

WBTW, Myrtle Beach: SC DSS director promises changes at agency

DSS Director Lillian Koller testifying at Wednesday's hearing. (Photo: Robert Kittle/WBTW)

COLUMBIA, SC - By Robert Kittle

South Carolina Department of Social Services director Lillian Koller promises changes at her agency to better protect children, including lowering DSS employees' caseloads. She testified Wednesday to a special state Senate subcommittee that's been investigating problems at the agency.

But Sen. Joel Lourie, D-Columbia, a member of the subcommittee, says it's not enough. "I think the governor is failing in not removing the director," he said after the hearing. "I think Ms. Koller is trying hard but we're not getting the job done."

The subcommittee is looking into children who've died while DSS has been involved with their families. Senators have heard from DSS employees from across the state complaining about being overworked.

Sen. Katrina Shealy, R-Lexington, says she got a letter from a DSS caseworker who wrote, "The caseload is way too high. I am responsible for 30 children and I do not feel comfortable being responsible for this many children with such limited resources. It is no wonder DSS is failing children in South Carolina. A caseworker simply cannot care for this many children the way they should be cared for."

Senators say they've heard from other caseworkers handling up to 70 and even 100 cases at once.

Koller told senators, "I am personally making a commitment to you all that I'm going to stay personally involved in the caseload distribution issue, and the caseload volume. I'm going to make sure that I get a weekly report from every county of any frontline worker who has more than 30 cases or more. And I'm going to personally call the county director, not delegate it but personally call, to find out why?"

But Sen. Lourie says, "First of all, 30 is way too many. Secondly, she allowed this to happen under her watch. I mean, would you let the captain of the Titanic take a cruise ship out in the ocean? No."

Koller says she'll be asking for more money in next year's budget to hire more people and improve technology, which will allow caseworkers to be more efficient.

As for Sen. Lourie's contention that the agency is "in meltdown," Koller says, "We're not in meltdown. We've been in build-up, strengthen mode since I got here. This was a very troubled agency. I did not walk in with my eyes closed."

The subcommittee plans to meet again in two weeks and throughout the summer.

<http://www.wbtw.com/story/25583687/sc-dss-director-promises-changes-at-agency>