



**Office of Children  
and Family Services**

Response to:  
New York State  
**Citizen Review Panels for  
Children and Family Services**

**2016 Annual  
Report**

Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor  
Sheila J. Poole, Acting OCFS Commissioner

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) appreciates the Panel's assessment of the state's child welfare system and its efforts to promote improvements for children and families. OCFS has made significant progress in addressing safety, permanency, well-being and prevention outcomes. With a sense of urgency and importance, OCFS has actively partnered with local departments social services (LDSSs), voluntary authorized agencies, state agencies and community-based providers; to expand and improve options for our target populations.

We appreciate this opportunity to share achievements in response to the Panel's 2016 recommendations. Please note that this report includes responses to those recommendations directed at OCFS only.

## **Panel Recommendations and OCFS Responses**

### **Develop a 5-year strategic plan with achievable goals and measurable outcomes that are posted on the agency website, including (those listed below):**

OCFS is required to submit a five-year Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) to the federal Department of Health and Human Services along with Annual Progress and Services Reports (APSR). The last five-year plan was submitted in June, 2014 for federal fiscal years 2015 through 2019. The CFSP and APSRs are posted on the OCFS website. To obtain the goals outlined in the plan, OCFS is focusing on implementation of the New York State Child Welfare Practice Model. The implementation of the Practice Model will improve outcomes for children and families by strengthening casework practice and bringing consistency to practices that enhance the safety, permanence and well-being of children.

In November 2015, OCFS received the federal Child and Family Services Data Profile detailing New York State's performance on the seven national standards. At that time, New York State was not meeting six of the seven national standards. In an effort to better understand the underlying conditions contributing to the state's performance, OCFS contracted with Public Catalyst (a national consulting firm) to conduct a root cause analysis. OCFS and many of the LDSSs have been working with Public Catalyst since then and have made significant strides in understanding the data and how it can inform strategies to improve outcomes.

The information from this process and the findings from the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) that was conducted in June 2016, highlighted several opportunities for improvement. These are addressed in the state's CFSR Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). OCFS submitted the PIP on March 27, 2017 for approval to the federal Department of Health and Human Services. Once approved, the PIP will be posted on the OCFS website. Many of the recommendations from the panels are included in the PIP.

In addition to the OCFS PIP, each LDSS in the state is embarking upon an individual program improvement plan through their Child and Family Services Plan. In an effort to focus on data driven strategies which will contribute to statewide improvements, the Child and Family Services County Plan process has been significantly transformed. Throughout 2017, each LDSS planning team will systematically work through a process of diagnosing the LDSSs performance on key

child welfare indicators, analyzing root causes for certain performance metrics, recommending solutions to improve those outcomes, and developing methods to monitor the implementation and impacts of the recommended strategies. This work will be supported by OCFS “Data Leaders” who are specially trained to provide support to LDSSs to access and analyze child welfare data. Each LDSS will be measuring progress against this data with the goal of improvements in statewide performance.

### Implement effective solutions to the dual crisis of staff turnover and high caseloads in the child welfare workforce

OCFS is committed to transforming the current child welfare training system to support the Practice Model and its core competencies. It is anticipated that this professional development opportunity will help improve staff retention. The new training model will allow for improved evaluation of caseworker/supervisor competence and will be easily understood by all LDSSs and agencies to guide staff development plans. This approach is designed to be more behavioral-based and better able to meet the growing number of staff in child welfare, while also responding to emerging needs.

The first level of training to be offered to all new workers is “Foundational Training” and has ten different courses (domains) offered through four different methods: computer-based training, classroom training, skills clinics and formalized on-the-job learning. This training is expected to be piloted in the second quarter of 2017, and be fully implemented in 2018. Following the training, there will be four separate, specialized tracks: prevention, foster care, adoption and young adults; as well as a supervisory overlay to the entire program. By focusing on supervisors, who tend to be the more stable part of the workforce, it is expected that caseworkers will be better supported in meeting their job responsibilities.

In 2017, OCFS will be exploring options for assessing existing caseloads and recommending standards. In the veto message to the CPS Case Load Bill (Senate Bill Number 2691), the governor directed OCFS to make recommendations for conducting a statewide study regarding workload standards. OCFS will be convening a group of stakeholders to assist in identifying contributing factors, outlining the related issues, collecting data and developing recommendations for the study.

### Promotion of family engagement principles across all of child welfare work

There are currently 23 jurisdictions (including two boroughs in New York City) participating in Family Assessment Response (FAR), an alternative child protective response designed to achieve child safety through family engagement. Since its inception in 2008, more than 85,629 SCR reports have been handled through FAR. The majority of counties using FAR are concentrated in New York City and the Syracuse and Spring Valley regions.

Recognizing the benefits of a dual track system, OCFS has made concerted outreach efforts to share relevant CPS data with LDSSs districts demonstrating the number of families who would be eligible for FAR and the cost/benefits of implementation. For example:

- In both 2014 and 2015, 77 percent of CPS reports statewide were legislatively eligible for FAR, based on allegations and safety decisions. Only 23 percent required an investigation.

The percentage of reports potentially eligible for FAR ranged from 56 to 93 percent across all counties.

- FAR-eligible reports that were investigated were almost twice as likely to be unfounded than reports that required an investigation (42 percent vs 78 percent unfounded).
- Counties are permitted to have additional eligibility criteria for FAR; just two districts used FAR for more than 50 percent of all familial reports, 13 counties used FAR for between 25 and 50 percent of familial reports and the other eight counties used FAR for fewer than 25 percent of familial reports in 2016.

In September 2017, Butler Institute will begin to be phased out as the FAR training vendor. The Center for the Development of Human Services (CDHS) will assume responsibility for training, technical assistance and coaching staff in counties which practice FAR. In preparation for the transition, CDHS has been co-training with Butler Institute and has hired a project coordinator with extensive FAR expertise. CDHS will be working with OCFS expanding the program and cost/benefits of a two-track approach; and helping additional counties to implement FAR.

In addition to promoting the expansion of the two-track system, OCFS' Practice Model is built on the belief that the most effective way to protect children and promote permanency and well-being is to strengthen families; and the most effective way to strengthen families is through strengths-based, solution-focused partnerships. To that end, OCFS has developed a training program specifically focused on the "Principles of Partnership" which provides knowledge and skills development to caseworkers that can be used to help strengthen families.

#### Implementation of practices that result in improved outcomes for children in foster care

As part of the Child and Family Services County Plan process, in 2017 each LDSS is required to select at least one permanency outcome from the federal CFSR, fully engage in a robust data-driven needs assessment, and develop and identify targeted strategies designed to positively impact those permanency outcomes. To support this process, OCFS disseminated child-level permanency data to each county including age, gender, race, ethnicity and discharge data. OCFS staff are providing technical and substantive assistance to the LDSSs through their deeper analysis into this data, and to develop targeted strategies for improvement.

In 2016, OCFS provided training to two LDSSs to implement a "Lean" approach to improving permanency outcomes. It is expected that six more LDSSs will be supported in 2017. Lean is a management philosophy and a process re-engineering model, used by world-class companies such as Toyota, to make operations more efficient and effective and to better serve customers. At OCFS, Lean is being used to examine processes, remove obstacles and unnecessary steps, and to deliver more efficient and effective results to children, families and communities.

OCFS is pursuing contracting with Wendy's Wonderful Kids to work directly with counties who have children who are nine years of age and older who have been in care for two or more years and have a goal of adoption. The Wendy's Wonderful Kids program is administered by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and works to increase adoptions from foster care. The program recruiters employ child-focused, child-specific recruitment activities. Recruiters directly engage youth to explore their attitudes toward adoption and seek their input on prospective adoptive resources. Recruiters conduct an exhaustive search for people with whom the child has had a bond or positive relationship. Seventeen recruiters are proposed to be placed in New York State.

OCFS facilitates monthly meetings with the Statewide Implementation Team (SIT) that includes representatives from LDSSs and voluntary authorized agencies who assist in implementing the New York State Child Welfare Practice Model. This past year, the SIT prioritized kinship care as a practice for improving permanency outcomes. Research shows that children in foster care have improved placement stability, higher levels of permanency, and decreased behavior problems when placed with relatives who offer familial and cultural connections.

OCFS and the SIT disseminated a packet of materials to all LDSSs and voluntary authorized agencies to support the use of relative resources. The packet included an executive summary of a caseworker survey conducted by the American Bar Association regarding kinship knowledge and resources, a kinship tip sheet for caseworkers and supervisors, practice recommendations from the SIT, a brochure entitled "*Know Your Options: Kin Care for Children,*" and a more detailed booklet with the same name.

OCFS has also been working with state agency partners to improve outcomes for children in foster care. OCFS has been collaborating with both the New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities and the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services to develop cross system supports, to review challenges with individual youth, to educate each other about resources available and to develop pathways to services.

OCFS continues to partner with the State Education Department (SED) on child welfare related issues. In 2016, OCFS and SED through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), began sharing related to the education of children in foster care. OCFS sends a file of the more than 14,000 school-aged children in foster care and SED returns the students' complete education data. This information is now available to case workers for individual children in their care. This agreement has helped OCFS begin to work with local schools to build supports for this population, to improve performance and increase graduation rates and post-secondary education readiness.

OCFS and the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) have collaborated to maximize income-based Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) educational grant awards for youth in foster care. This effort has resulted in an additional \$715,000 in TAP awards provided to current and former foster care youth. The information sharing between OCFS and HESC simplifies the eligibility determination on behalf of the students.

Because of federal changes that broadened benefits eligibility for adoptive families, New York State achieved \$5 million in adoption assistance savings that will be re-invested in programs to support adoptive families and to prevent at-risk children from re-entering the foster care system. The state budget includes authorization for OCFS to re-invest these savings in Permanency Resource Centers (PRCs). PRCs provide post-adoptive and post-guardianship support to adoptive and guardianship families with services such as case management, home visits and crisis intervention, counseling, respite care, educational advocacy, information and referrals. The goal is to help adoptive and post-guardianship families be successful, to keep children in permanent homes and to keep children from re-entering the foster care system.

#### Set and achieve milestones toward New York's child welfare system being trauma-informed

OCFS concurs with the panel's recommendation to infuse the child welfare system with trauma interventions for children in foster care. The Statewide Implementation Team has identified trauma informed services as one of the priorities for improving outcomes. The SIT shared trauma informed tools which are being used in one county and have had a positive impact with families.

The plan is to identify additional resources that can be shared statewide. OCFS offers in-service trauma training to foster and adoptive parents. Recognizing the importance of a trauma informed system, beginning in June 2017, all new workers will receive trauma training as part of the new Foundational Training program. OCFS is exploring additional resources options for infusing trauma-informed supports.

## **Reduce disproportionate minority representation and promote race equity in the child welfare system**

OCFS has been actively working to address the race equity issues at the state and local levels. OCFS continues to promote the value of convening regionally-based Race Equity Learning Communities (RELCs) that are led or supported by OCFS regional offices. The RELCs are an opportunity to work with cross-system stakeholders to address disparity and disproportionality issues, share data and share promising strategies.

OCFS hosted a two-day conference, “Mindfulness and the Mind Science of Bias,” in March, 2017. The conference attracted over 100 participants from across the state including child welfare and juvenile justice representatives. Presenters focused on the human and business case for being more mindful about the work related to racial equity and the research and strategies to overcome implicit bias, racial anxiety and stereotype threat. Current data on county level racial disparities for foster care placement of Black children was presented. OCFS collaborated with several judges in planning the conference and a panel of judges presented their efforts to address the issues related to racial and ethnic disparities from the bench.

OCFS is planning a webinar to present the findings of a review of the Nassau County race equity work with a focus on the report written by the University of Albany School of Social Welfare which reviewed the related work in Nassau and Onondaga counties. The webinar will focus on the blind removal process in Nassau County designed to remove potential bias and reduce racial disparity in out of home placements. The webinar will be open to all child welfare staff throughout the state.

OCFS has been contracting with national consultant Khatib Waheed to convene Racial Equity Learning Exchange (RELE) sessions <sup>SM</sup> designed to help OCFS achieve its overall mission by providing context and framing to:

- safely reduce the disproportionate representation of minorities placed and remaining in child welfare;
- safely reduce the overall number of children involved with child welfare; and
- build statewide and county level capacity for child welfare systems to understand and improve how systemic responses to racial, ethnic and cultural differences can contribute to the disproportionate representation and disparate treatment of certain children and families of color.

Mr. Waheed has been facilitating RELE sessions for new staff; and as part of a sustainability plan, has also been training OCFS staff to facilitate and/or present RELE sessions and related work. OCFS is beginning to bring this work to voluntary authorized agencies where staff often struggle with cultural competence issues. OCFS is also working on developing a New York State model of the Race Equity Learning Exchange sessions, with consultant Khatib Waheed as a subject matter expert.

OCFS is also contracting with the University at Albany Professional Development Program to develop cultural competency training. The one-day edition will offer the Foundational Training program. A more intensive two-day training will be provided when requested.

### **Improve outcomes for children of incarcerated parents**

Based on feedback from the Citizen's Review Panels in 2015, OCFS arranged to meet with the Osborne Association to explore options for partnering to improve outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. As a result of that meeting, OCFS committed to providing training through the Osborne Association to LDSSs and voluntary authorized agencies across the state. Osborne Association staff have been working directly with OCFS regional offices to coordinate training sites. The Osborne Association training, "*Seeing and Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents in Child Welfare*," is a three-hour session that includes information about the effects of parental incarceration on children, and how to support affected children and families. In addition to supporting the training, OCFS will be assessing options for collecting and disseminating data to identify and track the outcomes of children in the child welfare system who have incarcerated parents. OCFS is committed to an on-going collaboration with Osborne Association to improve outcomes for these children.