

AGENCIES STUDY PLAN FOR MEDICAID FUNDS

By Gerry Cherry
Staff Writer

■(GIT) State agency heads attended the presentation of a draft plan for changes in Medicaid funds distribution for the NeedsMet Committee of the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, Tuesday. The funding plan was presented by Tracey Feild and

Hansine Fisher of the Institute for Human Services Management (IHSM) of Bethesda, MD.

The plan calls for:

- collaborative state agency (DHS, Juvenile Affairs, Mental Health, Foster Care, etc.) efforts to move funding for children and youth closer to the local level;

- eliminate duplication and fragmentation of services to clients;

- obtain more federal Medicaid funding through identification of services the federal program will finance with matching funds; and

- establish a state clearinghouse for all services to children and youth.

One agency head feels the plan has merit. Ken Lackey, executive director of Juvenile Affairs and Secretary of Health in Governor Keating's cabinet, said "It's a very worthwhile undertaking to look at additional sources of federal funding. Every agency should be interested."

"As a cabinet member and agency head of the office of Juvenile Affairs, we will set up a strike force and investigate the recommendations to see if we can access additional federal funds," Lackey said. "Historically, we have thought the regional office wouldn't let us use funds in the way they recommended. We're going to look at it immediately."

"Oklahoma isn't organized to coordinate resources in the manner suggested," Lackey continued. "If it happens, it has to be a purely voluntary effort."

Because of fragmentation at the local level, Lackey said, "many families receive benefits from more than one agency. In today's environment, local entities need to play a larger role in delivering services."

"The key," Lackey said, "is involving local entities and coordinating resources." He called the plan an excellent first step; but said, "the problem isn't the recommendations, it's the implementation. I'm going to try to use what information I have to get other agencies to work together."

Stumbling blocks to implementation of the plan, as explained by IHSM, include:

- "The structure of the executive branch of government — where agency directors report to boards instead of to the Governor — is similar to only a handful of states," the report said. "This structure appears to result in service fragmentation and inefficiency, in that no single individual, i.e. the Governor, is accountable for services to families and children."

- "The structure appears to work against the concept of interagency collaboration," the report continues. "Hence, agency staff run their own service systems with little collaboration across systems, or recognition of how collaboration at the local level might more efficiently and effectively serve chil-

Coffman Report, continued from page 2

the lead agent in child abuse investigations.

"All the facts, all the information must be seen by someone who is in charge of the case," Keating said, comparing such an investigatory style to his days with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Nobody," Lackey added, "went back and looked at the chronic nature of the complaints involving this family."

According to the task force's findings, "An overview of the Shane Coffman case spans at least three generations, at least one mother and four father figures, several homes, both in Oklahoma and out-of-state, and multiple interactions with the family by DHS, law enforcement, medical professionals, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges and school personnel. It also involves citizens who failed to see what must have been a chaotic and painful environment for the Coffman children."

To address what Keating, Lackey and task force member John Foley said repeatedly was a failure of the system to work in the Coffman child's best interest, the task force made the following recommendations:

- The establishment of interdisciplinary teams in all areas of the state "in order to secure the advice and recommendations of multiple professionals in the area of child abuse and neglect, including members of the medical and mental health professions, law enforcement, child welfare and prosecution;"

- Removal of "all perceived legal and procedural barriers and restrictions which hinder meaningful, rapid and full exchanges of information between agencies and individuals therein;"

- Eliminating "institutional barriers which prevent investigators from accessing records of other agencies and/or states" and implementing a process by which cases of families for which reports have previously been received and closed are reviewed and, if warranted by the severity of the allegations, reassigned for investigation;

- The development of protocol and prac-

tice "to assess the totality of all risk factors involved, including the recognition that "[a] family's multiple referrals must be recognized as risk factors for serious and persistent family problems requiring a high priority response and a multidisciplinary review;"

- Requiring "members of each discipline involved with investigations, prosecutions and treatments" to, without fail, "read the entire case file regarding the family before making recommendations or decisions regarding filings, placement of disposition;"

- Coordination of prosecution of deprived cases with related criminal cases involving the same family;

- The elimination of the "many legal and economic barriers" that "defeat proper and timely access to medical and mental health professionals;" and

- The creation of a public policy which allows for oversight of home schooling.

"DHS needs to reshape its systems," said Keating, who faced intense questioning from reporters in light of his February statement that the state should be outraged by the death and that every effort would be made to find and address problems within the child welfare system.

Keating characterized the breakdown involved in the human services department handling of the case as a "gross failure," calling that "an indictment of the system."

Lackey agreed, saying, "The system fell down on the job."

Lackey also pointed his finger at law enforcement officials, who, like the Department of Human Services, had received a number of referrals involving in the Coffman family.

Had all that information been shared, Keating and Lackey repeatedly stressed, the outcome might have been different.

Ironically, the release of the report coincides with the effective date of HB2053, the so-called Ryan Luke bill, an attempt reform the child welfare system. That bill, Lackey said, would have had no affect on the Coffman case.

See Medicaid Funds, page 4