

Everything You Wanted To Know About the Federal Child and Family Services Review (But Didn't Know You Should Be Asking)

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The federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), now scheduled for early 2009, appears to be one of the better kept secrets throughout the statewide child welfare community, despite Michigan's failure to achieve substantial conformance in the first federal review in 2002. Michigan was not alone, however. None of the other 49 states achieved substantial conformance in the first round of reviews. This "nationwide failure" might explain our complacency in getting the word out regarding the importance of this review.

This review is conducted by the Children's Bureau within the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. It is based on federal requirements outlined in the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, Public Law 105-89 (ASFA), and related aspects of Title IV-E/B of the Social Security Act. The ASFA legislation was designed to help states achieve more timely permanency decisions and establish stronger safety guarantees for abused and neglected children.

Most federal reviews assess a state's compliance with procedural requirements, as was the case with the recent Title IV-E review. The CFSR however, assesses conformity with the requirements of the above-referenced federal child welfare legislation in relationship to the **outcomes** each state achieves for children and families in the vital areas of **child safety, timely permanency and child well being**.

The Children's Bureau uses the CFSR to ensure that the states will remain committed to continuous quality improvement in their child welfare systems.

The CFSR incorporates seven outcome factors and seven systemic factors to measure positive outcomes for children. The outcomes measured include:

- Whether children under the care of the state are protected from abuse and neglect;
- Whether children are safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate;
- Whether children have permanency and stability in their living conditions;
 - Whether the continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children;
 - Whether families have enhanced capacity to provide for meeting their children's needs;
 - Whether children receive appropriate and adequate services to meet their educational needs;
 - Whether children receive appropriate and adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

The systemic factors (capacities needed to achieve identified outcomes) measured include:

- The effectiveness of the state's computer systems for gathering and analyzing child welfare data and information;

- The efficiency and effectiveness of the case (court) review system;
- State agency internal and external quality assurance;
- Training of child welfare staff, foster parents, and other stakeholders;
- The array of services available to address the needs of children and families;
- The agency's responsiveness to the community and ability to collaborate with stakeholders and service providers to bring about positive outcomes for children and families;
- Foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention.

OUTCOMES

Outcomes are determined by the following means:

- 1) Comparing state child welfare data on safety, timely permanency, and child well being with national standards;
- 2) Through an assessment of qualitative information related to the above factors;
- 3) Through review of case records and interviews with children, parents, and other stakeholders; and
- 4) Through review of system components, processes, and statutory requirements that are established by the state to produce positive outcomes for children and families served by the state child welfare system.

If the review shows that the state has not achieved required outcomes in the areas of safety, timeliness, and child well being, financial penalties are accrued in relationship to nonconformance with one or more of the above 14 factors. Penalties can potentially run into the millions of dollars of federal money lost, resulting in a greater burden on county child care funds.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

Each CFRS is a two-stage process consisting of a statewide self-assessment and an onsite review of child and family service outcomes and program systems. For the statewide self-assessment, the Children's Bureau prepares and transmits to the state the data profiles that contain aggregate data on the state's foster care and in-home service populations. The data profiles allow each state to compare certain safety and permanency data indicators with national standards determined by the Children's Bureau. Focus groups, surveys, and case readings in select counties assist the state in its evaluation of conformity to the required outcomes.

After the statewide self assessment is completed, a joint federal-state team conducts an onsite review of the state child welfare program, in partnership with state child welfare staff and consultant reviewers who supplement the federal review team.

The onsite portion of the review includes:

- (1) Case record reviews;
- (2) Interviews with children and families engaged in services; and
- (3) Interviews with community stakeholders, such as the courts and community agencies, foster families, and caseworkers and service providers.

At the end of the onsite review, states that have not achieved substantial conformity in all areas assessed must develop and implement a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) addressing the areas of nonconformity. The PIP is developed collaboratively by the state agency and key stakeholders, particularly the courts.

During the PIP process, the Children's Bureau supports the state with technical assistance and then monitors implementation of the PIP. Achieving the objectives outlined in the PIP can reduce federal penalties and help the state improve outcomes for children and families. It also improves the state's chances of achieving substantial conformity in subsequent federal reviews.

MICHIGAN'S STATUS

Michigan's first Child and Family Services Review was conducted in 2002. The state failed to achieve substantial conformity in a number of areas. A Program Improvement Plan (PIP) was created and has since been implemented, resulting in a significant reduction of the 2002 review's conditional financial penalties.

Michigan is scheduled for its next onsite review in early 2009. In preparation, the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) is conducting a self-assessment that includes focus groups of DHS staff and community stakeholders (including the Foster Care Review Board).

The DHS and the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) will collaborate to keep local courts throughout the state well informed and prepared for the upcoming review process and to ensure that the courts fully understand their responsibility to help Michigan achieve substantial conformance with CFSR requirements. A statewide CFSR webcast is scheduled for February 21, 2008. That webcast will be archived for future reference through the SCAO website. Regional trainings with family court administrators and family division judges and referees will be conducted in April and May 2008.

For comprehensive information regarding the Child and Family Services Review, please go to www.childwelfare.gov or www.courtsandchildren.org. For additional information regarding Michigan's involvement with the CFSR, please go to www.michigan.gov/dhs click on the foster care link.