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THE TIMES OF INDIA

300 more illegal children's homes to be shut

TNN | Apr 25, 2017, 07:34 AM IST



CHENNAI: A year after the social defence department became the sole authority to grant licences for child care institutions in Tamil Nadu, the crackdown on illegal homes is continuing unabated. Officials have closed down 554 unregistered homes so far and identified another 300 to be shut. The children rescued from these institutions have been sent back to their families or shifted to other registered institutions. "We are in the process of identifying families of the children living in these 300 institutions across the state and also looking at other nearby homes where children who do not have parents can be shifted," social defence commissioner R Lalvena said. He was launching a 'Child Rights Research Project' jointly introduced by Unicef and Loyola College's social welfare department on Monday.

Official records of the department state that there are presently 1,113 registered homes for children. "Institutionalising should be the last resort," Unicef chief of field office for Tamil Nadu and Kerala Job Zachariah said. "Children should live in a family environment and there are options such as foster care and financial assistance under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme to encourage this concept." Lalvena, however, said that they were not receiving sufficient central funds to implement the scheme effectively.

In order to curb rampant violations in the running of institutions, field staff such as probation officers and social welfare officers

must improve the quality of inspection and monitoring, the commissioner said. "For instance, field officers need to do a thorough background check of children, and the education and health facilities they get. But what happens is that they merely mark whether a child is receiving education with 'yes' or 'no' and that serves no purpose," Lalvena said.

The new project aims to train child protection officers from government and non-governmental organisations on the legislation and rights concerning children. "The training will be held across all 32 districts for officers from different sectors," said project coordinator Andrew Sesuraj.

Apart from offering training, the project will also conduct studies and create a central database of Tamil Nadu child-related information.