



Jeb Bush
Governor

Kathleen A. Kearney
Secretary

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT:

**DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN & FAMILIES RELEASES
STRIKE FORCE REPORT**

TALLAHASSEE— Judge Kathleen A. Kearney, Secretary of the Department of Children & Families, today released the findings of the District 7 Child Safety Strike Force—a multidisciplinary task force deployed in May to investigate family safety in the Central Florida area. Their findings, she said, represent family safety issues that are prevalent statewide.

"The Strike Force report clearly shows that, based on the way we have historically done business, the Department has not done the best job of protecting our children," said Judge Kearney. "The systemic problems that were long suspected do, indeed, exist."

Not only did the Strike Force diagnose the problems, it recommended specific remedies for change, several of which the Department has implemented since January 1999.

It was on May 26 that Judge Kearney formed the Strike Force after two children were beaten to death and a third critically injured within a three-week period in the District that encompasses Brevard, Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties. The Department had previous involvement with all three families—and failed to properly assess the risks to the children.

The Strike Force had two objectives: (1) the extensive review of these three cases; and, more significantly, (2) the complete review of all open cases and those closed in District 7 between January 1 and June 30, 1999.

"This was a truly multi-disciplinary approach to investigating the entire family safety protection system," Judge Kearney said. "Led by an independent consultant, professionals in domestic violence, health care, child advocacy and law enforcement came together to investigate our family safety operations."

Judge Kearney called the Strike Force's work "unprecedented." More than a hundred of the Department's child protection investigators statewide reviewed more than 15,000 cases involving 25,000 client records; and, District staff are continuing to follow up on a large number of these cases. This review was complicated by the significant increase in caseloads resulting from the full implementation of the Adoptions and Safe Families Act and the Kayla McKean Act. The project cost approximately \$1.7 million.

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1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

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The Strike Force found that fully 32 percent of the cases reviewed lacked the information needed to tell whether children were living in unsafe conditions or not. Most significantly, in 12 percent of cases, children were at a high risk of further abuse or neglect. Simultaneously with the review, extra workers investigated the incomplete cases and, for those cases where children were identified as being at risk, the Department took appropriate action.

"As I have said in the past, we are looking at the problems and working to fix them," Judge Kearney said. "The recommendations of the Strike Force, which are based on actual data, give us a blueprint for a successful child protection system. With Governor Bush's and the Legislature's leadership and commitment, we will change the system. This is not cosmetic. This is true reform."

The *summary, overview and recommendations* of the Strike Force Report are available via links from this news release on the Department of Children & Families web site at: http://www.state.fl.us/cf_web