



NEW YORK STATE
OFFICE OF
CHILDREN & FAMILY
SERVICES

The Office of Children and Family Services' Response: New York State's Citizen Review Panels

2013 Report and Recommendations



Sheila J. Poole, OCFS Acting Commissioner

The Office of Children and Family Services' Response: New York State's Citizen Review Panels 2013 Report and Recommendations

Introduction

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the recommendations put forth by the Citizen Review Panels for improving child welfare services in New York State. The Panels have offered a thoughtful set of recommendations, and we are appreciative of the opportunity to attend the Panel meetings and to respond to the report. OCFS remains committed to a continued relationship with the Citizen Review Panels and to our shared efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

OCFS remains committed to working with the local departments of social services and the authorized voluntary agencies to promote the safety, permanency and well-being of New York's children. OCFS continues to work to improve child welfare practice on the local level by providing training and resources wherever possible. This past year we have shared a concept paper that outlines our agenda for improving well-being for children, youth, and families. Over the next several years we will look to implement screening and assessment tools that will help better identify the needs of our families, provide appropriate interventions to meet those needs, and to use data to measure performance in getting to the outcomes we seek.

Panel Recommendations

Essential Child Welfare Services

Restore open-ended funding for preventive, protective, adoption, aftercare, and independent living services to the full 65 percent state share as called for in New York State statute.

In this year's enacted budget, the appropriation language for preventive services reimbursement remained uncapped at 62 percent State share and 38 percent local share net of federal funding for the current State fiscal year. Again in 2013, we witnessed another reduction in foster care placements and attribute this to mandated preventive funding as well as funds used to support community based preventive programs, such as Healthy Families New York, Family Resource Centers, and Community Cafes.

In 2013-2014, we were able to fund 18 programs designed to increase services for at-risk children and youth to prevent involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and/or to expedite their return home. These funds were made available through Public/Private Partnerships. In the 2014-15 enacted budget, a total of \$3,409,000 was made available to

support Public/Private Partnerships, and we are currently reviewing the possibility of renewing these contacts, provided each program can leverage the required matching funds.

Family Assessment Response (FAR)

Continue to support implementation of FAR throughout New York State, by providing the necessary training, coaching, and flexible funding needed to meet individual needs.

Conduct an evaluation of FAR incorporating a broader representation of counties utilizing an approach that includes a cost/benefit analysis.

OCFS will continue to support the implementation of FAR throughout the state. We will do so by supporting the current twenty-two FAR counties to grow their programs to include a broader range of allowable allegations and to assign a sufficient number of their Child Protective Services (CPS) staff to FAR so that all eligible families can receive FAR. OCFS will also continue efforts to engage additional counties in considering the benefits of FAR and assist them to develop the necessary readiness for implementation. OCFS will continue to provide training and coaching to new and current FAR counties. In addition, OCFS will continue to conduct quality assurance reviews in partnership with FAR counties to assess the quality of FAR practice and areas for practice improvement and further coaching. OCFS is also continuing to develop additional expertise in FAR implementation and quality assurance in its own staff. OCFS training partners continue to develop their expertise in training and coaching FAR and OCFS continues to support several FAR county staff to be able to deliver the FAR training series.

Current and future funding to assist families receiving FAR services to meet their needs is available through funding streams that support CPS services. In addition, many FAR counties have instituted creative ways to locate and provide out of the ordinary resources to meet the special needs of children that will assist the families to function more effectively.

OCFS does not see the need or the benefit of an additional cost benefit analysis. Our initial evaluation and those of other states providing a differential response shows FAR to generally be cost neutral, and with the evidence of a slightly reduced penetration further into the child welfare system, there are some longer term cost savings. A broader evaluation of the counties beyond the pilot counties that focuses on cases practice, family engagement, safety, service provision, and impact on the child welfare outcomes of case openings, family court petitions, and foster care would be a worthy undertaking. At this time OCFS does not have the resources available to conduct that evaluation.

Racial Equity

Continue to address and seek to eliminate racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities by expanding OCFS's work to additional counties through the use of data-informed and data-driven strategies.

Recruit more racially and ethnically diverse and bi-lingual staff to child welfare.

Require continuous staff development and education advancing cultural competence and responsiveness in child welfare.

Disproportionate Minority Representation (DMR)

Children of color, specifically African-American and Native American children, are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, as compared to their numbers in the general population. Research tells us that the reason children of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system is because of disparities in the likelihood of coming into contact with the system and disparities in the likelihood of ending involvement with the system. Research informs us that disproportionality is directly attributable to the fact that children of color are more likely to be admitted to foster care and often times less likely to leave the system. This data dictates that to address and resolve disparities we must understand the contributing social, economic, and organizational factors which result in this overrepresentation. The OCFS Disproportionate Minority Representation (DMR) work, coupled with the Race Equity and Cultural Competence (RECC) program is designed to examine these factors to help OCFS and the respective local departments of social services (LDSS) develop interventions, programs, and policy changes which will mitigate disparities in the system.

Practice Initiative

The goal of the DMR and RECC work is to help child welfare explore the mechanisms behind the underlying disparities which lead to disproportionality. This work, currently centered in 13 counties (Albany, Dutchess, Erie, Genesee, Monroe, Nassau, Onondaga, Orange, Rockland, Schenectady, Suffolk and Westchester), which have been identified as having the greatest disparity rates, calls for identifying disparity at the key entry points, reporting, disposition, and ultimately placement in care, to the child welfare system. This ongoing examination requires work on a number of fronts, namely:

- Extensive data analysis around each point of contact with the child welfare system to identify impacted communities and promote work being done through a cultural and race equity lens;
- Training and Technical Assistance to the LDSS from OCFS;
- Support learning exchanges and peer networking to facilitate shared learning between counties;
- Engagement of community stakeholders, *i.e.*, schools, hospitals, the judiciary, probation, etc.;
- Additionally, exploring the impact of Family Assessment Response (FAR) upon reducing disparate outcomes for families of color.

Home Visiting

Restore funding for Healthy Families NY to \$26.8 million, an increase of \$3.5 million.

Provide \$5 million in funding to sustain the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), an increase of \$3 million.

The 2014-2015 enacted budget provided for \$23.3 million, which will allow OCFS to continue funding 36 Healthy Family New York programs. Working with the New York State Department of Health (DOH), an additional \$1 million in federal funding went to support four additional

maternal, infant and early childhood home visiting programs in 2013. In October, an additional \$200,000 became available and afforded OCFS the opportunity to fund one additional program.

While the oversight of Nurse Family Partnership is maintained at DOH, we are aware that they are using federal funds from the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting grant for programs throughout New York City, and in Monroe, Onondaga and Nassau counties. Healthy Family NY programs work collaboratively with Nurse Family Partnership programs wherever we share the same target locations.

Educational Neglect

Eliminate educational neglect as a basis for child protective reporting for children 13 and older.

Identify effective practices to reduce absenteeism, educate school district personnel about these practices, and support the implementation of promising models throughout school districts in New York State.

Address chronic absenteeism in primary and elementary schools where research shows the most promising results.

OCFS has collaborated with Inside Schools, Pipeline Winning Strategies, and NYC Children's Defense Fund to heighten awareness about this issue and identify and promote social service/education strategies to reduce the need for reporting of education neglect cases. The Child Welfare Organizing Project has also consulted with OCFS on its Administration for Children's Services Department of Education educational neglect diversion model.

OCFS continues to work on improving educational outcomes for children in foster care in particular. There are three main components to the efforts to improve educational outcomes for youth in care:

- Building local child welfare and educational collaborations to promote educational stability and school success;
- Supporting college opportunities; and
- Improving data collection and analysis.

Local child welfare and educational collaborations

With support from Casey Family Programs, OCFS has engaged a number of local departments of social services and their respective school districts to select liaisons that will work together in addressing the unique educational needs of youth in foster care, and to keep children in their school of origin once they come into care. Reducing the number of school moves a child experiences can lead to improved outcomes. However, if it is determined it is in a child's best interest to change schools, the liaisons help with the speedy transfer of records to facilitate a seamless school transition. Once a local educational agency is aware of the needs of children in care, performance in K-12 education does improve. By developing liaisons in both child welfare

and education, both systems become well versed in the policies, procedures, and practices of the other and create common understandings of the needs of youth in care. Moreover, the liaisons will serve as a point of contact and ongoing dialogue between child welfare and education.

OCFS has identified education administrators who support the success of youth in foster care. Our greatest successes have been in developing collaborative relationships with the local Family Courts, schools and the child welfare agencies. Having judicial partnerships at the local and state level has been instrumental in New York's ability to move this agenda forward. While the process is at times arduous, this effort is critical to improving educational outcomes for our youth. It is imperative to the foster care youth that the systems work together to support their educational progression. In addition, birth and foster parents are critical to this process as they need to be our youths' educational champions.

Develop College Supports for Youth in Care

Few students from foster care are prepared to access postsecondary education. "Only 20 percent of students from foster care who complete high school begin to pursue post-secondary education, compared with 60 percent of non-foster care youth. Even more disheartening is the fact that less than two percent obtain a college degree." (Casey Family Programs, *Supporting Success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care*, Version 2.0, 2010). Yet, it is well known that obtaining a post-secondary - two or four year - degree is a means for young people to successfully transition to adulthood.

In the spirit of a public private partnership, OCFS, with technical support from Casey Family Programs, is working within the State of New York university system (SUNY) to build a campus-based framework of support for students in foster care. Through our work we have identified the top needs as:

- Financial aid
- Housing Assistance
- Mentoring
- Peer support (club or organization where foster youth can bond and support one another)
- Time Management skills
- Academic and Career Counseling
- Help Transitioning from college to career

This work is in its beginning stages. It is our expectation that we will develop a model of support that can be implemented at any of the two or four year colleges within the State university system.

Data Collection and Analysis

OCFS and the State Education Department have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which will enable data sharing of student information for foster care and juvenile justice youth. Our goal is to develop real time student specific data for caseworkers and aggregate statewide data for OCFS to begin to analyze the educational performance of youth in out of home care.

Kinship Caregiver Services and Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program

Restore funding for Kinship Caregiver Services and the Kinship Navigator Program to \$3 million.

Fund Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGap) as an uncapped permanency option with no reduction to the Foster Care Block Grant.

We are currently funding eight Kinship Caregivers programs that are in their last year of funding. The 2014-15 enacted budget added \$500,000 to bring the total amount of funding to \$838,750. It is our plan to fund the eight existing programs for another year. The Navigator Program, aimed at supporting relatives, is also funded through state and federal monies. The funding for the Kinship Navigator remained the same for 2014-2015 at \$220,500.

As noted in our response last year, changing the funding of KinGAP will require legislative action. The 2014-2015 enacted State budget maintains funding for the KinGAP program for an additional year as part of the Foster Care Block Grant.

The use of KinGAP by local departments of social services continues to grow. As of March 31, 2014, a total of 426 children have been discharged from foster care to a KinGAP arrangement since the program went into effect in April 2011. An additional 210 KinGAP applications have been approved by the local districts, but have not been finalized in court yet, and 89 applications are pending.

OCFS is continuing to promote KinGAP across the state and is regularly monitoring the KinGAP statistics as well as providing tools and assistance to local districts for their KinGAP work. We are also working closely with local districts to support their efforts to find families for children at risk of placement while providing them with the full array of options available to support kinship care.

Additionally, OCFS continues to support Family Finding, a model that seeks to identify family relationships where they had not been previously known, and supports the development of long-term family connections with a goal of finding permanency and building family connections. A total of 21 counties and 13 authorized voluntary agencies have been trained by Hillside Children's Center on Family Finding. In 2014, OCFS will continue to dedicate funds to further this training that provides caseworkers and supervisors the knowledge and skills necessary in identifying and locating family members for children placed in foster care and assisting in building lasting relationships and exploring permanency options.

Conclusion

The recommendations as outlined in your report are very closely aligned with OCFS' mission, and we appreciate the partnership we have had with the Citizen Review Panels. We are

confident that together our combined efforts can improve the safety, permanency and well-being of the children and families in New York State.