

Baker is latest governor to battle child welfare woes

By [Jim O'Sullivan](#) Globe Staff August 19, 2015

In the 1990s, Charlie Baker, then the state's newly minted health and human services chief, led an overhaul of the state's child welfare agency. As a candidate for governor last year, he railed against its recent failures and stood by as political allies blamed them on his opponent.

Now, as governor, Baker finds himself grappling with the death of yet another child in the custody of the state's Department of Children and Families, an agency whose chronic problems have bedeviled generations of the state's chief executives.

On Monday, Baker said ensuring against future cases like the one that unfolded last weekend in Auburn was his "highest priority." Nearly eight months into his administration, though, the governor has yet to release a broad reform plan despite repeatedly critiquing the Patrick administration's record on child protection during the 2014 campaign.

On Tuesday, Baker said the challenges at the agency are related largely to the population it serves.

"Very complicated families, very difficult circumstances and situations. In many cases, complicated kids, too," Baker said.

"I know people are working hard and I know they're trying to do their best, but clearly we have to do better," he told reporters during a State House news conference.

The union representing DCF caseworkers said many of them carry workloads of up to 25 families. In May testimony to lawmakers during annual budget hearings, DCF Commissioner Linda S. Spears said the department had "not yet been able to achieve the goal of 15 families for all ongoing social workers."

On Saturday, a 2-year-old named Avalena died at an Auburn foster home that a DCF worker [had just visited last Wednesday](#). Police and emergency personnel had [responded to 28 calls from the home to 911 since 2008](#). Between 2004 and 2008, emergency responders had received another 35 calls from the two Auburn homes where the foster mother had lived during that time.

A second little girl, a 22-month-old foster child, was also taken Saturday from the home where Avalena lived [and was still in critical condition Tuesday](#), Baker's office said. Last month, [a 7-year-old boy in Hardwick under DCF watch nearly died](#), and at last report he remained unresponsive.

The agency's performance has drawn heightened scrutiny [since the 2013 disappearance of a 5-year-old Fitchburg boy](#), Jeremiah Oliver, whom social workers were supposed to be monitoring. His body was found last year next to a highway.

[The state ranked 38th out of 50](#) in the percentage of foster children who received monthly visits from caseworkers, according to 2012 federal Health and Human Services data, and 45th in the category of children not mistreated again within six months. Only four other states joined Massachusetts in failing to report data on abuse report response times.

"I've always felt that one of the toughest jobs in state government is the role of DCF, social workers, management, and staff," said Michael D. Weekes, president and chief executive of the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, and a deputy commissioner of the child welfare agency during the Weld administration. "Very difficult decisions that have to be made on a daily basis that affect thousands of lives, and it's challenging."

"I'm not aware if there is a perfect system that's out there," he added.

Management at DCF became a defining issue in last year's governor's race between Baker and the Democratic attorney general, Martha Coakley, when Baker allies launched searing broadsides against Coakley that attacked the core of her argument that she would be a more compassionate governor.

In the campaign's closing weeks, with polls showing the outcome up for grabs, [a pro-Baker super PAC aired television ads](#) accusing Coakley of insufficiently acting in defense of the state's children.

"Martha Coakley failed our most vulnerable citizens," the spot's narrator intoned. "How could we trust her again?"

Baker at the time said he did not "like the tone" of the ad, which featured a playground without children on it and an unmoving teddy bear, but declined to call for its removal from the airwaves and said questions about Coakley's performance were "worth discussing."

Asked Tuesday whether he had gained a new appreciation for DCF's complexities, Baker said, "Well, I had a pretty good appreciation for it when I was secretary of health and human services."

As HHS chief under Governor William Weld, Baker called for a review of the 23,000 children in the care of the current DCF's predecessor — known then as the Department of Social Services — and under his oversight, adoptions rose and supervisory oversight improved.

But [Baker acknowledged in a Globe interview](#) last year that the effort still came up short.

“Generally speaking, I think we got pretty far down the road on most of the stuff we were chasing,” Baker said. “But when I was at health and human services, I know we never got where we wanted to go on staffing and caseloads.”

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, said lack of resources and a high rate of staff and administrative turnover are just some of the problems that pose roadblocks to reform at child protection agencies.

“[Child welfare] systems are hard to reform for many reasons; they tend to be crisis-driven,” Finkelhor said. “So it’s often hard to get funding to deal with the overall functioning because something’s been grabbed here and grabbed there.”

Like this past winter’s [historic woes at the MBTA](#), another state agency that has vexed policy makers for decades, the problems at DCF will ratchet up pressure on Baker’s stance against seeking more revenue. Senate President Stanley C. Rosenberg, since taking over in January, has overseen an increase in the Senate’s appetite for higher taxes.

“We’ve had discussions about this internally, and the only answer to this DCF situation is more money,” another Democrat in legislative leadership said. “The caseload that each social worker has to have is exorbitant.”

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