



# Washington State Auditor's Office Performance Audit Description

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**March 2015**

## **DSHS's Complaint Resolution Unit** Program background

The Department of Social and Health Services' Complaint Resolution Unit receives and prioritizes for action all reports of abused, neglected and exploited vulnerable adults living in state-regulated residential settings, such as adult family homes, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes. People living in such settings are particularly at risk, research shows, and inaccurate or delayed responses to complaints may jeopardize their health, safety and well-being. In Washington, an estimated 23,000 state-supported adults live in these settings; when including those who pay for care privately, this population is even higher.

In 2014, the Complaint Resolution Unit received more than 32,000 complaints, ranging from allegations of inadequate care to suspected crimes including sexual abuse and financial exploitation. Staff must refer the complaint for an investigation, or to another entity such as law enforcement, within two working days. By law, it "shall initiate a response" to a complaint "no later than twenty-four hours after knowledge of the report."

In August 2014, the Unit had a backlog of nearly 1,000 complaints, each taking up to two weeks to process. Although DSHS eliminated the backlog by adding temporary staff, longer-term solutions may benefit from improvements in processes or automation. Aside from delays in processing complaints, some advocates for vulnerable adults have raised concerns about whether the Unit is accurately prioritizing complaints for action, referral or closure according to severity based on established guidelines.

### **Scope and objectives**

This performance audit will seek to answer the following questions:

- Are complaints processed and referred in a timely manner, and if not, why not? Can any improvements be made?
- Are complaint severity assessments accurate and consistent, and if not, why not? Can any improvements be made?

### **Timing**

We estimate audit results to be released in fall of 2015.