

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Pursuant to section 1123A of the act and 45 CFR 1355.31 through 1355.37, the Administration for children and Families (ACF) is charged with the review of State child and family services programs. The purpose of the review is to determine the States' substantial conformity with State plan requirements and other program requirements under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act.

The reviews cover the range of child and family services funded through titles IV-B and IV-E, including child protective services, foster care, adoption, independent living, and family support and preservations services. The review process is twofold. The first phase consists of the development of a State Profile, derived from data for FFY 1999 contained in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and for CY 1999 from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). This data profile provides information on the key indicators relating to safety and permanency for children entering the child welfare system. State's develop their Statewide Assessment using this data and other sources of information. The assessment analyzes the process, procedures and policies of the State's child protective services, and foster care and adoption. This assessment also focuses on the systemic factors that are in place, which enable the State to carry out the process, procedures and policies of the program.

The second phase of the process is an onsite review that includes intensive reviews of a sample of cases and interviews with State and local stakeholders in the provider and service delivery community. Information from both phases of the process is used to determine the States' substantial conformity with the requirements under review.

The review process evaluates seven specific outcomes of services delivered to children and families. In addition to reviewing for case outcomes, the review process also examines seven systemic factors that affect the States' capacity to deliver services in a manner that promotes positive outcomes for children and families.

In reviewing for outcomes and systemic factors, the review process is designed to identify both the strengths and areas needing improvement in the States' programs. For those areas in which the State is determined not to be operating in substantial conformity with requirements under review, the State has the opportunity to implement a program improvement plan designed to correct the area of nonconformity. According to 45 CFR 1355.34(b)(3), each outcome must be substantially achieved in 90 percent of the cases examined during the on-site review in order to be determined in substantial conformity. Although the State is advised of applicable penalties associated with the degree of nonconformity, the penalties are not assessed until the State has had an opportunity to correct the area of nonconformity through the program improvement plan.

The period under review for the Child and Family Service Review in Vermont was from the beginning of Federal Fiscal year 1999 (October 1, 1998) to the present date of the on-site review. The review process consisted of the following activities:

- The State completed the Statewide Assessment in February 2001 in consultation with the ACF Regional Office.
- The State members of the review team and the ACF Regional Office selected three locations in the State for the onsite review activities: Burlington, Middlebury and Barre. The onsite review was conducted during the week of 4/29/01 - 5/4/01
- A State and Federal review team of 40 persons reviewed a total of 50 cases. At each site was a site leader from the Federal staff and a co-site leader from the State staff and there were two-person teams (State/Federal). These teams reviewed and rated the services provided these children and families in relationship to safety, permanency and well being. This was done by conducting a review of the case records, interviews with those involved with the case such as parents, caseworkers, foster parents, service providers and when appropriate the children themselves.
- The team also conducted interviews and focus groups with approximately 100 state and local stakeholders on the systemic factors. The stakeholders interviewed included, foster parents, caseworkers and supervisors, community partners, attorneys and legal and law Enforcement groups.

The results of the statewide assessment, the onsite case reviews, and the stakeholder interviews were compiled by the review team and used to make a determination about the State's substantial conformity with regard to each of the seven outcomes and each of the seven systemic factors

The following report is a summary of the information obtained during the review pertaining to each outcome and systemic factor, and the performance indicators used to evaluate them. The ACF Regional Office will be working with The Vermont Department of Social and Rehabilitation Service (SRS) to develop a program improvement plan that addresses those areas noted in the report that are not in substantial conformity.

KEY FINDINGS RELATING TO SAFETY, PERMANENCY AND WELL-BEING

In order for the State to be determined to be in substantial conformity on any given outcome, the outcome must be determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of the cases reviewed in the first review. In addition, the State must meet the national standard that has been established for any statewide aggregate data attached to that particular outcome.

I. SAFETY

- *87.8 percent of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Safety Outcome 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect*

Safety was found to be a major focus and priority of the Agency during this review. This was seen throughout the cases and in the stakeholder interviews. In over 87 percent of the cases reviewed, the Agency responded to reports of abuse and neglect within the 72-hour timeframe; face-to-face contact was made with family members in the timeframe required by Agency policy. The agency was found to be very responsive when there is imminent risk to children.

As a result of a child death in 1999, the State has implemented a policy that expands the agency's role when "risk of harm" is alleged. The State's statutory "risk of harm" category was identified by the agency and many of the stakeholders as contributing to the increased numbers of reports accepted for investigation.

The State's incidence of substantiated repeat maltreatment (6.58%) does not meet the national standard (6.1%). The State has recently changed its policy in regards to accepting reports of maltreatment on open cases. Prior to this change, reports of repeat maltreatment on open cases were taken as "additional information"; the revised policy now requires these reports to be fully investigated. The State's incidence of maltreatment in foster care (0.15%) meets the national standard of 0.57 percent. .

Casework documentation was found to be an area needing improvement across all three sites. In most cases it was difficult for reviewers to ascertain what actions the Agency took during an investigation, and to locate information regarding final disposition of investigations.

Status of Safety Outcome S1: Not in Substantial Conformity

- *81.3 percent of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate*

In most cases, the services provided to families is appropriate and interventions are commenced in a timely manner. All three sites noted that community involvement is an integral part of the SRS system.

However, areas needing improvement were identified. Reviewers consistently raised concerns about the lack of on going assessments and monitoring of services to children and families. Reviewers noted that the Agency relies heavily on providers for feedback regarding the progress of treatment services, rather than SRS workers maintaining regular face-to-face visits with children and families. Additionally, there is not a system in place to monitor the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of services. Reviewers also cited a concern that ongoing risk of harm is not being addressed in all cases.

Status of Safety Outcome S2: Not in Substantial Conformity

II PERMANENCY

- *71.4% of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Permanency Outcome 1: Children will have permanency and stability in their living situations.*

In FY 1999, 8 percent of Vermont's children re-entered foster care within 12 months of a prior episode; the State meets the national standard of 8.6 percent. The review found that 100 percent of the foster care cases had either no re-entries or in the few that did, they were appropriate. Vermont's population includes children who are in custody due to child abuse/neglect, delinquency, and because they are beyond the control of their parents. It is important to note that Vermont has the highest median age, 14.23 years of children in out of home care of all the states reporting AFCARS data in 1998. This high population of juveniles directly affects their data.

The percentage of children in foster care less than 12 months who experienced two or fewer placements in the State for FY 1999 was 69.96 percent which does not meet the national standard of 86.7 percent. The age group of children who experienced the most moves are those children who stay in care for longer periods of time and are not pre-school age. In this review, the average age of a child who experienced 2 or more placements was 17 years. Many of these older children who enter care have intensive needs and it remains a challenge to the State to find appropriate placements for these youth that can meet these needs.

Vermont faces a challenge in the area of permanency planning. In FY 1999, 64.91 percent of children in care were reunified with their parents or caretakers in less than 12

months; this is below the national standard of 76.2 percent. The State has been using a number of strategies to achieve permanency for foster children. Some of these are, using kinship care when appropriate and legal guardianship as an appropriate option for some children. Many barriers remain in achieving timely permanency in the State. Some are due to the fact that many children enter care during adolescence and these youth represents a unique challenge in finding permanency. In addition, reviewers and stakeholders expressed concern regarding the reluctance of SRS staff to consider cross-jurisdictional placements for children who are legally free for adoption.

Vermont's Independent Living Program (Transitional Services Program) is administered centrally through a Residential Services Coordinator. Each district office has transitional services coordinators on staff. The program serves youth between the ages of 15 and 21. Stakeholders reported that the program functions very effectively however additional resources are needed.

In FY 1999 the State reported that 23 percent of adoptions were achieved within 2 years or less. This does not meet the national standard of 32 percent. Vermont has focused on improving the process and timeliness of finalizations of adoptions for the last several years. The State has recognized the need to improve their recruitment process and has started to identify and address the issues that require change.

Status of Permanency Outcome P1: Not in Substantial Conformity

- *86% of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.*

Vermont has been very successful in placing children in their communities whenever possible and gives priority on placing siblings together when appropriate. In the foster cases reviewed, 100 percent of the cases were placed in their original community or county.

Preserving family connections is an important part of case planning for caseworkers. For the most part, visitation is frequent and the Agency promotes and supports visits when appropriate.

The use of kinship care has increased since the State revised its policy to require staff to identify possible kinship resources for both children in custody and during an investigation.

The case review did identify instances at two sites in which workers appeared to struggle with making appropriate decisions on how and when to maintain and support relationships between parent and child.

Status of Permanency Outcome P2: Not in Substantial Conformity

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

- *78% of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Well-Being Outcome 1: Families will have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.*

Vermont has an extensive array of services available throughout the State and stakeholders reported that the Agency has developed strong community collaborations with service providers. This collaboration allows the district offices to work together to meet the unique needs of children and families. The State has established treatment teams that meet regularly to coordinate services and caseworkers are very active in linking families to community services.

The case planning process was described as being inclusive of parents, children/youth (as appropriate), and out-of-home care providers, treatment providers and other related case participants.

Visitation between the Agency and the child/parent was identified as an area needing improvement. Due to high caseload, the Agency's social workers manage many cases indirectly. Across all three sites there was a need found for an increase in the direct contact between social worker and child. An over-reliance on service providers to perform key assessment and monitoring tasks was identified at all three sites.

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB1: Not in Substantial Conformity

- *95.5% of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Well-Being 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.*

The educational needs of children are a major focus for the Agency. Stakeholders agreed that the Agency provides strong support to children and continually tries to improve the educational opportunities for children. The State has developed a strong collaboration with the Department of Education to assist them in helping children meet their educational needs.

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB2: Substantial Conformity

- *87.5% of the cases reviewed substantially achieved Well-Being 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.*

The State was found to be identifying and addressing the physical and mental health needs in the majority of cases reviewed. Services to provide preventive health care, immunizations and special medical conditions are in place. Early intervention services are appropriately accessed for pre-school children. Foster parents reported that they have the medical records for the children in their home.

At one site, the Agency has developed a strong collaboration with the Washington County Mental Health Service to improve the delivery of mental health services and the state is considering replicating this in other districts.

All three sites identified the need for additional mental health services, in particularly, for severely emotionally disturbed children and for juvenile sex offenders. Also cited was a lack of skilled child psychiatrists. The assessment process for children needing out of home placement was identified as needing improvement; an incomplete assessment sometimes could lead to children being inappropriately placed. Funding shortages were also noted as effecting the availability of needed services.

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB3: Not in Substantial Conformity

KEY FINDINGS FOR SEVEN SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

The SRS information system has the capacity to track the status, demographic characteristics, location and goals for each child, including those in the juvenile justice population, who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care. Although Vermont does not operate a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SAWCIS) the system in place has the capacity to provide the state with timely data and information. Vermont was the first state to submit Adoption Foster Care and Reporting System Data (AFCARS) and voluntarily meets the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) requirements.

Status of Statewide Information System: Substantial Conformity

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Overall case plans were completed within prescribed timeframes and included the required provisions. Many times the case plan was generated from the team meetings in which all interested parties participate including providers, parents and the children (as appropriate).

The State is conducting 6 and 11-month hearings in a timely manner. Permanency hearings and administrative case reviews are inclusive of case participants and generally considered to be meaningful events.

Petitions for TPR are filed within ASFA timeframes and increased filings indicate attention to pursuing permanency for children in the custody of SRS. The timely achievement of permanency for children is hampered by significant court backlogs.

Status of Case Review System: Substantial Conformity

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

There is a need for clear practice standards for SRS casework and supervision. There was a lack of practice standards and utilization review for contracted case management service providers identified in the review.

The State has not had a formal statewide quality assurance system (one is currently being established) since 1996 when the Case Review Unit was eliminated due to statewide mandatory position cuts. The review found that the districts were developing their own methods to monitor the quality of practices and services in their areas. Stakeholders recognized the need to develop a uniform statewide quality assurance system that would include a review of a random sampling of cases and would produce reliable data that could be used to assist the management decision making process.

Status of Quality Assurance System: Not in Substantial Conformity

VII. TRAINING

The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in their Child and Family Service Plan. The 60 hour New Employee Training is appropriate and helpful to new workers. In addition to NEST, which is completed in the first 6 months after hire, new social workers are required to complete 13-course core training within 18 months.

The State offers ongoing training for basic, relevant skills and for current topics identified by staff. There was a good balance found between child and family focus in the training offered. The substance abuse certification and advanced investigation training were highlighted as being very beneficial. Also, the State has developed a highly successful partnership with the University of Vermont that promotes matriculation in the Master of Social Work program.

Vermont recently implemented the Foster Parent Pride curriculum developed by the Child Welfare League of America. This training was regarded as adequate, but some concerns were raised about redundancy, focus and applicability.

Status of Training: Substantial Conformity

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Vermont has an extensive array of services, which have been developed through public-private collaborations. Available services address both family and individual needs and include intensive home-based interventions, parent-child centers, wrap-around services, post-adoption and foster care support as well as many other services which are described in this report.

Service gaps were identified for mental health services, psychiatric evaluations, substance abuse treatment; residential treatment for seriously emotionally disturbed children, sex offender treatment services and culturally relevant services for the growing refugee population. Some waiting lists for intensive family-based services and respite care were also cited.

A recurring theme throughout this review was the need for routine, comprehensive initial assessment of children and families. Linked with this was the need for SRS to regularly monitor and re-assess the effectiveness of services delivered to the progress made in achieving case plan goals.

Status of Service Array: Substantial Conformity

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

There was a high level of community collaboration found throughout all three sites. Stakeholders agreed that the state makes a concerted effort to reach out and address the needs of "the community's" children and their families.

Vermont has developed a strong and effective collaborative system for developing the Child and Family Service Plan. A State Interagency Team established in the 1980s and comprised of participants from State agencies and the community has been recently enriched by the addition of external community stakeholders in the planning process. These stakeholders provide valuable information that directly relates to the delivery of services to children and families.

Status of Agency Responsiveness to the Community: Substantial Conformity

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT RECRUITMENT, LICENSING AND RETENTION

SRS has revised the standards for licensing of foster family homes and childcare institutions in response to the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) regulations. Stakeholders reported that the standards are equally applied to all licensed or approved homes. Kinship homes are being assessed more thoroughly since ASFA.

Recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families represents a challenge for Vermont. ASFA has produced a pool of waiting children for whom placement resources within the State are scarce. A new grant funded initiative supplements the traditional efforts District offices employ to recruit new families to foster and adoptive care. However, a pervasive sense that placement resources have been “tapped out” was expressed by some stakeholders. The review identified the need for more state-level planning and activities to recruit foster and adoptive families.

Despite the lack of in-state adoptive resources, the State acknowledges that there is reluctance to place cross-jurisdictionally. The strong priority Vermont places on taking care of its children within their own communities was found to inhibit consideration of out-of-district, regional or national homestudies.

The review identified an immediate and compelling need to institute policy and procedure for use of cross-jurisdictional placements, as well as a more comprehensive and intense state wide recruitment plan.

Status of Foster Parent and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention: Not in Substantial Conformity