



Child Welfare:

HHS Should Facilitate Information Sharing Between States to Help Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Residential Facilities

GAO-22-104670

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Fast Facts

State and local agencies are primarily responsible for helping to prevent abuse and neglect in youth residential facilities, but incidents continue to occur. Stakeholders and others told us that states could take additional steps to address maltreatment in these facilities, including:

- improved oversight
- better facility staff and state investigator training
- stronger enforcement mechanisms to hold facilities accountable

We [recommended](#) that the Department of Health and Human Services facilitate information sharing among states on promising practices to prevent and address abuse and neglect in youth residential facilities.



Source: polya_olya/stock.adobe.com.

Highlights

What GAO Found

Several state agencies—including those responsible for child welfare, facility licensing, and education—work with federally funded residential facilities for youth to help prevent and address incidents of maltreatment, according to officials in four selected states. Maltreatment could include either abuse or neglect, and could result in injuries or even death. State agencies try to prevent the maltreatment of youth by requiring background screenings of facility staff, training staff, and increasing interagency coordination, among other things. When maltreatment occurs, states may respond in various ways, such as prohibiting a facility from taking in new residents or revoking its license.

Differing interpretations of what constitutes maltreatment may result in facilities over- or under-reporting incidents, thereby complicating states' data collection

efforts, according to state officials and other stakeholders. In response, selected states have taken steps to make it easier for residential facility staff to determine what types of incidents they should report, such as by providing facilities with technical assistance on states' legal reporting requirements.

Stakeholders and discussion group participants suggested additional steps that states could take to identify and address maltreatment in residential facilities, including improved facility staff and state investigator training, improved oversight, and increased provider accountability (see figure). Officials from the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education emphasized that states are primarily responsible for oversight of residential facilities and efforts to prevent maltreatment; however, the agencies told us that they support states' efforts by providing technical assistance and guidance. Nonetheless, some officials in the four selected states reported having minimal contact with or receiving little to no information from federal agencies, including HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF), the federal agency responsible for administering federal programs that provide for the safety of youth. HHS's strategic plan highlights the importance of disseminating strategies to prevent child maltreatment. By facilitating information sharing among states about promising data collection practices, training, oversight, and strategies for holding facilities accountable through stronger enforcement mechanisms, HHS could help states prevent and minimize further trauma for youth in these facilities and potentially save lives.

Stakeholder groups and discussion group participants suggested additional steps that states could take to address maltreatment in residential facilities, including:



Training



Oversight



Accountability

Source: GAO graphic based on interviews with stakeholder and discussion group participants. | GAO-22-104670

Why GAO Did This Study

News media have reported several incidents of youth being maltreated by staff employed at residential facilities. Some of these youth were in the child welfare

system and some had special needs. States oversee these facilities, and often contract with private providers to operate them. Little information is publicly available about incidents of maltreatment in federally funded residential facilities for youth. GAO was asked to review this issue.

This report examines (1) how selected states help prevent and address maltreatment in federally funded residential facilities, (2) the challenges selected states face in reporting and collecting maltreatment data, and (3) the additional steps suggested by stakeholders to address maltreatment and how relevant federal agencies are supporting state efforts. GAO interviewed state officials in four states—Arkansas, California, Massachusetts, and the Washington, D.C.—that were selected using federal data on high and low percentages of youth in residential facilities and recommendations from subject matter experts, among other factors; conducted discussion groups with residential facilities administrators and former residents of facilities; and reviewed relevant federal and state laws, regulations, and agency documents.

Recommendations

GAO recommends that HHS, in consultation with Education, facilitate information sharing among states on promising practices for preventing and addressing maltreatment in residential facilities. HHS agreed with the recommendation.

Recommendations for Executive Action

Agency Affected	Recommendation	Status
Department of Health and Human Services	The Secretary of HHS should direct the Administration for Children and Families to, in consultation with Education, facilitate information sharing among states on promising practices for	Open HHS agreed with this recommendation. Further, HHS reported that the agency, along with the Department of Education (Education), will look for further opportunities to promote promising practices for preventing

Agency Affected	Recommendation	Status
	preventing and addressing maltreatment in residential facilities for youth. (Recommendation 1)	and addressing maltreatment in residential facilities. In March 2022, HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF)'s Children's Bureau and Education hosted a technical assistance webinar for State Educational Agency foster care points of contact. The webinar covered a range of topics, including program monitoring activities. The agencies planned additional activities for summer and fall 2022, such as a blog post and webinars. To address this recommendation HHS should... View More

Full Report

Highlights	Full Report	Accessible
Page (1 page).	(39 pages).	PDF (43 pages).

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Preventing the Abuse of Youths Living in Residential Facilities

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2022

0:00 / 7:00

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