

Responsiveness

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One of PRS' most important responsibilities is providing information and responding to the questions of clients, families, and the public. This includes distribution of important information about abuse and neglect and about the department's activities. It also means responding fairly to complaints.

In 1996, PRS hotlines took in over 280,000 calls.

The department produced and distributed thousands of pieces of literature and aired public service announcements in communities throughout the state. Advisory committees and public comment at Board meetings and town-hall presentations helped to shape department policies. And PRS continues to work with universities and other agencies to develop training and collect vital information to prevent abuse and neglect.

PRS Hotlines



Texas Abuse Hotline	1-800-252-5400
Foster Care and Adoption Inquiry Line	1-800-233-3405
Child-care Information	1-800-862-5252
Ombudsman Hotline	1-800-720-7777
Runaway Hotline	1-888-580-HELP
Reports in MHMR Facilities	1-800-647-7418

Public Awareness

Educating the public about abuse and neglect is a critical part of the department's mission. In fiscal year 1996, PRS distributed more than a million pieces of printed literature. These included pamphlets, posters, media and public awareness kits, brochures, conference materials, and newsletters. The department maintains over 88 publications in stock.

Resolving Complaints

PRS is required to make decisions that greatly impact people's lives. When someone feels that they have not been treated fairly, there is an obligation for PRS to listen to their concerns and explain the reasons for the actions taken. If a mistake has been made, it must be corrected. PRS provides opportunities for people to be heard in administrative reviews, hearings, and through mediation.

The PRS Ombudsman Office serves as an impartial forum where citizens can resolve their complaints about the department's activities. The Ombudsman provides a fair and impartial review of cases in

which there has been a complaint, to determine whether department policy and procedures have been properly followed. If the complaint is determined valid, the Ombudsman recommends corrective action. For better access, the Ombudsman maintains a toll-free hotline (1-800-720-7777).

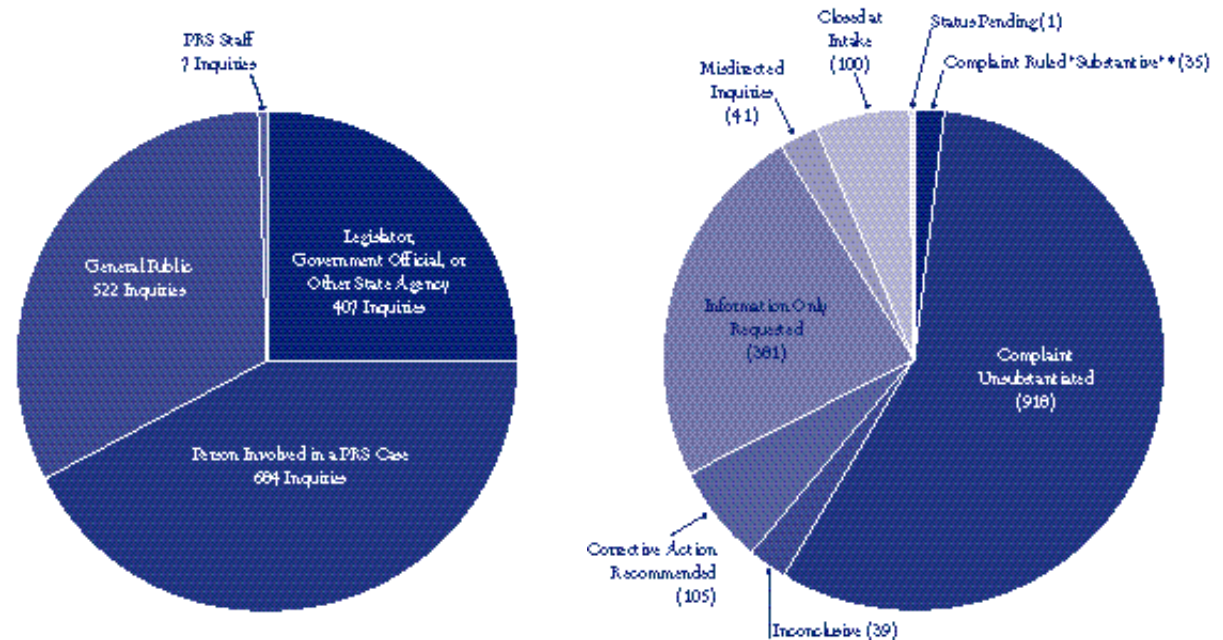
From its creation in 1993 to the end of fiscal year 1996, the Ombudsman Office handled over 4,500 inquiries. After review, the Ombudsman determined that findings in 273 department cases were questionable findings. Complaints made in 2,564 cases were ruled unsubstantiated. The remainder were inconclusive,

involved requests for information only, or were misdirected inquiries.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

Recruiting and retaining foster parents is critical to child protection. PRS has recently made significant progress in improving

Ombudsman Inquiries Fiscal Year 1996



* Ombudsman found departmental compliance with policy, procedures, or standards of conduct questionable, but final status of case was not affected.

relationships with foster families. In 1996, the department began offering mediation to resolve disputes between foster parents and PRS staff. During a six-month project starting in April, mediation services were available through independent dispute resolution centers to foster families in the Houston, San Antonio, and Amarillo regions. Volunteer mediators listen to both sides and ask questions to clarify the issues. They help the parties to reach a solution without offering judgment or taking sides. The service is free or available for a nominal charge in most cases.

Parents' and Children's Concerns

A new video produced by PRS' Children's Justice Act Project explains child protective services and the legal process for parents who have had their children removed from home. The presentation answers frequently-asked questions about responsibilities, visitation, foster homes, and parental rights. There is also a tape for older children entering foster care. The tapes come in English and Spanish versions.

Child Fatality Review Teams

Over 4,000 children die every year in Texas from various causes, including illness, accidents, and abuse. No single agency is responsible for tracking child deaths or assessing the circumstances surrounding deaths which are sudden or unexpected. Child fatality review teams are a means of establishing a systematic review of child deaths and collection of data on how and why children are dying. The goal of the teams is to identify risk factors and public policy changes needed to prevent deaths.

Local teams include police or sheriffs, child protective services, criminal prosecutors, pediatricians, and medical examiners. The first team was started in Dallas in 1992. There are now 36 teams operating or in development around the state with oversight from the State Child Fatality Review Team Committee. PRS provides technical assistance and training to communities interested in starting review teams. ■