

EDITORIAL On Abused Children

Protect kids, not agency

The children who die while under the supervision of state child protective services are glaring instances of official failure. But what about other youngsters growing up in abusive households who are nearly killed even though social workers are supposedly looking out for them?

The Legislature is now weighing two nearly identical bills that purport to collect information on near fatalities of children involved with Child Protective Services, the state program that investigates the abuse of youngsters.

But instead of shedding light on the agency's handling of instances of severe harm, the changes may do just the opposite. The proposals make it hard for parents, advocacy groups and the media to get a look at the facts and circumstances of a near fatality of a foster child or a youth living in troubled circumstances.

California provides information on deaths of foster children, a change adopted in 2008 that allows the public and family members to know how and why a fatality occurred. But the same

can't be said for harsh, life-threatening abuse, a level of abuse that federal authorities want to hear about.

Their request is highlighting the need for better and fuller reporting. But agency officials aren't following through. Instead they want to make public disclosure more difficult by adding vague legal standards on which documents and evidence should be public. It's a classic example of a public institution shielding itself from the public it's pledged to protect.

Lawmakers shouldn't tolerate this end run. The bills should be changed to make sure that public oversight is allowed and not blocked. There's no justification for hiding the facts behind near-fatal child abuse.