

Kids may pay for social worker shortage

by Marla Williams

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JUNEAU — Declaring war on child abuse, Alaska's Legislature made a show this year of building an arsenal of new child protection laws — but critics now say that despite the fanfare, lawmakers didn't supply needed troops for the front lines of the battle.

"There are children in Alaska who need protection, who need care, that are not going to get it because there isn't money to hire adequate staff," says Michael Price, director of the state's Division of Family and Youth Services.

"Because we have inadequate staff, we're not intervening as early as we should. Children are being left scarred by physical and sexual abuse and neglect," says Price.

Many of the child abuse victims of today, Price says, will grow up to be the alcoholics, criminals and child abusers of tomorrow.

He adds that social workers in Alaska must now contend with workloads of 80 or more "really terrible cases of child abuse," — three times the caseload recommended by the National Child Welfare League.

Since 1978, the division's child protection caseload has shot up 122 percent. At the same time,

though, the agency's social work staff has increased by only 18 percent, according to a report released last fall by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services.

This year, to help meet the massive workload, Gov. Bill Sheffield asked lawmakers to fund 39 new social workers and clerical support staff in the division. But although legislators agreed, on paper, to create 35 of the new positions, they only put up part of the money needed to pay for them.

Price says that because lawmakers did not fully fund a negotiated salary increase for state employees, and because they planned for job vacancies in the social worker ranks, only 23 new positions were really funded.

And that, he says, is not enough.

"We recognize there is a decrease in state revenues," he says, holding up a copy of the new state budget, "but what are our priorities? Do we want to protect children? How many miles of road, how many capital projects do we need at the expense of Alaska's children?"

That same question is being asked by officials in the Department of Law, who are charged with enforcing the new child protection laws.

Legislators were asked to earmark money for the hiring of six additional state prosecutors to handle only child abuse cases. Money for only one additional prosecutor was approved by lawmakers.

"It's a nightmare," says Assistant Attorney General Gayle Horetski, who oversees the department's efforts to prosecute child abuse cases.

Horetski says that because state lawyers are swamped with work, some child abuse and child

neglect cases are not being prosecuted.

"We are 'maxed-out'," she says, "and it's sickening."

"We are not prosecuting some cases just because sometimes we can't take anymore."

Saying that although she is disheartened, she is not ready to give-up, Horetski says the Department of Law will again present its case for more money for the prosecution of child abuse when lawmakers convene here again next January.

And Michael Price says the Division of Family and Youth Services is already working on an aggressive campaign to win more financial support from the legislature.

"We're not providing the kind of protection and services that a child needs," Price says.

"And what happens, then, is what kind of adults are these children going to be? You know, society eventually pays for this in the long run," he says.