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MargaritaF@auditor.ca.gov California's Foster Care System The State and Counties Have Failed to Adequately Oversee the Prescription of Psychotropic Medications to Children in Foster Care

Background

Although antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotics are prescribed to and may benefit individuals with psychiatric illnesses, these and other psychotropic medications can cause serious adverse side effects. Yet, during fiscal year 2014–15, nearly 12% (over 9,300) of California's more than 79,000 foster children received almost 96,000 Medi-Cal paid prescriptions for psychotropic medications—that's almost 10 prescriptions per child per year. Executive branch entities at the federal, state, and county levels, as well as the judicial branch at the state and county levels, oversee foster children who receive psychotropic medications.

Our Key Recommendations The Legislature should direct state and local entities to develop an effective oversight structure, and require periodic evaluations of state data to identify physicians who may be inappropriately prescribing medications.

The Department of Social Services should collaborate with counties and relevant stakeholders to develop and implement an oversight structure that addresses the weaknesses highlighted in our report.

The counties should perform the following:

- Monitor requests for authorization of psychotropic medications.
- Ensure court approval or parent consent prior to prescribing psychotropic medications.
- Ensure physicians follow-up within 30 days of prescribing a new psychotropic medication.
- Ensure proper mental health services are received along with psychotropic medications.

Key Findings

- Some counties have not adopted the state guidelines to ensure that foster children do not receive inappropriate or unnecessary psychotropic medications.
- Many foster children—in the 80 case files we reviewed—had been authorized to receive these types of medications in quantities and dosages that exceeded recommended guidelines.
 - » 14% were authorized to receive multiple psychotropic medications from the same medication class.
 - » 10% were authorized to take more medications than guidelines recommended for their ages.
 - » Nearly 25% were authorized to take larger dosages of the medications than guidelines recommended.
- One-third of the foster children we reviewed, who were prescribed new medications, did not receive timely follow-up visits with health care providers and a significant number do not appear to have received appropriate mental health services.
- More than a third of the foster children we reviewed had been prescribed medications without the required court approval or parental consent and 65% statewide appear to have been prescribed these medications without proper approval.
- California’s fragmented oversight approach for its child welfare system has contributed to the weaknesses in the oversight of the prescription of psychotropic medications to foster children—multiple government levels and branches are involved in the oversight yet there is no comprehensive State oversight plan.
- Of the case files we reviewed, many of the children’s Health and Education Passports—critical summaries of health and education information for foster children—were incomplete and inaccurate.