

Lawmakers question child welfare officials on recent problems

by Kevin Bessler

January 31 2022 3:29 PM



The Center Square – The first of several hearings was held Friday on the problems plaguing the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

State Rep. Camille Lilly, D-Oak Park, said the subject matter hearing would be held in the House Appropriations-Human Services Committee amid reported department shortcomings so lawmakers could “form holistic, long-term solutions.”

Some lawmakers during the virtual hearing Friday said issues like children being kept in psychiatric facilities rather than being with families is alarming. The latest is the case of a 13-year-old boy who was held in emergency custody for months despite a judge's order to move him to a more appropriate setting. Earlier this month, a Cook County judge cited DCFS Director Marc Smith for contempt for failing to relocate the boy to a therapeutic foster home.

Now there is word that a particular emergency housing facility was the subject of 161 service calls to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department last year. The 12-bed facility near Mount Vernon has a \$1.9 million contract to house children in DCFS custody.

During the hearing, state Rep. Tom Demmer, R-Dixon, highlighted the case of a 7-year-old Oregon, Illinois, boy whose mother is now charged with his murder.

"The child had an established relationship with a foster family where he was safe, where he was cared for and where he was loved, yet was repeatedly moved back to the custody of his mother despite the many, many allegations," Demmer said.

Smith said caseworkers use one criteria when determining whether to remove a child from a home.

"Making sure that we make decisions for every individual child that we come in contact with based on one thing, are they safe?" Smith said.

State Rep. Kathleen Willis, D-Addison, said she is introducing a bill that would create an oversight commission of DCFS.

"I want to see us work together as partners and not make it a finger-pointing thing because we need to get to where our ultimate goal is to help the children in the state of Illinois and the families," Willis said.

More hearings are planned and are expected to deal with DCFS worker safety in the wake of the Jan. 4 stabbing death of DCFS investigator Deidre Silas at a home near Springfield. Benjamin Reed, who lived at the house, is facing murder charges in the death.