive.

I recognize that there are many demands at DFPS, and that you may not always have the resources to meet those demands. In prioritizing the challenges that must be addressed, I submit that preventing child deaths should be at the very top. As Texans, it is all of our responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect, but DFPS has a truly special mission to go a step further — to support, protect, and strengthen children and their families. I thank you for your dedication to this mission and look forward to working with you and your staff and stakeholders to make Texas as safe as possible for all children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Abbott", written in a cursive style.

Greg Abbott
Governor

GA:kgc