

Calif. auditing school mental health services

By Jocelyn Wiener, CHCF Center for Health Reporting

California's state auditor has launched an investigation of school districts and other local educational agencies to determine whether they are delivering enough treatment to children with serious mental illnesses.

In 2011, a change in law shifted responsibility for decisions about the mental health care of students with disabilities from counties to the schools.

Since then, families, advocates and child psychiatrists have charged that some of the state's sickest children are struggling to get help. A story in The Sacramento Bee last year focused on these complaints, and on data showing significant drops in placements in residential treatment facilities since the law changed.

State Sen. Jim Beall, D-San Jose, chairman of the Senate's mental health committee, requested the audit. He said nearly 80,000 children with disabilities had been receiving mental health services through the counties before the change in law. Now, due to a lack of data, it is no longer clear how many are being served, he said.

"Right now, we literally don't have any results or information," he said. "My job is to make sure these services are available to all the kids who need them."

He said he expects to see results in December and may pursue legislation after that.

The state auditor will examine how well school districts and Special Education Local Plan Areas are fulfilling their

responsibilities to treat children with mental illnesses, how they are spending the money designated for these services, and whether the state Department of Education is fulfilling its oversight role.

Critics of the change in law say there have been significant disparities in how well schools have followed through on their new obligations.

“If you really look under the hood, what you see is enormous variance,” said Ken Berrick, CEO of the Seneca Family of Agencies, which serves children with emotional disturbances in a dozen counties.

Randall Hagar, director of government relations for the California Psychiatric Association, said the audit is a first step toward creating a more accountable, transparent system.

“We’ve needed information to clarify how the state is doing and whether it’s doing right by its kids,” he said. “Once we get that data, we’ll be able to figure out what the next steps are and how to improve care where it needs to be improved.”

Wiener writes for the California HealthCare Foundation Center for Health Reporting at USC’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.