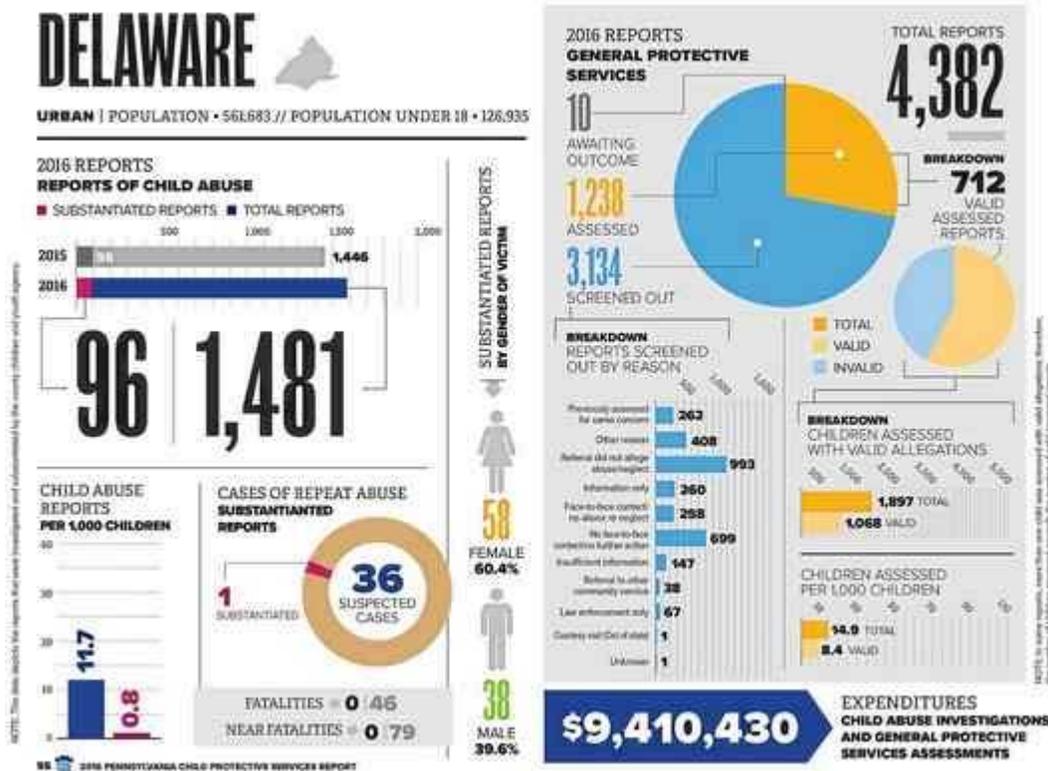


Child abuse cases rising in Pennsylvania, A.G. says



This chart outlines child abuse statistics for Delaware County. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Auditor General

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POSTED: 09/14/17, 8:42 PM EDT | UPDATED: 1 WEEK AGO

Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale released a report highlighting a startling trend in the commonwealth Thursday about the well-being of at-risk children.

Despite spending \$1.8 billion last year to protect Pennsylvania's children, the number of reported cases of abuse and neglect has risen across the state, including in Delaware County where there were 1,481 total reports of neglect in 2016.

DePasquale said the problems begin with Pennsylvania's understaffed, underprepared and inadequate children and youth services.

“Child welfare in this state is administered through a piecemeal system that doesn’t receive adequate resources from state or county governments,” DePasquale said. “It’s not only a matter of providing adequate funding and resources but also a matter of using the resources the state and counties have efficiently and effectively.”

Pennsylvania does not have yet staff an independent child-protection official tasked with investigating complaints against CYS services, a position DePasquale recommended to the Department of Health Services to advocate for at-risk children.

At-risk children are defined as those who come from poverty, experience family instability and dysfunction and racial discrimination.

DePasquale said the challenges already facing CYS caseworkers derive from difficulty finding enough qualified professionals who receive inadequate training, deal with heavy caseloads and burdensome paperwork and have remarkably low pay and quick turnover rates.

In 2016, there were 46 cases of child deaths and 76 cases of near-deaths in Pennsylvania.

Delaware County contributed zero fatalities and near-fatalities out of 96 substantiated reports of abuse, according to the report.

In Chester, the Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation works with young mothers and families to foster healthy living to combat fetal and infant mortality and morbidity rate.

The foundation partners with the Health, Education & Legal Assistance Project: A Medical-Legal Partnership (HELP:MLP) to advocate for parents who face unlawful evictions, benefit terminations that are unlawful, utility shutoffs, domestic violence victims who need access to shelter and civil or criminal protective orders.

“(We) attempt to fill the gap between what these front-line service providers are seeing and what they know what to say to their clients,” said Laura Handel, an attorney with the Medical-Legal Partnership for the foundation.

“We offer legal services to poor people in need, but it’s just not enough, and that’s why that justice gap exists,” said Dan Atkins, the director of HELP:MLP. “A lot of what our clients are encountering is immoral, unethical and illegal, and when it’s illegal we can pursue legal remedies.”

Handel represents people in fair hearings when they’ve been wrongfully terminated from benefits programs, while colleague Jordan Casey represents clients who may be facing eviction or experience housing conditions problems.

Sexual abuse was the issue dealt in 47.5 percent of cases. However, 539 of the 6,486 dealt with serious physical neglect, which members of the HELP:MLP said poverty was often a contributing factor.

A majority of the instances occurred in single-parent homes.

“We’re here to support our partners,” Atkins said. “These are nurses, case managers, that are working with pregnant women who have serious unmet legal needs that are interfering with their ability to start healthy and have healthy birth outcomes.”

Atkins and Handel said that while their work doesn’t directly crossover to Children and Youth Services, but are nevertheless tasked with remediating issues dealing with poverty.

“We have a misimpression of what precipitates placements of foster care, it’s not usually abuse, it’s usually neglect, and to the extent that we’re getting at circumstances of neglect, we’re preventing bad things from happening,” Atkins said.

“These are often consequences of poverty and parents not having access to the resources they need,” Handel said. “We’re seeing kids taken out of homes where the client got into a dispute with a landlord because they don’t have legal assistance and then the child is deemed homeless or under-housed and placed in foster care.”

“We see poverty driving some of those removals,” she said.

For a full review of the “State of the Child” report, it’s posted on the Auditor General’s website at paauditor.gov.