

## How the Child Welfare System Works in Idaho

It is our collective responsibility to ensure the safety of our children in Idaho. As “**mandated reporters**,” every Idahoan is tasked with alerting authorities within 24 hours if there is reason to suspect child abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The State of Idaho tasks the Department of Health & Welfare with ensuring that kids are not left in households in which they are physically abused, sexually abused, neglected, or abandoned.

In SFY2023, the Department received **24,431 referrals** from the public regarding concerns of abuse, neglect, or abandonment of children. When a referral is received, it is assessed and prioritized for response. Referrals involving a life-threatening and/or emergency situation require an immediate response, in which the Department coordinates action with law enforcement.

If a referral is not an emergency but meets criteria for staff to respond, Department social workers conduct a safety assessment within 72 hours to ensure child safety and determine if the family needs services to address safety concerns. The role of these social workers is neither to conduct a criminal investigation nor to remove children from their homes. Last year, the Department conducted **9,303 safety assessments**. Most safety assessments result in families receiving referrals to services that allow kids to remain safely in their homes.

### **Keeping Children Safe at Home:**

More often than not, children aren’t removed from their homes after an investigation into allegations of abuse and neglect. This does not mean, however, the referral was found to be *baseless*. The Department often conducts a safety assessment and learns the family needs referrals to address safety concerns – such as electric bill assistance, parent education, transportation to appointments, substance use treatment, house cleaning, or a food bank visit.

Last year, **13%** of conducted safety assessments resulted in a “**substantiated maltreatment**” determination, meaning evidence was found to meet the statutory definition of child abuse or neglect. If criminal charges of abuse or neglect are filed, the parents are informed of their rights by law enforcement, including due process rights to appeal the substantiation. Next steps for the child and parent depend on the severity of the maltreatment, an assessment of the child's immediate safety, the perceived risk of continued or future maltreatment, the services available to address the family's needs, and whether the maltreatment prompted the child's removal from the home and/or a protective court action. A child can only be removed from the home by law enforcement. In SFY 2023, **2,606 children** were served through foster care in Idaho.

The child welfare system is a complex arrangement of families, agencies, and partners that span jurisdictions and disciplines, and it is not an area of law that should not be experimented with. To address issues within foster care and improve child welfare outcomes, legislators should work with groups already collaborating, including members of the **Child Protection Legislative Oversight Committee**, Citizen Review Panels, child welfare policy experts, foster youth and alumni, and families impacted by foster care. To mitigate unintended consequences and potential harm to children, the review process for all proposed changes to the Child Protection Act must be deliberate, comprehensive, and vetted by all stakeholders.

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#### Sources:

- Idaho Department of Health & Welfare, 2024. “[Facts, Figures, & Trends 2023-2024.](#)”
- Idaho Department of Health & Welfare, 2023. “[Annual Legislative Foster Care Report SFY2022.](#)”
- U.S. Children’s Bureau, 2020. “[How the Child Welfare System Works.](#)”