

## **The New Jersey Central State Registry: An Assessment**

### **Executive Summary**

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One of the most important child protective services functions of a public child welfare agency is to receive and to promptly and appropriately respond to reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. Commonly referred to as a State's *child abuse and neglect hotline*, the State Central Registry (SCR) is the unit within New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF) that is responsible for receiving and responding to reports of child abuse and neglect. The SCR is a 24 hour-7 day per week operation. With every call, decisions are made which potentially affect the safety, well-being and chance for a stable, permanent future for a child and his or her family. The manner, speed and clarity with which the SCR receives, screens and acts on calls to its hotline greatly influences how the community interacts with and perceives the State's overall child protection performance.

This report is the result of an independent assessment of the SCR conducted by the federal court-appointed Monitor of New Jersey's child welfare reforms under the *Charlie and Nadine v. Corzine* Modified Settlement Agreement (MSA). The Monitor was joined in the assessment by representatives of the New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Quality Analysis and Information unit.

The assessment was designed to answer the following three questions:

1. Are SCR screening decisions appropriate?
2. Is SCR screening documentation accurate and sufficiently complete to enable the case managers in the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) field offices to respond appropriately?
3. Is complete and accurate information reaching the DYFS field office staff in a timely manner?

This assessment is the second formal assessment completed on New Jersey's SCR. In 2005, shortly after the SCR was created, the independent Child Welfare Panel created by the original *Charlie and Nadine H. v. McGreevey* Settlement Agreement reviewed SCR operations.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to 2005 review, which found multiple policy, management and operational problems within the SCR, ***this review found the SCR operations to be well managed, professional and appropriately focused on the timeliness and the quality of the response to the public's reports of child maltreatment.***

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<sup>1</sup> New Jersey Child Welfare Panel, *Period I Monitoring Report*, March 2005 and *Period II Monitoring Report*, October 2005.

Much has been accomplished in the past three years. Overall, the Monitor's assessment found that:

- ***SCR decision-making is sound and the vast majority of screening decisions are appropriate.*** The Study Team concurred with the SCR call classification in 92 percent of the calls reviewed and with the assigned response priority for 93 percent of the calls. After listening to tape recordings of calls and reviewing written documentation, the number of cases in which the Study Team came to a different conclusion than the SCR was small. The findings however suggest several areas in which additional policy guidance and clarification is needed, particularly with respect to handling calls alleging maltreatment in institutions which require a referral to the Institutional Abuse Investigations Unit (IAIU) and for those reports that need a child welfare assessment, not an investigation, but in a urgent time frame.
- ***For the vast majority of calls, screeners collect the information that DYFS case managers need in order to appropriately investigate complaints and assess families in need of services, although in some cases the documentation forwarded to the field offices needs to be more accurate and complete.*** Over 80 percent of the NJ SPIRIT Screening Summaries contained sufficient information to support the screening and priority decisions.
- ***The SCR completes its work in a timely fashion and the vast majority of reports or referrals reach the field within three hours of a call to the SCR.*** Eighty (80) percent of the Child Protective Services (CPS) reports and Child Welfare Services (CWS) referrals were sent to the field offices within 3 hours of the conclusion of the call.
- ***The majority of calls were handled thoroughly and professionally by SCR screeners.*** The SCR has established protocols for training and supervising its workers and has developed processes for continuous quality assurance. These are far more developed and effective than were evident in 2005, although there is still room for continued improvement.
- ***In addition to using the SCR to receive and process reports of maltreatment and requests for child welfare services, the SCR call and data tracking system is currently used to keep track of after hours employees (SPRU workers) and their schedules.*** This use of SCR staff time and resources for administrative purposes that are not integral to the functions of the SCR should be reconsidered.

In addition to the findings, the report includes multiple recommendations regarding policy, operations and staff development to further strengthen the operations of the SCR.

A complete copy of the report is available from the Center for the Study of Social Policy, 202/371-1565 ([www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org)).