

### Why We Conducted This Audit

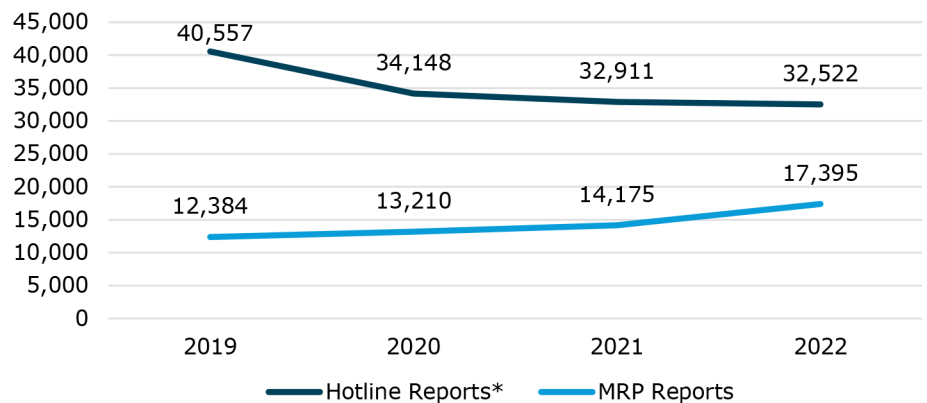
We evaluated the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) processes for receiving and processing reports of potential child abuse/neglect during fiscal years 2018 through 2022. In Louisiana, reports of alleged child abuse and/or neglect are received through a toll-free, statewide hotline operated by Centralized Intake (CI) staff within DCFS' Child Welfare Division or through the online Mandated Reporter Portal (MRP). Intake staff work shifts to provide coverage 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to screen and refer reports of potential child abuse/neglect for investigation. We conducted this audit in response to legislative interest. In July 2022, after several reports of child abuse and fatalities involving a parent or caretaker, the Senate Health and Welfare Committee began a review of DCFS's child welfare system through periodic public meetings.

### What We Found

- The majority of reports received by CI during fiscal years 2018 through 2022 were from mandatory reporters such as school personnel and medical professionals. Since the online Mandated Reporter Portal (MRP) was established in August 2018, 57,164 (29.0%) of the 197,302 reports received by CI came in through the portal. In addition, emergency reports submitted through the MRP increased by 47.3%, from 239 reports in fiscal year 2019 to 352 reports in fiscal year 2022, despite the MRP informing mandatory reporters to report emergency reports through the hotline.** While state law authorizes mandatory reporters to file reports through the MRP, DCFS' mandatory reporter training and the MRP advise mandatory reporters to only use the MRP for non-emergency reports of potential child abuse/neglect and to call in emergency reports to the hotline. The following exhibit shows the number of reports received via the hotline and the MRP during fiscal years 2019 through 2022.

**Mandatory reporters** are individuals required by law to report suspected or known instances of abuse and neglect and include professionals such as health, mental health, and social service practitioners; law enforcement officers; teachers and child care providers; and clergy members.

**Reports of Child Abuse/ Neglect Received, by Method Fiscal years 2019 through 2022**



\*Includes reports made in person at DCFS local officers.

Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using data received from DCFS' ACCESS system

## What We Found (Cont.)

- DCFS has not developed performance targets for all important hotline metrics including wait time, callbacks, and the number of calls abandoned that would help it evaluate CI performance.** Our analysis of fiscal year 2022 call data found that the average speed to answer calls was 6.9 minutes, the average number of abandoned calls each month was 1,183, and the average number of reporters requesting callbacks each month was 1,111. Without performance targets or goals for each of these metrics, it is difficult for management to determine if CI is answering calls and processing reports of abuse and neglect timely. The exhibit below summarizes our analysis of hotline data from fiscal year 2022 regarding different metrics.

Hotline Call Metrics Fiscal Year 2022					
Metric	Description	Total Number	Percent	Average Per Month	Target
Calls Answered Live	Number of calls answered directly by CI staff (caller did not request a callback)	45,841	60.3%	3,820	66.0%
Average Speed to Answer	Average number of minutes it takes for the call to be answered by CI staff	N/A	N/A	6.9 mins	not developed
Callbacks	Number of callers waiting in the queue that opted to receive a callback if all CI staff were busy	13,326	17.5%	1,111	not developed
Calls Abandoned	Number of calls abandoned while waiting to be answered (caller hung up before CI could answer)	14,192	18.7%	1,183	not developed
Caller Disconnect	Number of calls answered by CI where the caller hung up before finishing the report	2,612	3.4%	218	N/A
<b>Total Calls</b>		<b>75,971</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>6,331</b>	<b>N/A</b>

**Source:** Prepared by legislative auditor’s staff using data from DCFS.

- DCFS should use hotline data on call volume and other metrics to determine appropriate staffing levels. Since 2011, CI has used nine overlapping shifts but these shifts are not based on an analysis of call volume.** Our analysis of call volume data from calendar year 2022 found that intake may be overstaffed from approximately 5:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. on any given weekday and CI staff could be reallocated to shifts during the peak call period between 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. In addition, we found that Thursdays and Fridays had the highest daily average speed to answer calls and the most calls abandoned during calendar year 2022.

According to Casey Family Programs, one of the elements of an effective hotline is providing a consistent and timely response. Therefore, it is vital that the system is sufficiently staffed so that reports of child maltreatment are answered quickly and processed efficiently. In addition, agencies should monitor workload levels in real time and adjust hotline staffing levels whenever necessary to ensure sufficient staffing and oversight.

- DCFS reduces the risk of incorrectly accepting or not accepting reports of child abuse/neglect by requiring two levels of review for each intake decision. In addition, DCFS has strengthened its quality assurance processes to evaluate the performance of CI staff.** Establishing a continuous quality improvement process could help DCFS better understand the outcomes of CI’s decisions and identify necessary improvements to CI decision-making and processes.