

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Penalties recommended for child welfare agency over missing data on foster kids, deaths

Jessica Calefati

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(Yifan Luo for The Baltimore Banner)

Maryland's independent budget and policy analysts have recommended lawmakers withhold \$850,000 from the state Department of Human Services until the agency responsible for child welfare can fix a slew of problems with its data.

The recommendation comes after The Banner questioned the [growing number of child maltreatment fatalities](#) in Maryland. The agency responded by saying its own data was inaccurate. Now, the extent of the agency's data problems has grown.

The agency did not disclose how often this past year children in foster care were victimized, how often they were moved between placements, and how quickly they found permanent homes, as it has done in the past when lawmakers review the agency's budget. The agency also shared only limited new information on deaths from child abuse or neglect, and failed to submit a required report on foster kids living in hospitals, most of whom are disabled.

The omissions alarmed state lawmakers in both chambers who oversee the department.

"These numbers are still not right, and we were hoping that ... we could get some clarification," Del. Aletheia McCaskill said this week. The Democrat from Baltimore County sits on one of the committees that reviews the department's budget.

"We can't continue to support and or keep giving, you know, just a little slap on the wrist for your [the agency's]



Del. Aletheia McCaskill, a Baltimore County Democrat, at the Maryland State House last year. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

The Department of Legislative Services proposed withholding the money from the agency during appropriations hearings held Monday and Friday in Annapolis — a common penalty used to nudge state agencies into compliance. The agency concurred with the plan, but asked for nearly a year to supply some of the missing data.

“We continue to discover where data was routinely released without any validation or reconciliation,” said Carnitra White, a deputy secretary at the Department of Human Services.

White disclosed to lawmakers the agency now believes 47 children died from abuse or neglect in the federal budget year that ended Sept. 30, 2023. That’s three

dozen fewer deaths than the agency had previously reported, but it still represents a 75% increase in annual fatalities from a decade ago.

White did not update fatality data for any other years during the hearings. Lilly Price, a spokesperson for the agency, later told the Banner there were 46 deaths in the most recently completed federal budget year.

“We are committed to transparent communication,” Price said. “We have continued to model this commitment this legislative session by speaking on the record during multiple budget hearings to directly explain our challenges with our data.”

State Sen. Cory McCray, a Democrat from Baltimore, disagrees.



Sen. Cory McCray, right, a Baltimore Democrat, in February. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

He told the agency during Friday's hearing that their commitment to transparency seems to have waned since last year, when officials were enthusiastic about sharing information with lawmakers. White apologized and told McCray obfuscation was not her intent.

"Children should be safe, and we should be transparent about the work that we are doing." Delays in reporting are the result of work by the agency to validate its own data, she reiterated.

The missing report on foster kids who stay in hospitals or emergency rooms longer than medically necessary exemplifies the tension. The Department of Legislative Services noted in their report that the agency had previously provided lawmakers information about the problem, which has [resulted in extensive media coverage](#).

During her testimony, White touted the [creation of a data office](#) within the agency that will publish a digital dashboard showcasing key child welfare statistics. It's unclear how up to date the information in the dashboard will be when the new tool launches, given the ongoing concerns about data reliability.

Older data the Department of Human Services shared with lawmakers about Maryland's foster children suggests there is cause for concern about their well-being. The agency did not meet its goals to limit the number of times foster kids change placements or become victims while in state custody in the budget year that ended June 30, 2023.

The agency did meet a goal that year to ensure at least 90% of abuse or neglect victims do not experience a recurrence of maltreatment within 12 months.

The agency is also preparing to release records detailing dozens of maltreatment fatalities that occurred between 2020 and 2024. The documents will give the public an unprecedented view of what went wrong in those cases.

One child death The Banner has already examined closely is that of Zona Byrd, a 5-year-old girl who had been returned to her parents' custody before she [starved to death last year](#). She should have been in kindergarten, yet when police discovered her body, she was wearing toddler-size clothing that hung from her skeletal frame. Now her parents are facing first-degree murder and child abuse charges.

Lawmakers first questioned White about Maryland's child maltreatment fatality data at a hearing last Thursday. Delegate Emily Shetty, a Democrat from Montgomery County, [cited The Banner's recent coverage](#) and asked White to respond. She vowed to share new figures this week, but only provided some data when asked.



Carnitra White, a deputy secretary at the Department of Human Services. (Maryland Department of Human Services)

Another figure the agency sought to correct is the number of children who died from abuse or neglect in 2023 after being removed from their families and later reunited. There was one such death in Maryland that year, not 15 like the department previously reported.

But Price also revealed for the first time that 13 children who died in 2023 had received intensive support from state caseworkers at some point over the previous five years — more such deaths that year than nearly any other state in the nation. Only Illinois and Texas had more.

The distinction raises questions about whether the state is doing enough to protect known victims from further harm.

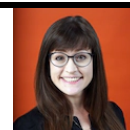
In her closing remarks at Monday's hearing, Shetty urged White to ensure that Maryland is "doing something with that data."

"Not only is it important for us to know what the status of these cases are, but we have to be able to examine each case individually to see if this was preventable," Shetty said.

The state, she said, must ask, "What could we have done differently or better to protect the lives of future children who could be at risk of some similar fate?"

Jessica Calefati

jessica.calefati@thebaltimorebanner.com



Jessica Calefati is an education investigative reporter for The Baltimore Banner focused on what Maryland kids need to be successful in school, college and careers.

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