

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Final Report: Alabama Child and Family Services Review
May 2008

INTRODUCTION

This document presents the findings of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for the State of Alabama. The CFSR is the Federal Government's program for assessing the performance of State child welfare agencies with regard to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. It is authorized by the Social Security Amendments of 1994 requiring that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) promulgate regulations for reviews of State child and family services programs under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. The CFSR is implemented by the Children's Bureau (CB) of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within HHS.

The Alabama CFSR was conducted the week of August 13, 2007. The period under review for the case reviews was from April 1, 2006, through August 13, 2007. The findings were derived from the following documents and data collection procedures:

- The Statewide Assessment, prepared by the Family Services Division (FSD) of the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR)
- The State Data Profile, prepared by CB, which provides State child welfare data for fiscal year (FY) 2004, FY 2005, and the CFSR 12-month target period ending March 31, 2006
- Reviews of 64 cases (40 foster care cases¹ and 24 in-home services cases) at 3 sites throughout the State: 30 cases in Jefferson County, 17 cases in Lee County, and 17 cases in Tuscaloosa County
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three sites and at the State level) with stakeholders including, but not limited to, children, parents, foster parents, all levels of child welfare agency personnel, collaborating agency personnel, service providers, court personnel, and attorneys

Background Information

The CFSR assesses State performance on 23 items relevant to 7 outcomes and 22 items pertaining to 7 systemic factors. In Section B: Systemic Factors of the report, each item incorporated in each systemic factor is rated as either a Strength or an Area Needing Improvement (ANI) based on whether State performance on the item meets Federal policy requirements. Information relevant to each item comes from the Statewide Assessment and the stakeholder interviews conducted during the week of the onsite CFSR. The overall rating for the systemic factors is based on the ratings for the individual items incorporated in the systemic factor. For any given

¹ The CFSR usually includes 40 foster care cases and 25 in-home services cases. However, during the Onsite Review, it was discovered that one of the in-home services cases involved a child in foster care. The case was, therefore, designated as a foster care case.

systemic factor, a State is rated as being either “in substantial conformity” with that factor (that is, a score of 3 or 4) or “not in substantial conformity” with that factor (a score of 1 or 2).

Items relevant to the seven outcomes are discussed in Section A: Outcomes of the Final Report. An overall rating of Strength or ANI is assigned to each of the 23 items depending on the percentage of cases that receive a Strength rating in the case reviews. An item is assigned an overall rating of Strength if 90 percent of the applicable cases reviewed are rated as a Strength. Performance ratings for each of the seven outcomes are based on item ratings for each case. A State may be rated as having Substantially Achieved, Partially Achieved, or Not Achieved the outcome. The determination of whether a State is in substantial conformity with a particular outcome is based on the percentage of cases determined to have substantially achieved the outcome. Specifically, for a State to be in substantial conformity with an outcome, 95 percent of the cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome. A State that is not in substantial conformity with a particular outcome must develop and implement a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address the areas of concern associated with that outcome.

ACF has set very high standards of performance for the CFSR Review. The standards are based on the belief that because child welfare agencies work with our country’s most vulnerable children and families, only the highest standards of performance should be acceptable. The focus of the CFSR process is on continuous quality improvement; high standards are set to ensure ongoing attention to the goal of achieving positive outcomes for children and families with regard to safety, permanency, and well-being.

It should be noted, however, that States are not required to attain the 95-percent standard established for the onsite CFSR at the end of their PIP implementation. ACF recognizes that the kinds of systemic and practice changes necessary to bring about improvement in particular outcome areas often are time consuming to implement. Also, improvements are likely to be incremental rather than dramatic. Instead, States work with ACF to establish a specified amount of improvement or implement specified activities for their PIPs. That is, for each outcome or item that is an ANI, each State (working in conjunction with CB) specifies how much improvement the State will demonstrate and/or the activities it will implement when addressing the areas needing improvement, and determines the procedures for demonstrating the achievement of these goals. Both the improvements specified and the procedures for demonstrating improvement vary across States. Therefore, a State can meet the requirements of its PIP and still not perform at the 95-percent (for outcomes) or 90-percent (for items) level as the CFSR requires.

The second round of the CFSR assesses a State’s level of functioning with regard to achieving desired child and family outcomes by applying high standards and a consistent, comprehensive case-review methodology. Application of such a methodology is intended to serve as a basis for continued planning in areas for which the State still needs to improve. The goal is to ensure that program improvement is an ongoing process and does not end with the closing of the PIP.

Because many changes have been made in the onsite CFSR process based on lessons learned during the first round and in response to feedback from the child welfare field, a State’s performance in the second round of the CFSR is not directly comparable to its

performance in the first round, particularly with regard to comparison of percentages. Key changes in the process that make comparing performance difficult across reviews are the following:

- An increase in the sample size from 50 to 65 cases (with the exception of this review, see Note 1)
- Stratification of the sample to ensure a minimum number of cases in key program areas, resulting in variations in the number of cases relevant for specific outcomes and items
- Changes in criteria for specific items to increase consistency and to ensure an assessment of critical areas, such as child welfare agency efforts to involve noncustodial parents

General Information Regarding Tables

The specific findings with regard to the State's performance on the safety and permanency outcomes are in Table 1 at the end of the Executive Summary. Findings regarding well-being outcomes are in Table 2. Table 3 presents the State's performance with regard to the seven systemic factors assessed through the CFSR.

In the following section, key findings are summarized for each outcome and systemic factor. Information also is provided about the State's performance on each outcome and systemic factor during the 2002 CFSR.

I. KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO OUTCOMES (Section A)

The 2007 CFSR identified five items demonstrating high performance in Alabama with regard to achieving outcomes for children. The State achieved overall ratings of Strength for the individual indicators pertaining to timeliness of investigations (item 1); repeat maltreatment (item 2); foster care re-entry (item 5); placing children in close proximity to their parents (item 11), and physical health of the child (item 22). Alabama achieved a Strength rating of 90 percent or higher in all of these items. In particular, the State achieved 100 percent for item 2, 97 percent for item 11, and 96 percent for item 22.

The State met the two national standards for the safety-related data indicators—one pertaining to recurrence of maltreatment within a 6-month period and one pertaining to maltreatment of children in foster care by foster parents or facility staff members. The State also met two of the national standards for the four data composites pertaining to permanency. Those include the timeliness and permanency of reunification (Permanency Composite 1) and placement stability (Permanency Composite 4).

Although the State did not achieve substantial conformity for any of the safety, permanency, or well-being outcomes, 90 percent of the cases rated for Safety Outcome 1 (children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect) were substantially achieved. In addition, ratings for Safety Outcome 2 (children are safely maintained in their homes when possible and appropriate), Well-Being

Outcome 2 (children receive services that meet their educational needs), and Well-Being Outcome 3 (children receive services to meet their physical and mental health needs) were between 80 and 85 percent.

The 2007 CFSR did identify several concerns with regard to achieving outcomes for children and families. Alabama did not meet the remaining two national standards for permanency data composites. Those included timeliness of adoptions (Permanency Composite 2) and achieving permanency for children in foster care for long periods of time (Permanency Composite 3).

In addition, there are areas of concern with regard to Alabama's performance on three outcomes. Permanency Outcome 1 (children have permanency and stability in their living situations) was Substantially Achieved in only 33 percent of the cases reviewed, Permanency Outcome 2 (continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved) was Substantially Achieved in only 60 percent of the cases reviewed, and Well-Being Outcome 1 (families have enhanced capacity to provide for children's needs) was Substantially Achieved in only 48 percent of the cases.

Performance in these three outcomes was significantly impacted by the number of individual cases rated as a Strength. For Permanency Outcome 1, 54 percent of cases are rated as a Strength for item 8 (reunification, guardianship, and placement with relatives), only 27 percent of cases are rated as a Strength for item 9 (adoption), and 45 percent of cases are rated as a Strength for item 10 (Other Permanent Planned Living Arrangement [OPPLA]). For Permanency Outcome 2, 56 percent of the cases are rated as a Strength for item 13 (visiting with parents and siblings in foster care), and 55 percent of the cases are rated as a Strength for item 16 (relationship of child in care with parents). For Well-Being Outcome 1, 53 percent of the cases are rated as a Strength for item 17 (needs/services of child, parents, and foster parents) and 41 percent of the cases are rated as a Strength for item 20 (worker visits with parents).

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1 because of the State's timeliness of initiating investigations and level of efforts to prevent repeat maltreatment. Nevertheless, clear, effective policies and a focus on family preservation did contribute to a demonstrated strength in case practice. Safety Outcome 2 findings were influenced by variation in practice across the sites, particularly related to effective assessment of initial safety and risk needs, services not in place to prevent removal of children, and adequate assessment of safety in sexual abuse cases and within sibling groups. Concerns also were found regarding caseworker inexperience and the capacity of supervisors to provide quality, clinical supervision to guide caseworkers through complex practice decisions. There also is a need to place more emphasis on safety planning when children are a risk to themselves and others.

Permanency ratings were influenced by permanent planning practice and systemic issues. Those issues included timeliness in establishment of initial permanency goals (other than reunification), timeliness of reassessment of goals, timeliness in filing for termination of parental rights (TPR), court delays in docketing TPR hearings, and inconsistent implementation of concurrent planning across the State. The review also found that there was considerable use of OPPLA as the sole option for children much younger than the population for which the goal is generally considered appropriate, and it often appears as a result of an inability to develop permanency with relatives or foster parents.

A significant finding regarding adoption outcomes is that extensive delays in achieving finalization appear to be caused by barriers to scheduling TPR hearings and frequent continuances and postponements of TPR hearings. There is a perception that older children are not adoptable, concerns that caseworkers may not be knowledgeable about adoption, and perhaps a lack of diligent effort to identify adoption resources for children who will not be adopted by relatives or their foster families. Those findings may explain the extensive use of OPPLA as a plan goal in Alabama.

The Independent Living Program is highly regarded by most stakeholders interviewed for this CFSR. However, the review identified that establishment of ongoing resource families for teenagers in foster care who will “age out” of the system when they reach their 18th birthday is inconsistent across sites. In 2 of 5 cases posted as an ANI, foster parents have not signed formal agreements to continue as the permanent placement.

The 2007 CFSR found inconsistent practices with regard to ensuring adequate visitation between children and their parents and siblings; preserving children’s connections to extended family, community, and culture; seeking and evaluating relatives as placement resources; and making concerted efforts to support or maintain the bond between children and their parents while the child is in foster care. Case reviews and stakeholder interviews revealed that there is a lack of diligent efforts to identify, locate, and engage fathers in the lives of their children in foster care. The review also found that fathers (and as a consequence, paternal extended family members) were less likely to have needed assessments, be offered services, or be considered as a placement resource. Despite the concerns, the case reviews did find that children in foster care placements were in close proximity to parents or potential permanent caregivers, unless highly specialized placements were necessary. Furthermore, children in the cases reviewed were placed with their siblings unless a valid reason existed for separating them.

The agency was not consistent in assessing and meeting the needs of parents. For foster care cases, the agency was more likely to assess and meet the needs of children and foster parents than assess and meet the needs of either fathers or mothers. For in-home services cases, the agency was more likely to meet the needs of mothers and children than the needs of fathers.

The agency was not consistent in involving fathers in the case planning process. In the cases reviewed, mothers (94 percent) and children (89 percent) were far more likely to be involved in case planning than fathers (55 percent). The exclusion of fathers from case planning occurred even when a father’s whereabouts were known. In some cases, however, exclusion was evident even when the fathers were actively and positively involved in the lives of their children.

Alabama has a broad array of services. However, once needs are assessed, the State’s low performance with regard to child outcomes may be due in part to inconsistent availability of key services depending on location, waiting lists for some services, and lack of linguistically and culturally appropriate services, particularly for Hispanic families. Concerns about service delays were particularly apparent with regard to mental health and substance abuse assessment and treatment services.

The State’s low performance on many of the outcomes may be attributed in part to the lack of frequent and meaningful contact between caseworkers and the children and parents in their caseloads. Caseworker contacts with children were found to be of sufficient frequency

and quality in 75 percent of the cases reviewed, and contacts with parents were found to be of sufficient frequency and quality in only 41 percent of the cases reviewed. In many of the cases reviewed, caseworkers were not visiting children with sufficient frequency and, when they were visiting frequently, the visits were not of adequate quality. Caseworker visits with mothers were more likely to occur at least once a month than were caseworker visits with fathers. Such a lack of contact makes it difficult to ensure children's safety while in their own homes or in foster homes, conduct an ongoing assessment of the parental capacity to meet children's needs, and engage parents of children in foster care in services to meet the requirements of their case plan so that children can return home. In addition, the case reviews found that parents and age-appropriate children were involved in case planning in 44 percent of the cases.

Safety Outcome 1: Children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect

Safety Outcome 1 incorporates two indicators. One pertains to the timeliness of initiating a response to a child maltreatment report (item 1), and the other relates to the recurrence of substantiated or indicated maltreatment (item 2).

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for a rating of substantial conformity. Performance varied across sites. The outcome was substantially achieved in 90 percent of Jefferson County cases compared to 100 percent of Lee County cases and 83 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases.

Alabama did meet the national standards for the two data indicators relevant for Safety Outcome 1. Those indicators pertain to the absence of maltreatment recurrence and absence of maltreatment of children in foster care by foster parents or facility staff.

Alabama was in substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1 in its FY 2002 review and, therefore, was not required to address that outcome and associated items in its PIP.

During the 2007 review, DHR was found to be effective in timely initiation of investigations of child maltreatment reports and in preventing recurrence of maltreatment. As a result of the RC Consent Decree, the State developed a system to manage caseloads; however, stakeholders interviewed during the Onsite Review expressed their perceptions regarding high caseloads carried by investigating workers, high turnover of staff in those positions, and the impact of staff workload on capacity for ensuring child safety. The Statewide Assessment noted that county and State staff identified staff turnover and staff vacancies as one barrier to timely initiation of response to abuse and neglect reports.

Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes when possible and appropriate

Performance on Safety Outcome 2 is assessed through two indicators. One indicator (item 3) addresses the issue of child welfare agency efforts for preventing removal of children from their homes by providing services to the families that ensure a child's safety while remaining in their homes. The other indicator (item 4) pertains to the child welfare agency efforts to reduce the risk of harm to the children.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 80 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for a rating of substantial conformity. There was some variation in performance across sites. The outcome was substantially achieved in percent of 100 percent of Lee County cases, 76 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, and 70 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity for Safety Outcome 2 in its Round 1 CFSR. Both items addressed in Safety Outcome 2 were rated as areas needing improvement in the first review and the following concerns relevant to the item were noted in the 2002 CFSR:

- The services provided to families, while their children remained at home, were not always appropriate to address risk issues.
- When appropriate services were provided, DHR was not consistent in monitoring families to assess whether services were effective in reducing the risk of harm.

To address the identified concerns, the State implemented in its PIP the following strategies:

- Provided additional training to staff that targeted substance abuse and domestic violence issues and how to assess for those issues
- Developed and implemented a consistent State consultant review process for monitoring performance on this outcome
- Provided technical assistance to counties when problems were identified through the consultant review process

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of its PIP implementation period.

During the 2007 CFSR, both items incorporated in Safety Outcome 2 continued to be rated as Areas Needing Improvement. Similar to the 2002 CFSR, the 2007 CFSR found that some children in cases reviewed were unsafe or at risk of harm in their homes because either no services were provided that addressed safety issues or the services provided were insufficient to ensure the children's safety. Additional findings of the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- In a number of cases, assessments were not conducted and/or services were not provided to prevent the children's removal from the home.
- Concerns were noted about the ability of caseworkers to make adequate assessments of safety and risk in cases involving sibling groups and in cases involving sexual abuse.
- Stakeholders indicated that collaborative efforts were in place to provide family preservation services.

Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations

There are six indicators incorporated in the assessment of Permanency Outcome 1, although not all of them are relevant for all children. The indicators pertain to the child welfare agency efforts to prevent foster care re-entry (item 5), ensure placement stability for children in foster care (item 6), and establish appropriate permanency goals for children in foster care in a timely manner (item 7). Depending on the child's permanency goal, the remaining indicators focus on the child welfare agency efforts to achieve permanency goals (such as reunification, guardianship, adoption, and permanent placement with relatives) in a timely manner (items 8 and 9), or to ensure that children who have OPPLA as a case goal are in stable placements and adequately prepared for eventual independent living (item 10).

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. The determination was based on the following findings:

- The outcome was substantially achieved in 32.5 percent of the cases, which is less than the 95 percent required for an overall rating of substantial conformity.
- The State Data Profile indicates that for the CFSR 12-month target period, the State did not meet the national standards for Permanency Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions, and Permanency Composite 3: Permanency for children in foster care extended time periods.

Although Alabama's performance on the outcome was low in all sites, one site's performance was twice as strong as the next closest. The outcome was found to be substantially achieved in 20 percent of Jefferson County cases, 60 percent of Lee County cases, and 30 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1 in its 2002 CFSR. The following concerns were identified in the 2002 CFSR:

- Permanency goals were not being established in a timely manner because of delays in reassessing goals when appropriate. In particular, the goal of reunification often was maintained for extended periods of time.
- An OPPLA goal was established when children were young and before full consideration of other permanency options.
- Concurrent planning was not implemented consistently and effectively.
- Reunification was not achieved in a timely manner in many cases.
- The agency was not filing for TPR in a timely manner.
- Caseworkers lacked adequate knowledge about adoption processes and procedures.
- When foster parents did not want to adopt, the agency often did not seek alternative resources to adoption.
- Youth were not being adequately prepared for independent living in many cases.

The following strategies were implemented in the Alabama PIP to address these concerns:

- Made changes in agency policy that would strengthen practice with regard to permanency planning, concurrent planning, the TPR process, preparation of children for adoption, and use of OPPLA as a case goal
- Provided training to caseworkers, supervisors, DHR attorneys, and probate judges that supported the new policies and timelines in the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)
- Modified the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) to include reminders that would alert caseworkers and supervisors with regard to timelines and deadlines pertaining to permanency and codes to identify those foster homes that are foster/adopt homes
- Enhanced a variety of Alabama Child Welfare Information System (ACWIS) reports to make them useful in monitoring outcomes and trained management and supervisors in using these reports for monitoring purposes
- Developed brochures for parents regarding the ASFA timelines and implications of those timelines for the parents
- Developed brochures for prospective adoptive parents concerning adoption subsidy options
- Partnered with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) to develop training, brochures, proposal of guardianship legislation, consistent implementation of ASFA, early parental identification of relatives, and expedition of adoption hearings
- Revised Individualized Service Plan (ISP) documentation to articulate concurrent plans and release administrative letters with mandates to document visitation plans and reminders of ASFA time frames and related DHR policies

The State met its target goals for the outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key findings of the 2007 review included the following:

In the State's 2007 CFSR, all items incorporated in this outcome except for item 5 were rated as an ANI. Specific findings contributing to the outcome rating follow:

- The agency is generally effective in preventing re-entry into foster care.
- Some children in the cases reviewed did not experience placement stability as a result, in part, of inadequate matching of foster homes to a child's needs.
- The agency is not consistent with regard to establishing appropriate permanency goals in a timely manner.
- The agency is not consistent with regard to making concerted efforts to achieve reunifications or permanent placements with relatives in a timely manner.
- There are extensive delays in achieving adoptions in a timely manner, some of which may be attributed to delays in scheduling court hearings for TPR petitions and the court granting continuances and postponements for these hearings.
- In some cases, the agency had not formalized the permanent placements for children with a goal of OPPLA.

Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children

Permanency Outcome 2 incorporates six indicators that assess the child welfare agency's performance with regard to (1) placing children in foster care in close proximity to their parents and close relatives (item 11); (2) placing siblings together (item 12); (3) ensuring frequent visitation between children and their parents and siblings in foster care (item 13); (4) preserving connections of children in foster care with extended family, community, cultural heritage, religion, and schools (item 14); (5) seeking relatives as potential placement resources (item 15); and (6) promoting the relationship between children and their parents while the children are in foster care (item 16).

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. The outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 60 percent of the cases, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied markedly at one site when compared to the other two. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, 50 percent of Lee County cases, and 45 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2 in its 2002 CFSR. The following concerns were identified in the 2002 CFSR:

- The agency was not consistent in supporting visitation between children and their parents, particularly children and their fathers (item 13).
- The agency was not consistent in ensuring that children's connections with extended family, community, culture, faith, and friends were preserved (item 14).
- The agency was not consistent with regard to efforts to search for and evaluate relatives as potential placement options, particularly paternal relatives (item 15).
- The agency was not consistently effective in promoting the bond between children and their mothers and fathers.

The following strategies were implemented in the Alabama PIP to address the concerns:

- Enhanced the ISP process by revising the document to include a visitation plan and requiring that supervisors are present during ISP development
- Trained staff on practices related to preserving connections, including the development of Life Books
- Monitored the frequency and quality of child and family visitation through revision of ACWIS forms and supervisory review
- Modified concurrent planning policy to include a section on evaluating relatives as placement resources

The State met its target goals for the outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key findings of the 2007 review included the following:

All of the concerns related to Permanency Outcome 2 found in the 2002 CFSR also were found in the 2007 CFSR. For example, the 2007 case reviews continued to demonstrate inconsistent practice with regard to ensuring adequate visitation between children and their parents and between siblings; preserving children's connections to extended family, community, and culture; seeking and evaluating relatives as placement resources; and making concerted efforts to support or maintain the bond between children and their parents while in foster care. In general, there was a lack of diligent efforts to identify, locate, and engage fathers in the lives of their children while the children were in foster care.

However, case reviews also found the following strengths:

- Children in the cases reviewed were in foster care placements that were in close proximity to parents or potential permanent caregivers unless highly specialized placements were necessary (item 11).
- Most children in the cases reviewed were placed with siblings, unless there was a valid reason for separating them (item 12).

Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs

Well-Being Outcome 1 incorporates four indicators. One pertains to the agency's efforts to ensure that the service needs of children, parents, and foster parents are assessed and that the necessary services are provided to meet identified needs (item 17). A second indicator examines agency efforts to actively involve parents and children (when appropriate) in the case planning process (item 18). The two remaining indicators examine the frequency and quality of caseworker contacts with the children in their caseloads (item 19) and with the children's parents (item 20).

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. The outcome was rated as Substantially Achieved in 48 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 95 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied across all sites. The outcome was substantially achieved in 30 percent of Jefferson County cases, 71 percent of Lee County cases, and 59 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases. Performance did not vary based on whether a case was in-home or foster care. The outcome was substantially achieved in 36 percent (23 cases) of the 40 foster care cases and 33 percent (8 cases) of the 24 in-home services cases.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1 in its 2002 CFSR. All items incorporated in the outcome were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. The following key concerns were identified in the 2002 CFSR:

- The agency was effective in assessing the needs of foster parents, but less effective in assessing the needs of the children and their mothers and fathers.

- The agency was not consistent in involving parents and age-appropriate children in case planning, although it was more effective in involving mothers than in involving children and fathers.
- In many cases, caseworker visits with children and parents were not of sufficient frequency or quality to ensure adequate monitoring of children's safety or promote progress toward attainment of permanency goals.

To address the concerns, the State implemented in its PIP the following strategies:

- Developed a consistent format for documenting comprehensive family assessments and a curriculum for training in advanced assessment skills
- Developed a supervisory case review process requiring written feedback to caseworkers and ensuring supervisory monitoring of (1) family assessments, (2) caseworker visits with children and parents; (3) timely documentation of assessments and contacts, (4) inclusion of age-appropriate children in case planning, and (5) tracking case planning meetings
- Established a minimum number of required supervisory case reviews
- Established minimum requirements for caseworker contacts and issued the information in a revised policy

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

The case reviews in the 2007 CFSR resulted in the following findings: Similar to the 2002 CFSR, in the 2007 CFSR all items included in Well-Being Outcome 1 were rated as Areas Needing Improvement.

The key findings of the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- The agency was not consistent in assessing and meeting the needs of parents. For foster care cases, the agency was more likely to assess and meet the needs of children and foster parents than assess and meet the needs of either fathers or mothers. For in-home services cases, the agency was more likely to meet the needs of mothers and children than meet the needs of fathers.
- The agency was not consistent with involving fathers in the case planning process. In the cases reviewed, mothers (94 percent) and children (89 percent) were far more likely to be involved in case planning than fathers (55 percent). The exclusion of fathers from case planning occurred even when a father's whereabouts were known and in some cases, even when a father was actively involved in the lives of his children.
- In many of the cases reviewed, caseworkers were not visiting children with sufficient frequency and, when they were visiting frequently, the visits were not of adequate quality.
- Caseworker visits with mothers and fathers often were of neither sufficient frequency nor quality. Caseworker visits with mothers were more likely to occur at least once a month than were caseworker visits with fathers.

Well-Being Outcome 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs

There is only one indicator for Well-Being Outcome 2. It pertains to the agency efforts to address and meet the educational needs of children in both foster care and in-home services cases (item 21).

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2. The outcome was substantially achieved in 84 percent of the cases reviewed. This is less than the 95 percent or higher required for substantial conformity. There were differences in performance on this outcome across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 100 percent of Lee County cases and 85 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, compared to 72 percent of Jefferson County cases. There also was some variation in performance based on the type of case. The outcome was substantially achieved in 84 percent of the applicable foster care cases compared to 71 percent of the applicable in-home services cases.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2 in its 2002 CFSR. The key concern identified at that time was that although educational assessments were generally completed, services were not routinely provided to address the identified needs. In response to this concern, the State developed and issued guidelines for an Education/DHR Protocol to be used statewide as part of its PIP.

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

The key findings of the 2007 CFSR indicate that the concerns from the 2002 CFSR were present in the 2007 CFSR.

Well-Being Outcome 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs

This outcome incorporates two indicators that assess agency efforts to meet children's physical health (item 22) and mental health (item 23) needs.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. The outcome was determined as substantially achieved in 85 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 95 percent required for substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 94 percent of Lee County cases and 88 percent of Tuscaloosa county cases, compared with 78 percent of Jefferson County cases. However, performance did not vary based on the type of case reviewed. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 85 percent of both the 40 foster care cases and the 20 applicable in-home services cases.

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with the outcome in its 2002 CFSR. Although the item pertaining to meeting children's physical health needs was rated a Strength in that review, a key concern identified in the 2002 CFSR was that although the agency was somewhat effective in assessing children for mental health needs, it was less effective in providing services that met identified needs.

To address the concerns, the agency implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Developed practice guidelines to include assessment, screening, treatment, and monitoring of mental health needs and provided training to staff on the new guidelines
- Implemented an assessment tool to evaluate outcomes for children in residential placements
- Implemented a reporting process for in-home service providers that monitored progress in meeting children's mental health needs
- Maintained and updated the tracking system for children in restrictive placement settings to enable them to move to a less restrictive placement as soon as goals were achieved
- Developed interagency protocols to share information regarding the care of children in licensed or certified care facilities throughout the State and collaborated with the Departments of Mental Health and Youth Services to fund development of new family, school, and community services

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

In the 2007 CFSR, the item pertaining to meeting children's physical health needs continued to be rated as a Strength as it was in the 2002 CFSR. However, meeting the mental health needs continued to be rated as an ANI. The key concern identified in the 2007 CFSR was the lack of service provision, or extensive delays in service provision, for addressing identified mental health needs. In three cases, however, the agency also did not pursue mental health assessments, despite the presence of obvious indicators of mental and behavioral health concerns.

II. KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO SYSTEMIC FACTORS (Section B)

With regard to systemic factors, Alabama was found to be in substantial conformity with the factors of Statewide Information System, Quality Assurance System, Service Array, and Agency Responsiveness to the Community. Alabama was not in substantial conformity with the systemic factors of Case Review System; Training, and Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention. The systemic findings contribute directly to outcome performance.

Statewide Information System

One indicator is used to assess the State's performance with regard to the systemic factor of a Statewide Information System. The indicator examines whether the State's information system can inform users immediately with the status, demographic characteristics, location, and case goals for the placement of every child in foster care.

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Statewide Information System. DHR operates several automated information systems for child welfare, as well as many manual recording and reporting systems considered useful by staff and stakeholders. ACWIS tracks status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for children in foster care and pre-legal adoptive placements. Alabama also was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR.

The single concern noted about the current system by both the agency and stakeholders is that multiple data systems suffer as the result of the realities of the construct of the systems, for example, redundant and time-consuming data entry and labor-intensive maintenance activities. Still, the system meets all of the requirements needed to track children and report data to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

Alabama is implementing a SACWIS designed to resolve the problems of multiple systems. Furthermore, DHR implemented a new Electronic Report Distribution (ERD) system that has had the positive effect of allowing staff to access critical child data 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Case Review System

Five indicators are used to assess the State's performance for the systemic factor of a Case Review System. The indicators examine development of case plans and parent involvement in that process (item 25), the consistency of 6-month case reviews (item 26) and 12-month permanency hearings (item 27), implementation of procedures to seek TPR in accordance with the time frames established in ASFA (item 28), and notification and inclusion of foster and pre-adoptive parents and relative caregivers in case reviews and hearings (item 29).

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Case Review System. Alabama was not in substantial conformity with the factor during its 2002 CFSR, and was, therefore, required to address the factor in its PIP. The following concerns relevant to the Case Review System were identified in the 2002 CFSR:

- The agency was not consistent with respect to involving parents in case plan development.
- The State was not consistent with regard to holding permanency hearings in a timely manner.
- Although the State had a process for filing for TPR in accordance with ASFA, adherence to the timelines varied across counties and court systems.

To address these concerns, the State implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Revised policy to require random supervisory review of ISPs to ensure parental involvement

- Provided training on parent locator services and activities and parental/family involvement in ISPs
- Used Quality Assurance (QA) Committees to survey parents on whether they were involved in their child/family ISP to measure county performance in this area
- Enhanced systems that could capture ISP attendance, distributed tracking reports, and modified ACWIS to link TPR and compelling reasons fields
- Identified counties with unacceptable timely permanency hearing rates and subsequently provided them with AOC assistance in working with problematic jurisdictions
- Provided AOC training on identified needs to the legal/judicial community
- Provided policy re-issuances, clarifications, and technical assistance (TA) on permanency hearings, TPR, and compelling reasons through the Central Office
- Coordinated with AOC to review hearing notification and scheduling policies and practices
- Provided on-site consultation and TA to county caseworkers on the identification of compelling reasons and determining when “enough is enough” related to goal changes

The State met its target goals with regard to this systemic factor by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key concerns identified in the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- Stakeholder interviews and case record reviews indicate that parents are not consistently engaged in the development of their case plans.
- Stakeholder interviews and the case record reviews indicate that TPR petitions are inconsistently filed in a timely manner and that compelling reasons (for not filing) are inconsistently documented in the case record.

The concerns identified in the 2007 CFSR were the same as those from the 2002 CFSR. In the 2007 CFSR, inconsistency of practice was found with regard to involving parents in case planning, holding permanency hearings in a timely manner, and filing for TPR in accordance with ASFA. In addition, the 2007 CFSR also identified practice inconsistencies with regard to provision of notice to foster parents, relative caregivers, and pre-adoptive parents about docketed hearings and providing all of the parties with the opportunity to be heard.

Despite the concerns, the 2007 CFSR also found the following:

- Despite the inconsistencies in the practice of engagement of parents in case planning, there are obvious efforts underway in some jurisdictions to improve.
- All counties have the mechanisms in place to hold 6-month or administrative reviews of the ISP.
- Continuances for permanency hearings remain an issue; however, they are decreasing.

- Stakeholders, the courts, and DHR believe that collaborative efforts to rewrite the Juvenile Code will lead to improvements in the case review system and, ultimately, improve permanency outcomes.

Quality Assurance System

Performance with regard to the systemic factor of Quality Assurance System is based on whether the State has developed standards that ensure the safety and health of children in foster care (item 30), and whether the State is operating a statewide QA system that evaluates the quality and effectiveness of services and measures program Strengths and Areas Needing Improvement (item 31).

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Quality Assurance System. During the 2002 CFSR, Alabama was in substantial conformity with this systemic factor and was, therefore, not required to address the factor in its PIP. Key findings of the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- The State has implemented standards that are sufficient to protect the safety and health of children in care.
- The State has a functioning QA system that addresses key practice areas and provides feedback on key findings.

Stakeholders commented that DHR has developed and implemented standards that will ensure that children in the care and custody of the State are provided quality services that keep their safety and health paramount. The State also has a QA model that examines and assesses practice indicators related to best outcomes for children and families served by the system. The model identifies necessary corrective actions for a number of State and Federal program requirements, identifies practice and systems strengths, and incorporates successful strategies for replicating performance statewide.

Training

The systemic factor of Training incorporates an assessment of the State's new caseworker training program (item 32), ongoing training for agency staff (item 33), and training for foster and adoptive parents (item 34).

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Training. The State was in substantial conformity with this systemic factor in its 2002 CFSR and was, therefore, not required to address the factor in its PIP.

The key concerns noted in the 2007 CFSR were delays in providing the initial Alabama Certification Training (ACT I) core training to new caseworkers because of resource and travel issues, the impact of turnover on the State's ability to train new caseworkers in a timely manner, assignment of caseloads to new staff before receiving training, and a lack of minimum requirements for ongoing training.

The 2007 CFSR did find that some of the larger counties responded to the delays in the provision of ACT 1 training by developing their own training for workers to attend prior to participating in ACT I. Those counties are assessing their programs for content to see if they can sustain their own pre-service training programs without duplicating ACT I. That would free more slots for smaller jurisdictions.

There is ongoing training called ACT II, but training resources are limited. Access is consequently prioritized and not available on an as-needed basis for all caseworkers.

Item 34 of this Systemic Factor was rated as a Strength. The State has required pre-service training for foster parents and ongoing training requirements of 15 hours every year for regular foster homes and 30 hours every year for therapeutic homes. This item also was rated as a Strength in the 2002 CFSR.

Service Array

The assessment of the systemic factor of Service Array addresses three questions: (1) Does the State have in place an array of services that meet the needs of children and families served by the child welfare agency (item 35)? (2) Are the services accessible to families and children throughout the State (item 36)? (3) Can services be individualized to meet the unique needs of the children and family served by the child welfare agency (item 37)?

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Service Array. The State was in substantial conformity with the systemic factor in the 2002 CFSR and therefore did not address this factor in its PIP.

Key findings of the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- In areas of the State serving larger populations of minority and migrant families, there is a need to develop more responsive culturally- and linguistically-appropriate services.
- Information from both the Statewide Assessment and the on-site CFSR indicates that the State has developed a broad array of services that can generally meet individual needs across jurisdictions. However, some resource inconsistencies appear to be related to size of jurisdiction and local capacity. The concern tends to be about mental health and substance abuse treatment and is defined largely as a discrepancy regarding availability and access of existing services between smaller and larger counties.

Item 35 was rated as a Strength because the State agency is able to meet the assessed, unique needs of children, parents, and foster parents through the array of services that it provides.

Item 36 was rated as an ANI because a discrepancy exists between the larger and smaller counties with regard to access to critical services (for example, mental health and substance abuse treatment) and long waiting lists for both children and parents to access some services.

Item 37 was rated as Strength because State and local agencies have mechanisms in place for facilitating individualization of services. The majority of stakeholders agreed that the State makes concerted efforts to ensure that services are individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families the agency serves. This specific item was also rated as a Strength in the 2002 CFSR.

Agency Responsiveness to the Community

Performance with regard to the systemic factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community incorporates an assessment of the State's consultation with external stakeholders in developing the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) (items 38 and 39), and the extent to which the State coordinates child welfare services with services or benefits of other Federal or Federally-assisted programs serving the same population (item 40).

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community. The State also was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR. The general finding in the 2007 CFSR was that the State engages in ongoing consultation with key stakeholders to obtain their input regarding the goals and objectives of the CFSP. The CFSR also found that DHR and other Federal and Federally-assisted programs coordinate to meet the service needs of the children and families served by the agency (item 40). Of particular note is the Multi-Needs Program (MNP) established as a legislative initiative that requires a multi-disciplinary approach with a county team staffing model including representatives from education, DHR, public health, juvenile justice, and mental health. The agency also consistently engages stakeholders in developing annual reports of progress and services delivered that are a Federal requirement.

Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention

The assessment of this systemic factor focuses on the State's standards for foster homes and child care institutions (items 41 and 42), the State's compliance with Federal requirements for criminal background checks for foster and adoptive parents (item 43), the State's efforts to recruit foster and adoptive parents that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of foster children (item 44), and the State's activities with regard to using cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate permanent placements for waiting children (item 45).

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention. During the 2002 CFSR, Alabama was in substantial conformity with this factor. Key concerns of the 2007 CFSR with regard to this systemic factor were the following:

- Current recruitment mechanisms have not addressed the growing need for ethnic and racially diverse foster homes that are reflective of changing demographics of the State and the foster care population.

- There are delays in facilitating cross-jurisdictional placements in a timely manner, when children are placed out of State.

There also were concerns voiced in the Statewide Assessment and by stakeholders about significant delays in processing background checks when manual fingerprinting is used instead of the “Live Scan” process. DHR is working to develop a process that can expedite fingerprint results and, consequently, approval of foster care and adoptive resources.

Despite the concerns, the 2007 CFSR also found the following:

- The State established and implemented clear standards for licensing foster family homes and child care institutions, to include minimum requirements for pre-service and ongoing training.
- There is clear delineation of the requirements that must be met for families wishing to adopt.
- The State has a process in place for complying with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances for family foster home and adoptive placements that addresses the safety of children.
- DHR employed a variety of traditional and innovative recruitment efforts that would increase the pool of families interested in foster care and adoption.

Table 1. Alabama CFSR Ratings for Safety and Permanency Outcomes and Items

Outcomes and Indicators	Outcome Ratings			Item Ratings	
	In Substantial Conformity?	Percent Substantially Achieved*	Met National Standards?	Rating**	Percent Strength
Safety Outcome 1: Children are first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect	NO	90	YES		
Item 1: Timeliness of investigations				Strength	90
Item 2: Repeat maltreatment				Strength	100
Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes when possible and appropriate	NO	80			
Item 3: Services to prevent removal				ANI	78
Item 4: Risk of harm				ANI	84
Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations	NO	33	NO		
Item 5: Foster care re-entry				Strength	91
Item 6: Stability of foster care placements				ANI	78
Item 7: Permanency goal for child				ANI	60
Item 8: Reunification, guardianship and placement with relatives				ANI	54
Item 9: Adoption				ANI	27
Item 10: Other planned living arrangement				ANI	50
Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved	NO	60			
Item 11: Proximity of placement				Strength	97
Item 12: Placement with siblings				ANI	80
Item 13: Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care				ANI	56
Item 14: Preserving connections				ANI	79
Item 15: Relative placement				ANI	66
Item 16: Relationship of child in care with parents				ANI	55

*95 percent of the applicable cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome for the State to be in substantial conformity with the outcome.

**Items may be rated as a Strength or an ANI. For an overall rating of Strength, 90 percent of the cases must be rated as a Strength.

Table 2. Alabama CFSR Ratings for Child and Family Well-Being Outcomes and Items

Outcomes and Indicators	Outcome Ratings		Item Ratings	
	In Substantial Conformity?	Percent Substantially Achieved	Rating**	Percent Strength
Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for children’s needs	NO	48		
Item 17: Needs/services of child, parents, and foster parents			ANI	53
Item 18: Child/family involvement in case planning			ANI	66
Item 19: Worker visits with child			ANI	75
Item 20: Worker visits with parents			ANI	41
Well-Being Outcome 2: Children receive services to meet their educational needs	NO	84		
Item 21: Educational needs of child			ANI	84
Well-Being Outcome 3: Children receive services to meet their physical and mental health needs	NO	85		
Item 22: Physical health of child			Strength	96
Item 23: Mental health of child			ANI	83

*95 percent of the applicable cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome for the State to be in substantial conformity with the outcome.

**Items may be rated as a Strength or an ANI. For an overall rating of Strength, 90 percent of the cases reviewed for the item (with the exception of item 21) must be rated as a Strength. Because item 21 is the only item for Well-Being Outcome 2, the requirement of a 95 percent Strength rating applies.

Table 3: Alabama CFSR Ratings for Systemic Factors and Items

Systemic Factors and Items	Substantial Conformity?	Score*	Item Rating**
Statewide Information System	YES	3	
Item 24: State is operating a statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care.			Strength
Case Review System	NO	2	
Item 25: Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child’s parents that includes the required provisions			ANI
Item 26: Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child, no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review			Strength
Item 27: Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the States has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter			ANI
Item 28: Provides a process for TPR proceedings in accordance with the provisions of ASFA			ANI
Item 29: Provides a process for foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child			ANI
Quality Assurance System	YES	4	
Item 30: The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of children			Strength
Item 31: The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identified Strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluations program improvement measures implemented			Strength
Training	NO	2	
Item 32: The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training			ANI

Systemic Factors and Items	Substantial Conformity?	Score*	Item Rating**
for all staff who deliver these services.			
Item 33: The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP.			ANI
Item 34: The States provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children.			Strength
Service Array	YES	3	
Item 35: The State has in place an array of services that assess the Strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency.			Strength
Item 36: The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State's CFSP.			ANI
Item 37: The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency.			Strength
Agency Responsiveness to the Community	YES	4	
Item 38: In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with tribal representatives, consumers, services providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP.			Strength
Item 39: The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered pursuant to the CFSP.			Strength
Item 40: The State's services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population.			Strength
Foster And Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, And Retention	NO	2	
Item 41: The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and child care institutions which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards.			Strength
Item 42: The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or			

Systemic Factors and Items	Substantial Conformity?	Score*	Item Rating**
child care institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.			Strength
Item 44: The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom adoptive homes are needed.			ANI
Item 45: The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children.			ANI

*Scores range from 1 to 4. A score of 1 or 2 means that the factor is not in substantial conformity. A score of 3 or 4 means that the factor is in substantial conformity.

**Items may be rated as a Strength or as an ANI.

**Final Report
Alabama Child and Family Services Review
May 2008**

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau**

INTRODUCTION

This document presents the findings of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for the State of Alabama. The CFSR is the Federal Government's program for assessing the performance of State child welfare agencies with regard to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. It is authorized by the Social Security Amendments of 1994 requiring that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) promulgate regulations for reviews of State child and family services programs under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. The CFSR is implemented by the Children's Bureau (CB) of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within HHS.

The Alabama CFSR was conducted the week of August 13, 2007. The period under review for the case reviews was from April 1, 2006, through August 13, 2007. The findings were derived from the following documents and data collection procedures:

- The Statewide Assessment, prepared by the Family Services Division (FSD) of the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR)
- The State Data Profile, prepared by CB, which provides State child welfare data for fiscal year (FY) 2004, FY 2005, and the CFSR 12-month target period ending March 31, 2006
- Reviews of 64 cases (40 foster care cases¹ and 24 in-home services cases) at 3 sites throughout the State: 30 cases in Jefferson County, 17 cases in Lee County, and 17 cases in Tuscaloosa County
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three sites and at the State level) with stakeholders including, but not limited to, children, parents, foster parents, all levels of child welfare agency personnel, collaborating agency personnel, service providers, court personnel, and attorneys

Items relevant to the seven outcomes are discussed in Outcomes Section A. An overall rating of Strength or Area Needing Improvement is assigned to each of the 23 items depending on the percentage of cases that receive a Strength rating in the case reviews. An item is assigned an overall rating of Strength if 90 percent of the applicable cases reviewed are rated as a Strength. Performance ratings for each of the seven outcomes are based on item ratings for each case. A State may be rated as having Substantially Achieved, Partially Achieved, or Not Achieved the outcome. Determination of whether a State is in substantial conformity with a particular outcome is based on the percentage of cases determined to have substantially achieved the outcome. Specifically, for a State to be in substantial conformity with an outcome, 95 percent of the cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome. A State that is not in substantial conformity with a particular outcome must develop and implement a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) that addresses the areas of concern associated with that outcome.

¹ The CFSR usually includes 40 foster care cases and 25 in-home services cases. However, during the onsite review, it was discovered that one of the in-home services cases involved a child in foster care. The case was, therefore, designated as a foster care case.

ACF has set very high standards of performance for the CFSR Review. The standards are based on the belief that because child welfare agencies work with our country's most vulnerable children and families, only the highest standards of performance should be acceptable. The focus of the CFSR process is on continuous quality improvement; high standards are set to ensure ongoing attention to the goal of achieving positive outcomes for children and families with regard to safety, permanency, and well-being.

It should be noted, however, that States are not required to attain the 95-percent standard established for the CFSR Onsite Review at the end of its PIP implementation. ACF recognizes that the kinds of systemic and practice changes necessary to bring about improvement in particular outcome areas often are time consuming to implement. Also, improvements are likely to be incremental rather than dramatic. Instead, States work with ACF to establish a specified amount of improvement or implement specified activities for their PIP. That is, for each outcome or item that is an Area Needing Improvement, each State (working in conjunction with CB) specifies how much improvement the State will demonstrate and/or the activities that it will implement to address the areas needing improvement and determines the procedures for demonstrating the achievement of these goals. Both the improvements specified and the procedures for demonstrating improvement vary across States. Therefore, a State can meet the requirements of its PIP and still not perform at the 95-percent (for outcomes) or 90-percent (for items) level as CFSR requires.

The second round of the CFSR assesses a State's level of functioning with regard to achieving desired child and family outcomes by once more applying high standards and a consistent, comprehensive case-review methodology. Application of such a methodology is intended to serve as a basis for continued planning in areas in which the State still needs to improve. The goal is to ensure that program improvement is an ongoing process and does not end with the closing of the PIP.

Because many changes have been made in the onsite CFSR process based on lessons learned during the first round and in response to feedback from the child welfare field, a State's performance in the second round of the CFSR is not directly comparable to its performance in the first round, particularly with regard to comparisons of percentages. Key changes in the CFSR process that make comparing performance across reviews difficult are the following:

- An increase in the sample size from 50 to 65 cases (with the exception of this review, see Note 1)
- Stratification of the sample to ensure a minimum number of cases in key program areas, resulting in variations in the number of cases relevant for specific outcomes and items
- Changes in criteria for specific items to increase consistency and to ensure an assessment of critical areas, such as child welfare agency efforts to involve noncustodial parents

The following table presents key characteristics of the 64 cases reviewed during the CFSR.

Table – Key Alabama Case Characteristics

Case Characteristics	Foster Care Cases N=40	In-Home Cases N=24
When case was opened/child entered foster care		
Open prior to the period under review	34	13
Open during the period under review	6	11
Child entered foster care during the period under review	10	*
Child's age at start of period under review		
Younger than age 10	20 (50%)	*
At least 10 but younger than 13	6 (15%)	*
At least 13 but younger than 16	6 (15%)	*
16 and older	8 (20%)	*
Race/Ethnicity		
African American (Non-Hispanic)	22 (55%)	*
White (Non-Hispanic)	14 (35%)	*
Hispanic (of all races)	2 (5%)	*
Two or more races	2 (5%)	*
American Indian	0	*
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	*
Unknown	0	*
Primary reason for opening case		
Neglect (not including medical neglect)	14 (35%)	6 (25%)
Physical abuse	9 (23%)	3 (13%)
Sexual abuse	0	1 (4%)
Medical neglect	0	1 (4%)
Substance abuse by parent	7 (18%)	3 (13%)
Domestic violence in child's home	0	2 (8%)
Emotional maltreatment	0	0
Abandonment	3 (7%)	0
Mental/Physical Health of Parent	2 (5%)	0
Mental/Physical Health of Child	0	2 (8%)
Child's Behavior	2 (5%)	0
Other	3 (7%)	6 (25%)

*Information on these characteristics for in-home services cases is not provided because all children in the family are considered in these cases.

All 64 cases were open agency cases at some time during the period under review of April 1, 2006, through August 13, 2007.

SECTION A: OUTCOMES

This first section of the report presents CFSR findings relevant to Alabama's performance in achieving specified outcomes for children in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being. For each outcome, there is a table presenting the data for the case review findings and national indicators (when relevant). The table is followed by a discussion of the State's status with regard to substantial conformity with the outcome at the time of the State's first CFSR in 2002, the State's status relevant to the current review, and a presentation and discussion of each item (indicator) assessed under the outcome. Differences in findings across the sites included in the onsite review are described when noteworthy. Variations in outcome and item ratings as a function of type of case (that is, foster care or in-home services) also are identified when appropriate. The second section of the report (Section B: Systemic Factors) provides the assessment and discussion of Alabama's performance with regard to systemic factors relevant to the child welfare agency's ability to achieve positive outcomes for children.

In the following sections, for each outcome assessed, there is information pertaining to how the State performed on that outcome in the first round. If the outcome was not substantially achieved during the first round of the CFSR, there is a discussion of the key concerns identified at that time and the strategies implemented in the PIP to address the concerns. This discussion also focuses on whether the key concerns emerging in the first CFSR continued to be present in the second review, or whether the concerns were resolved, but other concerns emerged.

I. SAFETY

Safety Outcome 1

Outcome S1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Substantially Achieved	9	4	5	18	90
Partially Achieved	0	0	1	1	5
Not Achieved or Addressed	1	0	0	1	5
Total Applicable Cases	10	4	6	20	
Not Applicable Cases	20	13	11	44	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	
Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:					
	National Standard (%)		State's Percentage	Meets Standard	
Absence of maltreatment recurrence	94.6		97.8	YES	
Absence of maltreatment of children in foster care by foster parents or facility staff	99.68		99.87	YES	

Status of Safety Outcome 1

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of the applicable cases, which is close to, but less than, the 95 percent or higher required for a rating of substantial conformity. There was little variation in performance on this outcome across counties. Although both of the items included in the outcome were rated as a Strength, the combination of items within cases did not reach the level of 95 percent substantially achieved.

Alabama met the national standards for the data indicators pertaining to the absence of maltreatment recurrence and the absence of maltreatment in foster care by foster parents or facility staff. Alabama was in substantial conformity with this outcome in its FY 2002 review and therefore was not required to address the factor in its PIP.

Key Concerns From the 2002 CFSR

Alabama was determined to be in substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1 during the 2002 CFSR, having met both National Standards and because item 2 was rated as a Strength. Although the State was not required to address Safety 1 in its PIP, Alabama

implemented the following steps for addressing concerns related to Item 1: Timeliness. Case ratings indicated that the State was not always consistent in its response to reports of child abuse and/or neglect and found instances of failure to report to the Central Registry new reports on open cases.

To address noted concerns, Alabama implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Developed new Child Protective Services Policy and subsequently provided statewide training
- Developed and implemented a consistent State consultant review process

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

During the 2007 review, DHR was effective in initiating investigations of child maltreatment reports in a timely manner and in preventing the recurrence of maltreatment. However, stakeholders expressed concern regarding the high caseloads carried by investigating caseworkers and the high turnover in those positions. The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 1 are presented below.

Item 1: Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

The assessment of item 1 was applicable for 20 (31 percent) of the 64 cases. Cases were not applicable if there were no child maltreatment reports during the period under review. In assessing item 1, reviewers were to determine whether the response to a maltreatment report occurring during the period under review had been initiated in accordance with the policy requirements of the State child welfare agency.

Alabama policy states that “initiation” is defined as face-to-face contact with the child and “response time” is defined as the time frame in which an in-person initial contact is made with the children who are allegedly at risk of serious harm. The State has two designated response times—“immediate” and “within five calendar days.” Immediate is defined as “as soon as possible after a report is received, but no later than 12 hours from receipt of the intake information.” Within 5 days means that an in-person child contact must be made within 5 days from the date the intake information was received. Policy requires that individual, in-person, private interviews be conducted with all children in the home within the response time designated at intake. “All children” includes children identified at intake as allegedly abused/neglected, as well as all other children residing in the home. Nonverbal children must be observed while awake.

Alabama has implemented Child Protective Services (CPS) prevention policies that allow counties greater flexibility in assessing and determining risk of maltreatment of children. CPS prevention policies are an alternative agency response when information obtained at intake does not meet the definitions of child abuse and neglect. Child safety must continue to be assessed in CPS prevention cases. Initial in-person contact with children identified at risk of maltreatment is made as quickly as intake information warrants, but no later than 5 calendar days from receipt of the referral.

The results of the assessment of this item are in the table below.

Item 1	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	9	4	5	18	90
Area Needing Improvement	1	0	1	2	10
Total Applicable Cases	10	4	6	20	
Not applicable	20	13	11	44	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Performance on this item did not vary substantially across sites.

Item 1 was rated as a Strength when the investigation was initiated and face-to-face contact established with the children in the family within the time frame State policy or law requires. It was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in two cases when the investigation and/or face-to-face contact was not established within the required time frame. In one of the cases, the priority assigned to the report was “immediate,” requiring that a response be initiated within 12 hours. In the other case, the priority required a response within 5 days.

Rating Determination

Item 1 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 90 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had initiated an investigation of a maltreatment report in accordance with required time frames. This percent meets the 90 percent required for an overall item rating of Strength. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the agency responds to allegations of abuse and neglect in a timely manner. They noted that there are memoranda of understanding with local law enforcement agencies in most counties. They also noted that in larger counties some law enforcement officers are assigned to work directly with DHR to respond to child abuse reports.

Despite generally positive perceptions, a few stakeholders expressed concern about the potential for delays in responding when there are multiple law enforcement jurisdictions involved and the agency is unsure of which jurisdiction will respond with them. Stakeholders also noted that there can be delays in responding to maltreatment reports because of high caseloads caseworkers carry, which is exacerbated by the high turnover in the positions. Stakeholders in one county voiced concern that certain types of neglect allegations, such as young children left alone or young children responsible for younger siblings, may be screened out because of high caseloads. The same group of stakeholders indicated that determining what happens is difficult in these situations because reporters rarely receive feedback from the agency after an allegation is made.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, CPS consultants and child welfare consultants have partnered to provide county-specific consultation around increasing timely contacts. The Statewide Assessment reports that attention has been placed on increasing the capacity of line supervisors to routinely monitor the daily work of their staff. State Program Office consultants assisted some counties in completing a 100-percent desk audit to identify deficiencies. Supervisors were provided with tools and follow-up to enable them to regularly monitor child contacts on a daily basis. In one large county where this was accomplished, there was a 20-percent increase in the number of timely contacts made over the following two quarters.

The Statewide Assessment notes that county and State staff identified the following barriers to timely initiation of responses to child abuse and neglect reports:

- There is a failure to enter initial contacts in the automated child welfare system in a timely manner, that is, many caseworkers wait until the completion of the child abuse/neglect assessment to enter information, including the first victim contact, into the Alabama Social Service Information System (ASSIST, which is the current, statewide automated case record system). By not entering contacts as they occur, it appears as though no contact has been made.
- Development of the State’s Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) needs to be completed to streamline entry of critical data and support improved supervisory monitoring of practice.
- There are personnel issues such as staff turnover, staff vacancies, and untrained staff.
- There is difficulty in meeting the requirement that contacts be made within 5 calendar days on weekends and holidays.

Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

The assessment of item 2 was applicable for 14 (22 percent) of the 64 cases. Cases were not applicable for item 2 if there was no substantiated or indicated maltreatment report during the period under review. For all applicable cases, reviewers were to determine whether there had been a substantiated or indicated maltreatment report on the family during the period under review, and if so,

whether another substantiated or indicated report involving similar circumstances had occurred within a 6-month period before or after that identified report. Information regarding the ratings is provided below.

Item 2	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	6	2	6	14	100
Area Needing Improvement	0	0	0	0	
Total Applicable Cases	6	2	6	14	
Not applicable	24	15	11	50	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Item 2 was rated as a Strength when there was no indication of two or more substantiated or indicated maltreatment reports on the family within a 6-month period.

Although no evidence existed for the cases reviewed of the recurrence of substantiated maltreatment during the period under review, there were many cases in which multiple reports were on the family during the life of the case, most of which were not substantiated. In 2 cases, there were 12 or more reports during the life of the case.

Rating Determination

Item 2 was assigned an overall rating of a Strength. In 100 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that there was no recurrence of maltreatment. In addition, the State met the national standard for the absence of maltreatment recurrence. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the agency is effective in preventing maltreatment recurrence. However, a few stakeholders questioned whether the data pertaining to maltreatment recurrence reflect the reality for children. One concern noted was that new reports received on open cases are not always formally reported and investigated and therefore not substantiated. Another concern noted was that sometimes children who are the subject of reports assigned as “prevention” cases (alternative response) may have been substantiated as alleged victims in prior maltreatment reports, but since prevention reports do not rise to the level of abuse or neglect and no disposition is given, no maltreatment information is generated from prevention reports. Therefore, there is no maltreatment data incorporation into repeat maltreatment data. Stakeholders suggested seeing data reports that identify recurring reports regardless of the disposition would be useful.

Stakeholders expressed concern that the growing methamphetamine abuse in some areas of the State may result in greater incidences of maltreatment recurrence if the problem is not immediately addressed.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, conducting comprehensive assessments of family functioning rather than focusing solely on the presenting allegations helps prevent maltreatment recurrence. The Statewide Assessment reports that tracking of maltreatment recurrence occurs through various efforts across the State. Statewide data are provided through ASSIST to allow counties to monitor on a quarterly basis those children who have been identified as having multiple reports of maltreatment during designated times. Information regarding repeat maltreatment is reported in the pre-assessment prior to the county quality assurance (QA) review and twice a year in the semiannual QA report submitted to DHR. Counties must provide information on whether cases were open because of child safety and must identify any issues or concerns regarding assessment, provision of services, or case practice.

The Statewide Assessment also indicated that repeat reports of abuse and neglect are not being properly linked to existing cases in the automated system. Improper linkage could cause the absence of repeat maltreatment to appear higher than data indicate. Case reviews in the last CFSR supported a low rate of repeat maltreatment. QA indicators are being modified so that QA case reviews also can evaluate this item through examination of actual cases. Plans are underway to strengthen data reporting by way of the business requirements in the new SACWIS system contract.

Safety Outcome 2

Safety Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Substantially Achieved	21	17	13	51	80
Partially Achieved	2	0	2	4	6
Not Achieved or Addressed	7	0	2	9	14
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Status of Safety Outcome 2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 80 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for a rating of substantial conformity. There was some variation in performance on this item across sites. The outcome was substantially achieved in 100 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 76 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases and 70 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Key Concerns From the 2002 CFSR

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2 in its first CFSR. Both items incorporated in this outcome were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. The following concerns were identified in the 2002 CFSR.

- Services provided to families while the children remained at home were not always appropriate to address risk issues.
- When appropriate services were provided, DHR was not consistent in monitoring families to assess whether services were effective in reducing the risk of harm.

To address the identified concerns, the State implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Provided to staff additional training that targeted substance abuse and domestic violence issues and how to assess for those issues
- Developed and implemented a consistent State consultant review process for monitoring performance on this outcome
- Provided technical assistance to counties when problems were identified through the consultant review process

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of its PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

In the 2007 CFSR, both items incorporated in Safety Outcome 2 continued to be rated as Areas Needing Improvement. Similar to the 2002 CFSR, the 2007 CFSR found that some children were unsafe or at risk of harm in their homes either because no services were provided to address safety issues or the services that were provided were insufficient to ensure the children's safety. Additional findings of the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- In a number of cases, assessments were not conducted and/or services were not provided to prevent the children's removal from the home.
- Concerns were noted about the ability of caseworkers to make adequate assessments of safety and risk in cases involving sibling groups and in cases involving sexual abuse.
- Stakeholders indicated that collaborative efforts were in place to provide family preservation services.

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Safety Outcome 2 are presented below.

Item 3. Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

An assessment of item 3 was applicable in 40 (62 percent) of the 64 cases. Cases were excluded from this assessment if the children entered foster care prior to the period under review and no other children were in the home or if no substantiated or indicated maltreatment report identified a risk of harm to the children in the home during the period under review. For this item, reviewers assessed whether, in responding to a substantiated maltreatment report or risk of harm, the agency made diligent efforts to provide services to families that would prevent placement of children in foster care while at the same time ensuring their safety. The results of this assessment are shown in the table below.

Item 3	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	14	11	6	31	78
Area Needing Improvement	6	0	3	9	22
Total Applicable Cases	20	11	9	40	
Not applicable	10	6	8	24	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

There was variation in performance on this item across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 70 percent of Jefferson County cases and 67 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases.

Item 3 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- Services were provided to the parents and child to prevent removal (21 cases).
- The child was placed voluntarily with relatives or a family friend, and services were provided to the relatives, parents, and children (six cases).
- The children were appropriately removed from the home to ensure the child’s safety (two cases).
- Services were provided after the child was reunified with his/her parents to prevent re-entry (two cases)

Case review information indicates that a broad range of services was offered or provided to families. Services provided were those provided by agency staff along with the following: behavioral management, parenting skills training, counseling, funds for utilities, arrangements for treatment, substance abuse assessment and treatment, domestic violence services, individual therapy, family therapy, life skills, family preservation services, medication management, in-home mental health services, developmental screenings, legal services, inpatient mental health services, housing services, independent living services, flexibly funded financial assistance, and early childhood development services.

Item 3 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- No services were provided to support the child’s reunification (two cases).

- No services were provided to ensure the safety of children remaining in the home or there was a delay in services that left the child at risk in the home (two cases).
- Following the child abuse/neglect investigation and initial assessment of safety and identification of indicated services, there was a lack of ongoing assessment and/or service provision to parents (three cases) or relative caretakers (two cases) that prevented entry into foster care.

Rating Determination

Item 3 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 78 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to maintain children safely in their own homes. That percentage is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Many stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR noted that the agency is effective in providing services that prevent placement. These stakeholders praised programs such as Family Options and Home Builders as particularly effective in maintaining children safely in their homes. In addition, stakeholders indicated that the following agency practices are effective in preventing entry into foster care:

- Using voluntary placements with relatives while services were provided to parents
- Including safety plan development and implementation as part of the Individualized Service Plan (ISP)

Other stakeholders, however, expressed concern about the safety of children placed with relatives voluntarily as the agency continues to work with parents. The stakeholders suggested that the agency does not always pay sufficient attention to what is going on in the relative's home that will ensure the safety of the child.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the Department's performance with regard to providing services that maintain children safely in their own homes is an Area Needing Improvement for the State. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the findings of the Department's QA data suggest that more family preservation services are needed. In addition, stakeholders participating in focus groups as part of the State's assessment process expressed the opinion that the Department needs more family preservation programs that are less time limited than the Family Options program, which is based on the Home Builders model of a maximum of 4 to 6 weeks of service duration. Participants in stakeholder focus groups also voiced concern that in some areas of the State, the Family Options program operates at full capacity and often has to turn families away that need the service. Another concern identified in the Statewide Assessment was the lack of appropriate services in many areas to address the child safety or risk of harm issues in a family.

The Statewide Assessment identifies the following efforts as designed to ensure improved services that prevent removal of children from their homes:

- The Continuum Program, which currently is available in Lee, Madison, Jefferson, Cullman, Mobile and Montgomery Counties

- Family Services Centers receiving family preservation and support funds have been encouraged to provide more in-home services to families
- The Family Options Reunification Assessment, which is a pilot project available in Tuscaloosa, Southeast Alabama, and East Alabama and designed to provide an intensive assessment period of up to 30 days by Family Options Specialists who assist in making better permanency decisions
- Drug court programs established in Madison and Calhoun County Courts
- Collaboration between the Office of CPS and the State Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation to discuss the substance abuse treatment needs of the families served by DHR

The Statewide Assessment reports that children often come into foster care because of their parents’ substance abuse and in some areas of the State judges automatically order the children removed from their homes if a parent has any level of substance abuse. It states in the Statewide Assessment that the increasing use of more highly addictive drugs such as methamphetamine prevents the effective use of family preservation services, resulting in an increase in the foster care population.

Item 4. Risk of harm to child

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

An assessment of item 4 was applicable for all 64 cases. The results of this assessment are shown in the table below.

Item 4	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	23	17	14	54	84
Area Needing Improvement	7	0	3	10	16
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

As shown in the table, performance on this item differed across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 82 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases and 77 percent of Jefferson County cases. There were no substantive differences in performance on this item based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 82 percent of the foster care cases compared to 87.5 percent of the in-home services cases.

Item 4 was rated as a Strength in 54 cases when reviewers determined that the risk of harm to children was appropriately addressed by the agency through (1) conducting initial and ongoing assessments of risk and safety either in the children’s home or in children’s foster home, and (2) addressing all safety-related concerns identified through the assessment.

Item 4 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 10 cases when reviewers determined the following:

- The case was closed and there was no safety assessment prior to case closure despite evidence of safety concerns, or the safety assessment conducted at case closure was not adequate to address risk and safety concerns (three cases).
- There was a lack of adequate initial and ongoing safety and risk assessments during the period under review (two cases).
- No safety plan was put in place that would address the child's risk due to his or her behaviors or the behaviors of a sibling (five cases).

Rating Determination

Item 4 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. Reviewers determined that the agency had appropriately addressed the risk of harm to the children in 84 percent of the cases. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for an overall rating of Strength. This item was rated as Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item expressed the opinion that there is variation in practice with regard to effective assessments of safety and risk needs. They suggested that when there are problems with safety and risk assessments, it usually was the result of caseworker inexperience and a lack of adequate clinical supervision. They noted that because of the high level of turnover in caseworker positions, many caseworkers lack experience in conducting safety and risk assessments. Stakeholders also noted that DHR does not have a formal process of specific policy relating to risk assessment, although State-level stakeholders indicated that both of these are planned for the future. Stakeholders expressed the following concerns regarding safety and risk to children in foster care.

- Children from the Department of Youth Services are being placed in foster homes without adequate assessments of the potential risk of the children to the safety of the other children in the home.
- Children are being placed with relatives without a thorough assessment of safety and risk issues in the relatives' homes.

A few stakeholders indicated that reports of maltreatment of children by foster parents or facility staff are investigated by both the child abuse and neglect (CAN) caseworker and one or more DHR permanency caseworkers assigned to the case.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the ISP process continues to assess safety during the entire time the child is in foster care or receiving services from the Department. In addition, there is collaboration with service providers for ensuring that in their contacts with families they are assessing safety and risk issues on an ongoing basis.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that the National Resource Center for CPS recently conducted focus groups in two counties—Jefferson and Tuscaloosa—to determine what supervisors need to become child safety experts. The results of that effort showed that many of the supervisors did not believe they had more knowledge than caseworkers about safety assessments and safety management,

and some supervisors thought they had less knowledge than caseworkers on those issues. During this study, supervisors expressed the need to have support from their own supervisors as well as higher management. The number of workers per supervisor was also identified as a challenge. The Department's current ratio standard for staffing supervisors is one supervisor for each six workers. Supervisors in the focus groups pointed out that many times, as the result of high turnover of staff, the supervisor may be working with several new or inexperienced workers at the same time.

The Statewide Assessment notes that to improve practice in this area DHR is engaging in the following activities:

- The Department contracted with ACTION for Child Protection to provide training on safety assessments and develop effective safety plans.
- The Department made a change with regard to the material on safety assessment by providing all the safety training material together instead of having it woven through the training curriculum. Such a change seems to make it easier for newly hired staff to understand and analyze safety assessments.
- The current basic training for supervisors is being revised to incorporate more training on building the capacity of their staff with regard to practice issues.
- The Department is exploring developing a consortium of States to establish a profession development resource that can help supervisors become child safety decision-making experts.

II. PERMANENCY

Permanency Outcome 1

Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Substantially Achieved	4	6	3	13	32.5
Partially Achieved	14	4	6	24	60.0
Not Achieved or Addressed	2	0	1	3	7.5
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	
Conformity of statewide data indicators with national standards					
	National Standard (Scaled Score)		State's Composite Score		Meets Standard (Yes/No)
Composite 1: Timeliness and permanency of reunification	122.6 +		124.2		YES
Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions	106.4 +		56		NO
Composite 3: Permanency for children in foster care for extended time periods	121.7 +		107.6		NO
Composite 4: Placement stability	101.5 +		111		YES

Status of Permanency Outcome 1

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following findings:

- The outcome was substantially achieved in 32.5 percent of the cases, which is less than the 95 percent required for an overall rating of substantial conformity.
- The State Data Profile indicates that for the CFSR 12-month target period, the State did not meet the national standards for Permanency Composite 2, timeliness of adoptions, and Permanency Composite 3, permanency for children in foster care for extended time periods.

The State met the national standard for Permanency Composite 1, timeliness and permanency of reunification, and Permanency Composite 4, placement stability. Performance on the individual measures included in all composites is presented in the discussion of the items related to each measure.

Although Alabama's performance on this outcome was fairly low in all sites, variation existed across sites. The outcome was substantially achieved in 60 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 30 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases and 20 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Key Concerns From the 2002 CFSR

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1 in its 2002 CFSR. In the 2002 CFSR, item 5 pertaining to foster care re-entry and item 6 pertaining to placement stability were rated as a Strength. All other items incorporated in the outcome were rated as Areas Needing Improvement. The key concerns identified in the 2002 CFSR were the following:

- Permanency goals were not established in a timely manner because of delays in reassessing goals when appropriate. In particular, the goal of reunification often was maintained for extended periods of time.
- The goal of other planned permanent living arrangement (OPPLA) was established when children were young and prior to full consideration of other permanency options.
- Concurrent planning was not implemented consistently and effectively.
- Reunification was not achieved in a timely manner in many cases.
- The agency was not filing for termination of parental rights in a timely manner.
- Caseworkers lacked adequate knowledge about adoption processes and procedures.
- When foster parents did not want to adopt, the agency often did not seek alternative resources for adoption.
- Youth were not being adequately prepared for independent living in many cases.

To address these concerns, Alabama implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Made changes in agency policy that would strengthen practice with regard to permanency planning, concurrent planning, the TPR process, preparation of children for adoption, and use of OPPLA as a case goal
- Provided training to caseworkers, supervisors, DHR attorneys, and probate judges to support the new policies and to support the timelines established in the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)
- Modified SACWIS to include reminders that would alert caseworkers and supervisors with regard to timelines and deadlines pertaining to permanency and codes to identify those foster homes that are foster/adopt homes
- Enhanced a variety of Alabama Child Welfare Information System (ACWIS) reports to make them useful in monitoring outcomes and trained management and supervisors in using these reports for monitoring purposes
- Developed brochures for parents regarding the ASFA timelines and the implications of those timelines for the parents
- Developed brochures for prospective adoptive parents concerning adoption subsidy options
- Partnered with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) to develop training, brochures, proposed guardianship legislation, consistent implementation of ASFA, early parental identification of relatives, and expedition of adoption hearings
- Revised the ISP template to document concurrent plans and release of administrative letters with mandates to document visitation plans and reminders of ASFA time frames and related DHR policies

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

In the State's 2007 CFSR, all items incorporated in this outcome except for item 5 were rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Key findings of the 2007 CFSR case reviews were the following:

- The agency is generally effective in preventing re-entry into foster care.
- Some children in the cases reviewed did not experience placement stability, in part as a result of inadequate matching of foster homes to children's needs.
- The agency is inconsistent with regard to establishing appropriate permanency goals in a timely manner.
- The agency is inconsistent with regard to making concerted efforts to achieve reunifications or permanent placements with relatives in a timely manner.
- There are extensive delays in achieving adoptions in a timely manner, some of which may be attributed to delays in scheduling court hearings for TPR petitions and to the court granting continuances and postponements for these hearings.
- In some cases, the agency had not formalized the permanent placements for children with a goal of OPPLA.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Permanency Outcome 1 are presented below.

Item 5. Foster care re-entries

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

An assessment of item 5 was applicable for 11 (27.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable if the child did not enter foster care during the period under review. In assessing this item, reviewers determined whether the entry into foster care during the period under review occurred within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 5	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	5	3	2	10	91
Area Needing Improvement	1	0	0	1	9
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	6	3	2	11	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	14	7	8	29	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

State performance on the individual measure of foster care re-entry (measure C1.4) included in Composite 1: Timeliness and permanency of reunification was as follows: 8.6 percent of the children exiting foster care to reunification in the 12 months before the CFSR 12-month target period re-entered foster care in less than 12 months from the time of discharge. That percentage is less than the national 25th percentile for this measure of 9.9 percent. Because for this measure lower percentages are associated with higher levels of performance, Alabama’s performance on the measure was in the top 25 percent of the nation.

Item 5 was rated as a Strength in nine cases in which the child’s entry into foster care during the period under review did not take place within 12 months of discharge from a prior episode. One case was rated as a Strength because, although the child re-entered foster care in 4 months, re-entry was necessary to address the child’s severe behavioral problems. Item 5 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in one case in which an entry into foster care during the period under review occurred 2 months after the child was discharged to reunification. Reviewers determined that the re-entry was the result of a lack of provision of services to the mother to support the reunification.

Rating Determination

Item 5 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. The item was rated as a Strength in 91 percent of the cases reviewed, which exceeds the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that once children are reunified, they rarely re-enter foster care. However, a few stakeholders indicated that this is not always the case when the child is an adolescent with behavior problems. In addition, concern was expressed that sometimes the agency and courts reunify children before the problems that brought the child into foster care are adequately resolved.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama’s performance with regard to re-entry into foster care can be attributed to the quality of comprehensive assessments and early identification of safety risks, training focused on addressing underlying issues affecting families, accurate assessments of the capacity of parents to provide care for their children, provision of an array of services that

support the families while the child is in foster care and after reunification, and connecting families to community supports. The Statewide Assessment also notes that State policy was revised to require that a case remain open for 6 months after reunification to provide monitoring and services.

The Statewide Assessment reports that stakeholders participating in focus groups suggested that re-entry may occur in the following situations:

- Families do not have an adequate support system to monitor the reunification.
- Post-reunification services are prematurely discontinued because of noncompliance by the caretakers.
- Families have limited access to ongoing services because of financial or transportation barriers.
- A parent experiences a substance abuse relapse.

Item 6. Stability of foster care placement

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

All 40 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 6. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the child experienced multiple placement settings during the period under review and, if so, whether the changes in placement settings were necessary to achieve the child’s permanency goal or meet the child’s service needs. Reviewers also assessed the stability of the child’s placement setting. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 6	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	13	9	9	31	78
Area Needing Improvement	7	1	1	9	22
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

Performance on this item varied substantively across sites. Cases were rated as a Strength in 90 percent of Lee and Tuscaloosa County cases, compared to 65 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Alabama’s performance during the 12-month CFSR target period on the individual measures included in Composite 4: Placement stability is presented below.

- 89 percent of the children in foster care for at least 8 days but less than 12 months experienced two or fewer placement settings. This exceeds the national 75th percentile for this measure of 86.0 percent.

- 74.1 percent of the children in foster care for at least 12 months but less than 24 months experienced two or fewer placement settings. This exceeds the national 75th percentile for this measure of 65.4 percent.
- 51.4 percent of the children in foster care for at least 24 months experienced two or fewer placement settings. This exceeds the national 75th percentile for this measure of 41.8 percent.

Those data indicate that Alabama performed in the top 25 percent of States on all three national measures of placement stability.

Item 6 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- The child did not experience a placement change during the period under review, and either the current placement was stable or the child was discharged from foster care during the period under review (20 cases).
- The placement changes experienced were in the child's best interest and were intended either to further achieve the child's permanency goal or to provide specialized services to the child (11 cases). For example, placement changes were made to place siblings together or to place the child in the care of a relative.

Item 6 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or both of the following:

- The child was in multiple placement settings during the period under review, and at least one placement change was not planned by the agency to further attain the child's permanency goal (seven cases). Placement changes generally were the result of placements of children in foster homes adequately matched to meet their needs. In most of these cases, placements disrupted at the request of the foster parent or relative caregiver because they did not believe that they could meet the needs of the child or adequately handle the child's behaviors.
- The child's placement setting (at the time of the onsite CFSR) was not stable (three cases).

Additional findings of the case review were the following:

- Children in 24 cases experienced only 1 placement during the period under review.
- Children in 10 cases experienced 2 placements during the period under review.
- Children in six cases experienced three or more placements during the period under review.

Rating Determination

Although results from the Data Profile indicate that the State met the national standard for placement stability, case review results were not as positive resulting in Item 6 assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 78 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that children experienced placement stability or that changes in placements were in the best interest of the child. That percent is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. Significant variation in case ratings from the metropolitan (65 percent) and rural sites (90 percent) suggest that discrepancies between aggregate and case level data may be indicative of more isolated issues in placement stability rather than an overall weakness for the State. Item 6 was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed differing opinions regarding the effectiveness of the agency in achieving placement stability for children in foster care. Some stakeholders suggested that the agency is generally effective and attributed this to the ISP process, which can prevent placement disruptions by identifying the services needed to stabilize placements. Stakeholders also noted that although disruption prevention services are available for all foster parents, often they are not aware of these services and do not ask for them.

Stakeholders also indicated that placement stability can be a problem when there is a lack of adequate assessments of children's needs, adequate screening of foster homes, and appropriate matching of children with foster home resources. Such factors were expressed as a particular concern for adolescents with behavior problems, as these youth often disrupt because placement is based on the availability of a bed rather than on the skills and training of foster parents to parent the youth. However, stakeholders also acknowledged that there are not many foster family homes willing to accept youth with behavioral problems.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama's effectiveness with regard to placement stability may be attributed in part to the following:

- Provision of ongoing training to foster parents and other providers around critical areas that need to be understood when caring for children with particular behavioral or emotional concerns
- Use of the Child and Family Assessment (CFA) process, which covers family domains critical to understanding family dynamics, and the Multi-Dimensional Assessment Tool (MAT), which is used when moving children to either a higher or lower level of foster care
- Emphasizing frequent face-to-face contact between caseworkers and children as contributing to placement stability
- Individualizing planning with a team approach involving service providers
- Focusing on education and training caseworkers pertaining to understanding the needs of the children, particularly those with severe emotional and behavioral disorders
- Encouraging residential services providers to embrace a "no reject, no eject" policy

The Statewide Assessment also notes that, despite these actions, multiple moves for children continue to occur in some situations and that placement changes are most likely to occur when assessments are not adequate or not completed in a timely manner. As a result, children are placed in foster homes or residential centers not prepared to meet their needs.

Information from Item 35 of the Statewide Assessment is also applicable to this particular item. In that section, DHR notes that MAT is used to aid in the assessment of a child's placement needs, if that child must be removed from his or her home for safety reasons. MAT is based on the Child and Adolescent Needs Assessment (CANS) utilized by several States and municipalities across the nation. The MAT is an assessment of current behaviors, which helps the ISP team make appropriate decisions for placement, when necessary. MATs are conducted on children entering (and during) placement in Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC), mid-level residential treatment

care, and intensive residential treatment care. It also is used every 6-months after placement, to include assessment for de-escalation of placement.

Item 7. Permanency goal for child

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

All 40 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 7. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had established a permanency goal for the child in a timely manner and whether the most current permanency goal was appropriate. The results of this assessment are shown below.

Item 7	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	9	10	5	24	60
Area Needing Improvement	11	0	5	16	40
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

Performance on this item varied considerably across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 50 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, and 45 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Alabama did not meet the national standard for Permanency Composite 3: Achieving permanency for children in foster care for extended time periods. Performance on the individual measures included in this composite was as follows:

- 17.9 percent of the children in foster care for 24 months or longer at the start of the 12-month CFSR target period were discharged from foster care to a permanent home (that is, adoption, reunification with parents or other relatives, or guardianship) by the end of the target period. That percentage is less than the national median for a measure of 25.0 percent.
- 96.8 percent of the children exiting foster care in 2005 who were legally free for adoption at the time of exit were discharged to a permanent home. That percentage is equal to the national median for this measure of 96.8 percent.
- 51.2 percent of the children who were discharged from foster care during the 12-month target period with a discharge reason of emancipation had been in foster care for 3 years or longer at the time of discharge. That percentage is higher than the national median of 47.8 percent. For this measure, lower scores indicate more positive performance.

The data indicate that Alabama’s performance was at or below the lower 50 percent of the nation on all measures, indicating that achieving permanency for children in foster care for long periods of time is a challenge for the State.

Item 7 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the child's permanency goal was appropriate and had been established in a timely manner (24 cases). The case was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 16 cases when reviewers determined 1 or more of the following:

- The child's goal was not established in a timely manner (seven cases).
- The child's goal was not appropriate given the case situation and assessed needs of the child (three cases).
- The child's goal was not established in a timely manner and not appropriate given the case situation and the assessed needs of the child (four cases).
- The child's goal was established in a timely manner and was appropriate given the case situation and assessed needs of the child, but the case was rated Area Needing Improvement because termination of parental rights (TPR) was not filed in a timely manner (two cases).

The following case goals were identified for the 40 foster care cases:

- Fifteen children had a goal of either reunification with parents or permanent placement with relatives;
- Eight children had a goal of adoption only;
- Seven children had the sole goal of OPPLA;
- Six children had concurrent goals of adoption and reunification with parents or relatives (permanent placement with relatives);
- Three children had concurrent goals of OPPLA and reunification with parents or relatives; and
- One child had a concurrent goal of adoption and OPPLA.

For two of the seven children with the sole case plan goal of OPPLA, the goal was established when they were 8 years old. There were two children for whom the goal was established while they were preschool age.

Case review findings pertaining to TPR were as follows:

- At the time of the on-site review, 26 of the 40 children in the foster care cases had been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months.
- TPR was filed in a timely manner in 18 of the 26 cases applicable for TPR.
- In the eight cases that did not have TPR petitions filed within ASFA time frames, compelling reasons were filed in five cases.

Rating Determination

Item 7 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 60 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had established an appropriate permanency goal for the child in a timely manner. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR. However, 100 percent of the cases reviewed in Lee County were rated as a Strength for this item.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed differing opinions regarding the effectiveness of the agency in establishing permanency goals in a timely manner. While some stakeholders indicated that the agency establishes timely, appropriate goals for children, some Jefferson County stakeholders expressed concern about the use of OPPLA for adolescents who are not likely to reunite with parents. They noted that although some of the children are interested in being adopted, the agency does not select adoption as a goal for them because of the difficulty in finding families willing to adopt older children. Consequently, the goal of OPPLA sometimes is based more on expediency than on its appropriateness for the child. Other stakeholders expressed concern about the use of OPPLA as a goal for young children.

Stakeholders expressed differing opinions about the practice of concurrent planning. Lee County stakeholders noted that concurrent goals are often not being established and, when they are established, caseworkers do not work toward both goals simultaneously. Instead, they wait until one goal is ruled out before pursuing the other goal. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders reported that concurrent goals generally are established for children and that caseworkers focus on both goals simultaneously. Most stakeholders, however, suggested that a need exists for more education of agency partners and staff regarding concurrent planning.

Jefferson County stakeholders reported that the county uses a Permanency Roundtable to staff applicable cases when children are age 5 and younger, with the goal of eventually using the Roundtable for all cases. Jefferson County stakeholders also noted that cases in that county are monitored by a Permanency Specialist, who is responsible for keeping track of cases and, when necessary, recommending strategies for promoting achievement of permanency goals in a timely manner.

Stakeholder interview notes indicate that adoption is not pursued in Alabama if a child is in the care of a relative. As a result, many children remain in long-term foster care (in some cases through age 18 because of their placement with relatives). Included in the Round 1 PIP was an action that proposed legislation to allow guardianship as a permanency option for children in Alabama. Although discussions occurred between the AOC and the agency, those discussions did not result in legislative changes.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, although Alabama has some counties successful in identifying appropriate permanency goals for children in a timely manner, inconsistencies run across the State. The Statewide Assessment reports that when counties are identified as having needs in this area, consultant support is provided to target skill development.

The Statewide Assessment indicates that caseworker turnover may contribute to some of the delays in establishing permanency goals in a timely manner because when a case is reassigned, the new caseworker often “starts from the beginning” in working with the family. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, supervisors are encouraged rather than treating the case as new to coach newly assigned caseworkers to review the case history when determining the next steps to take with regard to the permanency goal.

The Statewide Assessment reports that there is some indication caseworkers and supervisors are using the goal of OPPLA as a default goal when it appears that reunification with the family has been ruled out and the youth is older. The Statewide Assessment suggests that caseworkers and the courts may view older youth as “un-adoptable” or unwilling to be adopted. In addition, once the goal of OPPLA is identified, generally no further effort is made to reconsider alternative permanency goals. Policy directs that use of this goal must receive court sanction to be valid and that the resource be named as the permanent arrangement. That is not occurring in all cases.

The Statewide Assessment reports that during focus groups with youth it was learned that some were not aware of what OPPLA means and some indicated that they had not been approached about adoption. Those who were approached indicated that they had not considered adoption for themselves often because of their misconceptions about adoption (for example, the youth believed that if they were adopted, they would have to abandon any further contact with biological families). Some youth indicated that they would consider adoption if they were given the ability to actively assist with identification and selection of an adoptive family. Some youth also said that they may change their mind, if adoption was explored further after OPPLA had been determined to be the goal.

Item 8. Reunification, Guardianship, or Permanent Placement with Relatives

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 8 was applicable for 24 (60 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing the cases, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had achieved the permanency goals of reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives in a timely manner or, if the goals had not been achieved, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was in the process of making, diligent efforts to achieve the goals.

The results of this assessment are shown in the table below.

Item 8	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	6	5	2	13	54
Area Needing Improvement	9	1	1	11	46
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	15	6	3	24	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	5	4	7	16	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Alabama met the national standard for Permanency Composite 1: Timeliness and permanency of reunification. Performance on the individual measures included in this composite in the 12-month CFSR target period was as follows:

- 65.6 percent of the reunifications occurred in less than 12 months of the child’s entry into foster care. That percentage is less than the national median of 69.9 percent for this measure.
- The median length of stay in Alabama foster care for children discharged to reunification was 8 months. The length of stay exceeds the national median of 6 and a half months for the data set used to establish the national standards for composite 1. (Note that lower number of months means higher performance.)
- 47.4 percent of children entering foster care in the last 6 months prior to the 12-month target period were discharged from foster care to reunification in less than 12 months of entry into foster care. This percentage is greater than the national median of 39.4 percent but slightly less than the national 75th percentile of 48.4 percent.

The data indicate that although Alabama’s performance with regard to timeliness of reunification is strongest for children recently entering foster care (measure 3), for the most part timeliness of reunification is a challenge for the State. However, because Alabama’s performance on the fourth measure included in this composite, which pertains to foster care re-entry, was in the top 25 percent of the nation, this contributed to the State meeting the national standard for the overall Permanency Composite. The State’s performance with regard to foster care re-entry is discussed under item 5.

Item 8 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the goal had been achieved in a timely manner or that the agency was making concerted efforts to achieve the goal in a timely manner (13 cases). Item 8 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 11 cases when reviewers determined that the agency did not make diligent efforts to achieve the goal in a timely manner. There were no clear trends in these cases regarding reasons for delays in achieving this goal in a timely manner.

Rating Determination

Item 8 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 54 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to attain the goals of reunification, permanent placement with relatives, or guardianship in a timely manner. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR indicated that there are a number of reasons for delays in reunification. They suggested that delays often are because of a lack of parental compliance with case plan requirements or a parent’s relapse in substance abuse. Stakeholders also expressed the opinion that delays may be attributed to the agency’s cautiousness with regard to returning children to their families.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, delays in achieving reunifications in a timely manner may be attributed in part to delays in the court procedures. The Statewide Assessment notes that there are ongoing discussions with the juvenile courts through the AOCs regarding reducing the number of continuances. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, staff of the Court Improvement Program (CIP) conducted case-flow management workshops for 19 counties in the State to educate judges, their docketing staff, and DHR

personnel on ways to improve the movement of dependency and TPR cases through the system so that children in foster care may reach permanency faster.

The Statewide Assessment also notes that Family Service Centers have been funded in some counties to enhance family supports and expedite reunification.

Item 9: Adoption

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

Item 9 was applicable for 15 (35 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether diligent efforts had been, or were being, made to achieve finalized adoptions in a timely manner. The results are shown in the table below.

Item 9	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	0	4	0	4	27
Area Needing Improvement	5	0	6	11	73
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	5	4	6	15	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	15	6	4	25	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Although the small sample sizes make it difficult to interpret variation in performance in a meaningful way, striking differences existed among counties in performance on this item. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Lee County cases. In contrast, applicable cases in Jefferson and Tuscaloosa Counties were rated as an Area Needing Improvement.

Alabama did not meet the national standard for Permanency Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions. Performance during the 12-month CFSR target period on the individual measures included in this composite was as follows:

- 19.1 percent of the children exiting to adoption were discharged in less than 24 months from the time of entry into foster care. That percentage is less than the national median of 26.8 percent for this measure.
- The median length of stay in foster care for children adopted was 38.2 months. The length of stay is more than the national median of 32.4 months. (Note that a lower number of months equates to a higher level of performance.)
- 10.9 percent of children in foster care for 17 months or longer on the first day of the CFSR 12-month target period were discharged to a final adoption by the last day of the target period. That percentage is less than the national median of 20.2 percent for this measure.

- 7.6 percent of children in foster care for 17 months or longer on the first day of the CFSR 12-month target period became legally free for adoption (that is, there was a TPR for both mother and father) within 6 months. That percentage is less than the national median for this measure of 8.8 percent.
- 27.7 percent of children who were legally free for adoption were adopted within 12 months of becoming legally free. That percentage is less than the national median for this measure of 45.8 percent.

Those data suggest that the State performed in the lower 50 percent of the nation on all measures pertaining to timeliness of adoption.

Item 9 was rated as a Strength in four cases when reviewers determined that the State had made diligent efforts to achieve finalized adoptions in a timely manner. Item 9 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 11 cases when reviewers determined 1 or more of the following:

- Court-related delays were caused by granting of numerous continuances and delays in scheduling TPR hearings (eight cases). In six of these cases, the delays in hearing the TPR petition extended more than 2 years after the agency filed the TPR petition and in one case, the TPR petition was not heard for 3 years after filing. In one case, the continuance was requested by the agency attorney.
- Delays were caused by agency not filing for TPR in a timely manner (one case).
- Delays were in finalizing adoptions after TPR (two cases).
- There was a lack of diligent effort to find an adoptive home for the child (one case).
- There were delays as a result of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) process with another State (one case).

Additional findings relevant to this item were the following:

- Adoption was finalized during the period under review in 2 of the 15 cases that had adoption as a single or concurrent goal. In one case the adoption was finalized in 20 months, and in the other case the adoption was finalized in 25 months.
- Of the remaining 13 children who remained in foster care, 11 had been in foster care for more than 2 years, and 8 of the children had been in foster care for more than 3 years.

Rating Determination

Item 9 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 27 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to achieve a finalized adoption in a timely manner. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR. In addition, the State did not meet the national standard for Permanency Composite 2: Timeliness of adoptions. The key concern identified in the case reviews was the extensive delay in the adoption process caused by delays in scheduling TPR hearings and frequent continuances and postponements of TPR hearings.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that, although DHR has made efforts to improve outcomes for children with a permanency goal of adoption, the State generally is not effective in achieving adoptions in a timely manner. Some of the concerns stakeholders identified included the following:

- TPR petitions are not consistently filed according to State and ASFA timelines.
- There is a lack of concerted efforts to recruit adoptive families for children, particularly older children and adolescents and children with special needs.
- The courts are extending the time frames for parents when they start to comply with case plan requirements, despite the child being in foster care for a long period of time.
- Greater efforts are needed to ensure that all necessary family research is completed at the onset of a case, to prevent delay in the process once it is time to file for TPR.
- Greater efforts are needed to shorten the time it takes to finalize an adoption after TPR is granted by the court.
- There is a lack of systematic tracking of permanency time frames to monitor progress toward finalization of adoptions.
- Many stakeholders expressed the belief that older children are not adoptable.

Despite the concerns, stakeholders also identified the following factors as promoting timely adoptions.

- The finalization for foster parent adoptions is done in Probate Court and is very quick.
- The agency discusses adoption subsidies with prospective adoptive parents as soon as the case plan goal is changed to adoption.
- Some of the courts are making efforts to hold TPR hearings within just a few months after the petition is filed.
- Many foster parents are opting to adopt children in their care.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, delays in achieving adoptions in a timely manner may be attributed to both the courts and the agency. With regard to the courts, the Statewide Assessment notes that AOC, in collaboration with DHR, has made efforts and opened communication with court systems and judges to achieve a better understanding of the impact that hearing postponements and delays have on permanency outcomes for children. This has resulted in a renewed emphasis on the need for timely achievement of permanency. In addition, the Statewide Assessment reports that, during a 2004-2005 reassessment of the juvenile and family courts in 22 counties, CIP staff reviewed court records to identify causes for delays in permanency that could be attributed to court dockets and issuing of orders. The review revealed that delays in final orders for TPR hearings in many cases exceeded 6 months, which resulted in further delays in proceeding with adoption planning. As a result of the finding, an amendment of a Supreme Court Rule, which was effective September 18, 2006, requires that trial courts issue an order within 30 days of the final TPR hearing.

With regard to agency-related delays, the Statewide Assessment reports that there is a need for the agency to conduct more thorough assessments and gather more information about the family early in the agency's involvement with families and to actively engage in concurrent planning. The Statewide Assessment notes that concurrent planning should be ongoing from the time the child enters the

system and not begin when the goal changes or TPR occurs. However, as indicated in the Statewide Assessment, stakeholders suggest that concurrent planning often does not begin until the agency determines that the initial case plan goal (usually reunification) is not likely to be achieved despite all efforts. The Statewide Assessment also notes that TPR often is delayed when the agency waits until the expiration of the 15 of 22 months to file the petition, rather than filing earlier if there are clear indicators that reunification will be unlikely.

The Statewide Assessment notes that achieving adoptions in a timely manner is often difficult because of delays in foster parent adoptions. County offices have the responsibility of completing adoptions for children who are to be adopted by their foster parents. This involves updating the home study for approval as an adoptive resource, completing a non-identifying background summary, and proceeding with the placement process. Because staff may view these children as stable, doing well, and in a placement that is not going to change, finalization of the adoption may not receive the same sense of urgency from caseworkers placing priority on more pressing cases. In addition, there has not been consistent training around the adoption process that would assist workers in moving forward with the foster parent adoptions. In 2004, Alabama issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) and awarded three contracts for assistance in moving foster parent adoptions to finalization. The goal was for the adoption of 45 children. The contracts did not prove to be as fruitful as first hoped and by the end of the contract, 14 adoptions were finalized. Some barriers encountered included accessibility to case material, disagreements in planning, and external time limits around filing that prevented timeliness of finalization.

Recruitment and retention of placement resources continues to be a factor in locating families for children who are legally free for adoption. One specific barrier to identifying an adoptive resource for children is that there is not a user-friendly database for identifying approved and available resources for consideration. Currently, many children are with out-of-State resources, which poses a drain on consultant time and agency resources. In focus groups with stakeholders that included foster and adoptive resources, the perception in Alabama is that the State indicates a need for resources, yet the process for becoming a resource takes too long. Many consumers report delays in required training, the approval process, and in the response to inquiries about becoming an adoptive resource.

The availability of post-adoptive services is viewed as critical in supporting families during the adoption process as well as an important recruitment tool and Alabama currently contracts for post-adoptive services. Alabama Post Adoptive Services (APAC) has provided Statewide training support, educational materials, a Buddy and Respite program, summer camp for children waiting for or already adopted, counseling services, crisis intervention, and a hotline. The contract was increased in 2006 to include marketing and recruitment services, an annual conference for 300 adoption and provider staff, and a staff position for responding to inquiries made to the DHR hotline and Web site. Additionally, adoption assistance provides post-adoptive support. Because many caseworkers are unfamiliar with the Adoption Assistance Program, there have been increased efforts to educate staff and stakeholders on the availability of financial assistance for special needs adoptees.

Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement (OPPLA)

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 10 was applicable for 10 (25 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing these cases, reviewers were to determine if the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to assist children in attaining their goals related to other planned permanent living arrangements. The results are presented in the table below.

Item 10	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	1	2	2	5	50
Area Needing Improvement	3	2	0	5	50
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	4	4	2	10	
Not Applicable Foster Care Case	16	6	8	30	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Item 10 was rated as a Strength in five cases when reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to ensure long-term placement for the child and provide services necessary for preparing the child for independent living. The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in five cases when reviewers determined the following:

- The child was referred for independent living classes but was not attending, and the agency had not assessed the reason for nonattendance (one case).
- There is no formal agreement on the part of the foster parents to be a permanent placement for the child (two cases).
- Adoption was an appropriate option for a teenager, but was never considered, and the agency had concerns about the OPPLA resource (one case).
- OPPLA was a concurrent goal with reunification, but the agency did not make efforts toward preparing the youth for independence if reunification did not occur (one case).

Rating Determination

Item 10 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 50 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the goal of OPPLA was being addressed in an appropriate way. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Many stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR praised the State’s independent living program, indicating that there is a continuum of services for adolescents from age 14 to young adulthood. The continuum includes the Chafee education

program, which provides services and funding for education through age 21 and transitional living resources available to youth who are 17 and older.

However, several stakeholders noted that there needs to be a focus on creating more “normal” lifestyles for children who have a goal of OPPLA. They noted that activities most teenagers experience, such as dating, driving, and overnight stays with friends, are not routinely permitted for children in foster care. Stakeholders did advise that normalcy could be negotiated in the individual service plan for the youth. The State does have a policy to permit “normal” teenage activities to the greatest degree possible (depending on the individual teen, his or her maturity level, foster parents, and local policies).

Some stakeholders voiced concern about the quality of case plans developed for older youth in foster care and the involvement of youth in case planning, which appeared to vary across the three sites. Youth are included in most ISPs, but they may not always be given an opportunity to voice their opinions or, if they do speak, their opinions may not always be reflected in the case plan. Stakeholders suggested that independent living plans are not always well developed with regard to addressing issues relevant to the youth, particularly those transitioning from foster care to independence, and that plans tend to be “boilerplate.”

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has independent living and transitional living services throughout the State that support children who will possibly age out of the system without a permanent resource. The Statewide Assessment reports that through these programs and supports, older youth are provided with instruction and financial assistance that will provide initial assistance in setting up households or pursuing a college education. The Statewide Assessment also reports that independent living services caseworkers are encouraged to identify an individual who can provide a adult connection for the youth to be able to turn to in the time of need. Alabama is exploring assistance from a National Resource Center to review and enhance the existing independent living program in the State.

Permanency Outcome 2

Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total	Percent
Substantially Achieved	10	5	9	24	60.0
Partially Achieved	9	5	1	15	37.5
Not Achieved	1	0	0	1	2.5
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	0	0	0	0	

Status of Permanency Outcome 2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. The outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 60 percent of the cases, which is less than the 95 percent or higher required for substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, compared to 50 percent of Lee County cases and 45 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Key concerns From the 2002 CFSR

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2 in its 2002 CFSR. Key concerns identified during the 2002 CFSR were the following:

- The agency was not consistent in supporting visitation between children and their parents, particularly children and their fathers (item 13).
- The agency was not consistent in ensuring that children's connections with extended family, community, culture, faith, and friends were preserved (item 14).
- The agency was not consistent with regard to efforts to search for and evaluate relatives as potential placement options, particularly paternal relatives (item 15).
- The agency was not consistently effective in promoting the bond between children and their mothers and fathers.

To address these concerns, Alabama implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Enhanced the ISP process by revising the document to include a visitation plan and requiring that supervisors be present during ISP development
- Trained staff on practices related to preserving connections, including the development of Life Books
- Monitored the frequency and quality of child and family visitation through revision of ACWIS forms and supervisory review
- Modified concurrent planning policy to include a section on evaluating relatives as placement resources

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key findings From the 2007 CFSR

All of the concerns relevant to Permanency Outcome 2 that were found in the 2002 CFSR also were found in the 2007 CFSR. For example, the 2007 case reviews continued to demonstrate inconsistent practice with regard to ensuring adequate visitation between children and their parents and between siblings; preserving children's connections to extended family, community, and culture; seeking and evaluating relatives as placement resources; and making concerted efforts to support or maintain the bond between children and their parents while the child is in foster care. In general, there was a lack of diligent efforts to identify, locate, and engage fathers in the lives of their children in foster care.

Despite these concerns, the case reviews also found the following:

- Children in the cases reviewed were in foster care placements in close proximity to parents or potential permanent caregivers unless highly specialized placements were necessary (item 11).
- Most children in the cases reviewed were placed with their siblings, unless there was a valid reason for separating (item 12).

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Permanency Outcome 2 are presented and discussed below.

Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

Item 11 was applicable for 31 (77 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases determined to be not applicable were those in which (1) TPR was attained before the period under review, (2) contact with parents was not considered to be in the child’s best interest, and/or (3) parents were deceased or their whereabouts unknown. In assessing item 11, reviewers were to determine whether the child’s most current foster care setting was in close proximity to the child’s parents or close relatives. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 11	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	15	7	8	30	97
Area Needing Improvement	1	0	0	1	3
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	16	7	8	31	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	4	3	2	9	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Item 11 was rated as a Strength in 30 cases when reviewers determined that the child was placed in the same community or county as the parents or that the child’s placement was not in the same community or county, but was still in close proximity to the parents. The item also was rated as a Strength if the child was placed out of his or her community or county, but that the placement was necessary to meet the needs of the child and/or support attainment of the permanency goal. In three cases, the child was placed near relatives who could support preservation of family.

In the single case that was rated as an Area Needing Improvement, the child was placed in TFC in another county because that level of care was not available when the child needed placement.

Rating Determination

Item 11 was assigned an overall rating of Strength. In 97 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DHR had made diligent efforts to ensure that children were placed in foster care placements close proximity to their parents or relatives or were necessary to meet special needs. This percent exceeds the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that most children in foster care are placed in their same county and in close proximity to their parents or relatives. They noted that when children are placed some distance from their families, it usually is because of the child’s need for specialized treatment.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this item was an area of Strength for Alabama during the first CFSR and continues to be an area of Strength. The Statewide Assessment notes that State policy requires that every effort should be made to place children within their own neighborhoods and within the same county whenever possible. When children are placed outside their county, it generally is because there is a relative resource for the child, or the child requires a residential placement not available within the county. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, children placed out of State usually are placed with the adoptive resource matched to their needs, a family member, or to receive intensive services not currently available in Alabama.

Item 12. Placement with siblings

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 12 was applicable for 25 (62.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable if the child did not have a sibling in foster care at any time during the period under review. In assessing item 12, reviewers were to determine whether siblings were, or had been, placed together and, if not, whether the separation was necessary to meet the needs (service or safety needs) of one or more of the children. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 12	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	6	6	8	20	80
Area Needing Improvement	4	0	1	5	20
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	10	6	9	25	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	10	4	1	15	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was determined to be substantially achieved in 100 percent of Lee County cases and 89 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases compared to 60 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Item 12 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the child was placed with siblings, or that the separation of siblings was necessary because one of the siblings had special placement needs or because placement with siblings was not in the child’s best interest. Item 12 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in five cases when reviewers determined that the agency had not made sufficient efforts to locate a placement for a sibling group. In one case, siblings were initially separated to meet the treatment needs of one child, but when treatment concerns were resolved, the agency did not make efforts to reunite the children. In three cases, siblings were separated because there was no family that could take the children together. In a fourth case, reviewers determined that the agency did not make an effort to place siblings together.

Rating Determination

Item 12 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 80 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency placed siblings together in foster care whenever possible and appropriate. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that DHR is effective in keeping sibling groups together when they are placed in foster care. Stakeholders also noted that although large sibling groups often make it difficult to find a single placement, the agency makes concerted efforts in these situations to keep the siblings connected by placing them in homes in the same neighborhood, or with foster families who are friends with one another.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the practice within the agency is to follow policy regarding sibling placements while considering the individual needs of the child and the connections with siblings. The Statewide Assessment notes that there have been several cases in which siblings who are free for adoption are living in separate foster homes and each foster parent wants to adopt only one sibling. These cases resulted in foster parents requesting that the court decide as to whether to place the siblings together for adoption or to allow the siblings to be adopted separately. The Statewide Assessment reports that these court cases are being used to help review policies and highlight the importance of sibling placement at the time of entry into foster care.

Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 13 was applicable for 32 (80 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable for an assessment of this item if the child had no siblings in foster care and if one of the following conditions was met with regard to the parents: (1) TPR was established before the period under review and parents were no longer involved in the child’s life (or parents were deceased), or (2) visitation with a parent was not considered in the best interests of the child. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine (1) whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to facilitate visitation between children in foster care and their parents and siblings in foster care, and (2) whether the visits occurred with sufficient frequency to meet the needs of children and families. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 13	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	7	3	8	18	56
Area Needing Improvement	9	5	0	14	44
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	16	8	8	32	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	4	2	2	8	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, compared to 53 percent of Jefferson County cases and 37 percent of Lee County cases.

Item 13 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the frequency and quality of visitation with parents and siblings met the needs of the children (18 cases). Item 13 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- The frequency and/or quality of visits with the father was insufficient in the case (nine cases).
- The frequency and/or quality of visits with the mother was insufficient in the case (three cases).
- The frequency and/or quality of visits with the siblings was insufficient in the case (two cases).

Rating Determination

Item 13 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 56 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency made concerted efforts to ensure that visitation was of sufficient frequency to meet the needs of the family. That percentage is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the agency makes concerted efforts to ensure that children in foster care visit with their parents and siblings as frequently as possible. However, some stakeholders expressed

concern about visitation with siblings for older youth. They noted that for many of these youth, frequent placement changes make visitation difficult.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has visitation policy that guides staff to understand the need for frequent contact between family members and children in foster care and its relevance for promoting permanency and well-being. The Statewide Assessment reports that QA reviews conducted since the 2002 CFSR show that in 8 of the 35 counties included in the reviews, there was a need to improve practice with regard to visits occurring between children and their families.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that DHR provided consultation to agency staff that focuses on the quality and frequency of visitation. As a result, visits routinely are occurring in relaxed settings in which parental skills can be applied, that is, in the foster parent’s home, local parks, fun centers, and in therapeutic settings that promote coaching for the parents.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, agency staff experience challenges in ensuring frequent and high-quality visitation. Challenges include the amount of transportation involved in coordinating and implementing visitation and having the time to monitor or facilitate visitation. The Statewide Assessment notes that some foster parents are unwilling or unable to be involved in or to assist with arranging and implementing visitation.

Item 14. Preserving connections

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 14 was applicable for 39 (97 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. In assessing item 14, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to preserve the child’s connections to neighborhood, community, heritage, extended family, faith, and friends while the child was in foster care. This item is not rated on the basis of visits or contacts with parents or siblings in foster care. The results of the assessment are provided in the table below.

Item 14	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	12	9	10	31	79
Area Needing Improvement	7	1	0	8	21
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	19	10	10	39	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	1	0	0	1	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases and 90 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 63 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Item 14 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- The agency made concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections with extended family members (for example, through phone contact and visits and placements with relatives) (25 cases).
- The agency made concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections with the child's religious or cultural heritage (five cases).
- The agency made concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections with the school, community, and important activities such as dance class or sports (for example, selecting placements that do not require such things as a change of school, jobs, or sports teams) (14 cases).

Item 14 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in eight cases when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- The agency did not make concerted efforts to maintain the child's connections to extended family (six cases).
- The agency did not make concerted efforts to preserve the child's connections to school or community (six cases).

In five cases, there was no evidence that inquiry was ever made with the family about whether the child had Native American ancestry to assess for possible Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) applicability. In one case, Native American heritage was identified and the Tribe was notified; however, the Tribe declined intervention as a legal party because the child was not an enrolled member of the Tribe.

Rating Determination

Item 14 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement. In 79 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to maintain the child's connections with extended family, culture, religion, community and school. This is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in Alabama's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that practice is inconsistent with regard to agency efforts to preserve the child's connections to extended family, community, religion, and cultural heritage while the child is in foster care. They noted that while this is a priority for many caseworkers, other caseworkers do not make diligent efforts to preserve connections.

Tuscaloosa County stakeholders also noted that caseworkers do not routinely inquire about the child's possible Native American heritage, although stakeholders indicated that if children were identified as Native American, the Tribe was notified and ICWA guidelines were observed.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the training curriculum for agency staff was enhanced to provide a component on maintaining a child’s connections to family, community, culture, faith, and friends while out of the home. Staff were encouraged and trained to develop Life Books for children to provide an avenue for remaining connected to birth and foster families. Consultation support in counties and training for foster and adoptive parents have also focused on the importance of preserving connections for children. The Statewide Assessment indicates that efforts to preserve connections are enhanced by the State policy of placing children in close proximity to their parents and relatives and in focusing on placements with relatives, whenever possible.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that there have been instances in some counties and school jurisdictions in which children were allowed to remain in school districts outside of where they were placed to provide for consistency and continuity at least for the remainder of the current school year. When that has occurred, caseworkers and foster parents have provided the necessary transportation when buses were not available. The Statewide Assessment also notes that caseworkers and foster parents have provided the transportation necessary to ensure that children can attend their regular church, or at least a church of their faith.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, Alabama strives to be in compliance with the ICWA and is currently in the process of approving and issuing policy regarding compliance with ICWA.

Item 15. Relative placement

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 15 was applicable for 35 (87.5 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable if relative placement was not an option during the period under review because: (1) the child was in an adoptive placement at the start of the time period, or (2) the child entered foster care needing specialized services that could not be provided in a relative placement. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives (both maternal and paternal relatives) as potential placement resources for children in foster care. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below.

Item 15	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	9	5	9	23	66
Area Needing Improvement	9	3	0	12	34
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	18	8	9	35	
Not Applicable Foster Care Case	2	2	1	5	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

Performance on this measure varied somewhat across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, compared to 62.5 percent of Lee County cases and 50 percent of Jefferson County cases.

Item 15 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined the following:

- The child was placed with relatives or close family members (nine cases).
- The child was not placed with relatives but the agency made diligent efforts to search for both maternal and paternal relatives when applicable (14 cases). In those cases, children were not placed with relatives because a relative could not be found or because identified relatives were unable or unwilling to care for the children, lived too far from the parents, and/or had a criminal record or history of substantiated child maltreatment.

Item 15 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The agency had not made diligent efforts to search for known maternal and paternal relatives during the period under review (three cases).
- The agency did not make any efforts to search for relatives (five cases).
- The agency made diligent efforts to search for maternal relatives, but not paternal relatives (four cases).

Rating Determination

Item 15 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 66 percent of cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives as potential placement resources. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that relatives are the first placement option when children must be removed from their homes. They noted that when a relative placement is considered at the initiation of an investigation, a background check is conducted through the central registry to place the child with a relative immediately and then more intensive criminal checks are initiated the next day. Stakeholders also noted, however, that at the initial investigation stage, the caseworkers rely on relatives the mother identifies. Paternal relatives are generally sought only after the father has been located and paternity established, if necessary.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the first CFSR. Focus groups with staff, stakeholders, and foster care providers revealed that relatives—particularly paternal relatives—should be consistently explored early in the life of a case. The Statewide Assessment notes that as part of the State's PIP the agency collaborated with the AOC to assure that families provide relative information early through court hearings if they do not provide this information prior to the hearing.

The Statewide Assessment also notes that to ensure a stable placement for a child, it is important to assess relatives with regard to their ability to meet the individual needs of the child rather than assume that because someone is a relative they will be an appropriate placement resource. Through the initial PIP, the State’s concurrent planning policy was revised to address the issue of systematic evaluation of relatives.

The Statewide Assessment reports that support services and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) payments are available to relatives who choose to gain custody of related children. In many cases, relatives have been approved as related foster care resources to be able to provide for related children. Alabama does not provide subsidy assistance for related care outside of the above, including guardianship. The relative may be eligible to receive up to \$500 in Kinship funds for hard services.

Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 16 was applicable for 29 (72 percent) of the 40 foster care cases. Other foster care cases were not applicable if (1) parental rights had been terminated before the period under review and parents were no longer involved with the child, (2) a relationship with the parents was not considered in the child’s best interests throughout the period under review, or (3) both parents were deceased. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to support or maintain the bond between children in foster care and their mothers and fathers through efforts other than arranging visitation. The results of this assessment are provided in the table below.

Item 16	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	8	4	4	16	55
Area Needing Improvement	7	4	2	13	45
Total Applicable Foster Care Cases	15	8	6	29	
Not Applicable Foster Care Cases	5	2	4	11	
Total Foster Care Cases	20	10	10	40	

There was some variation in performance on this item across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 67 percent of the Tuscaloosa County cases, compared to 53 percent of Jefferson County cases and 50 percent of Lee County cases.

Item 16 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to support and/or strengthen the bond between parents and children through various activities. The table below identifies the activities as well as the number of cases relevant for each type of activity.

Twenty-one of the 29 applicable cases for Item 16 required concerted efforts to engage both parents in activity with the child. The mother’s involvement with the child was not required in only one of the applicable cases and fathers’ efforts were not required in seven cases. When efforts were not required, this was due to a deceased parent; unsuccessful, diligent efforts completed to find an absent parent; a court order relieving the agency from working with the parent; or a continued threat of harm from the parent.

Examples of Efforts Made	With Mother	With Father
Encourage the parent’s participation in school activities and case conferences, attendance at doctor appointments with the child, or engagement in the child’s after-school or sports activities?	17	9
Provide or arrange for transportation or provide funds for transportation so that the parent could attend the child’s special activities and doctor appointments?	7	3
Provide opportunities for therapeutic situations to help the parent and child strengthen their relationship?	7	5
Encourage foster parents to provide mentoring or serve as role models to the parent to assist him or her in appropriate parenting?	11	6
Encourage and facilitate contact with incarcerated parents (where appropriate) or with parents not living in close proximity to the child?	3	2

Item 16 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The agency did not make concerted efforts to support the child’s relationship with the father (seven cases).
- The agency did not make concerted efforts to support the child’s relationship with either parents (three cases).
- The contact was not therapeutic for the child and should have been discontinued (one case).
- The father was deceased and there was no effort made to support the child’s relationship with the mother (two cases).

Rating Determination

Item 16 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 55 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to support the parent-child relationships of children in foster care. This percent is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR indicated that the agency supports the child’s relationships with parents by encouraging letters and phone calls when proximity to parents is an issue.

Statewide Assessment Information

In addition to visitation, the agency supports the parent-child relationship through joint therapy sessions and by developing relationships between foster parents and birth parent to enable more routine and flexible visitation, coaching, and a shared understanding of expectations and progress. Staff are encouraged to creatively develop ways for families and children to maintain relationships.

The Statewide Assessment notes that there has been effort through the Fatherhood Initiative to improve staff understanding of the value of relationships between children and their fathers. There is an annual Fatherhood Conference to which staff are invited to attend that places increased focus on the role of the father and offers ways of engaging the father and paternal relatives in the care of children.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Well-Being Outcome 1

Outcome Well-Being 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total	Percent
Substantially Achieved	9	12	10	31	48
Partially Achieved	14	5	5	24	38
Not Achieved or Addressed	7	0	2	9	14
Total Applicable Cases	30	17	17	64	
Not Applicable Cases	0	0	0	0	

Status of Well-Being Outcome 1

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. The outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 48 percent of the cases reviewed, which is less than the 95 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 30 percent of Jefferson County cases, compared to 70.5 percent of Lee County, and 58.8 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases. Performance did not vary based on the type of

case. The outcome was found to be substantially achieved in 36 percent (23 cases) of the 40 foster care cases and 33 percent (8 cases) of the 24 in-home services cases.

Key Concerns From the 2002 CFSR

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1 in its 2002 CFSR. All items incorporated in the outcome were rated as an Area Needing Improvement. The following key concerns were identified in the 2002 CFSR

- The agency was effective in assessing the needs of foster parents, but was less effective in assessing the needs of the children and their mothers and fathers.
- The agency was not consistent in involving parents and age-appropriate children in case planning, although it was more effective in involving mothers than in involving children and fathers.
- In many cases, caseworker visits with children and parents were not of sufficient frequency or quality to ensure adequate monitoring of children's safety or promote progress toward attainment of permanency goals.

To address these concerns, the State implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Developed a consistent format for documenting comprehensive family assessments and a curriculum for training in advanced assessment skills
- Developed a supervisory case review process that requires written feedback to caseworkers and ensures supervisory monitoring of (1) family assessments, (2) caseworker visits with children and parents; (3) timely documentation of assessments and contacts, (4) inclusion of age-appropriate children in case planning, and (5) tracking case planning meetings
- Established a minimum number of required supervisory case reviews
- Established minimum requirements for case worker contacts and issued the information in a revised policy

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

Similar to the 2002 CFSR, in the 2007 CFSR, all items included in Well-Being Outcome 1 were rated as an Area Needing Improvement. The key findings of the 2007 CFSR were the following:

- The agency was not consistent in assessing and meeting the needs of parents. For foster care cases, the agency was more likely to assess and meet the needs of children and foster parents than it was to assess and meet the needs of either fathers or mothers. For the in-home services cases, the agency was more likely to meet the needs of mothers and children than meet the needs of fathers.
- The agency was not consistent in involving fathers in the case planning process. In the cases reviewed, mothers (94 percent) and children (89 percent) were far more likely to be involved in case planning than were fathers (55 percent). The exclusion of fathers from case planning occurred even when the fathers' whereabouts were known and in some cases, even when the fathers were actively involved in the lives of their children.

- In many of the cases reviewed, caseworkers were not visiting children with sufficient frequency and, when they were visiting frequently, the visits were not of adequate quality.
- Caseworker visits with mothers and fathers often was not of sufficient frequency or quality. Caseworker visits with mothers were more likely to occur at least once a month than were caseworker visits with fathers.

The findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 1 are presented and discussed below.

Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

Item 17 was applicable for all 64 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had (1) adequately assessed the needs of children, parents, and foster parents; and (2) provided the services necessary to meet those needs. This item excludes the assessment of children’s (but not parents’) needs pertaining to educational, physical health, and mental health needs. These are addressed in later items. The case review results were the following:

Item 17	Jefferson County	Lee County	Tuscaloosa County	Total Number	Percent
Strength	12	12	10	34	53
Area Needing Improvement	18	5	7	30	47
Not applicable	0	0	0	0	0
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 70.5 percent of Lee County cases, compared to 58.8 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases and 40 percent of Jefferson County cases. Performance also varied somewhat based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 60 percent (24 cases) of the 40 foster care cases, compared to 42 percent (10 cases) of the 24 in-home services cases.

Item 17 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the needs of children, parents, and foster parents had been adequately assessed and that identified service needs had been met. Item 17 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that there was either inadequate assessment of needs or inadequate services to meet identified needs.

Specific case review findings for item 17 are shown in the table below. The data indicate that, for foster care cases, the agency was more likely to assess and meet the needs of children and foster parents than it assess and meet the needs of either fathers or mothers. For the in-home services cases, the agency was more likely to meet the needs of mothers and children than meet the needs of fathers.

It is interesting to note that although foster care cases were more likely to be rated as a Strength than were in-home services cases, the agency was more likely to assess and meet the needs of mothers in the in-home services cases (92 percent) than it was to assess and meet the needs of mothers in the foster care cases (68 percent).

Target person for needs assessment and services	Foster Care			In-Home Services		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Mother's needs assessed and met?	19 (68%)	9	28	22 (92%)	2	24
Father's needs assessed and met?	9 (41%)	13	22	6 (33%)	12	18
Foster parent's needs assessed and met?	33 (92%)	3	36	NA	NA	NA
Child's needs assessed and met?	37 (92.5%)	3	40	21 (87.5%)	3	24

Rating Determination

Item 17 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 53 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the State had adequately assessed and addressed the service needs of children, parents and foster parents. That percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Many stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the agency is effective in identifying and addressing the needs of parents, children, and foster parents. They noted that for foster care cases, the agency must report on the status of needs and services during court hearings. Lee County stakeholders indicated that foster and adoptive parents in that county view the agency as supportive in meeting both their needs and the needs of the children in their care. They noted that foster parents report frequent contact with caseworkers and indicate that caseworkers respond quickly and effectively if a foster parent has questions or concerns.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the agency has initiated a number of activities that should result in improvement of the assessment of needs and provision of indicated services to children, parents, and foster parents over time. However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that this continues to be an area that needs improvement. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the following activities have been implemented to improve assessing and meeting the needs of children, parents, and foster parents.

- Initiated a CFA that includes a thorough assessment of physical, emotional, and educational strengths and needs of family members and provided training to county staff on this tool
- Established a policy to enhance service planning and delivery for foster parents so that foster parents are encouraged and assisted to articulate their own strengths and needs, the goals they are seeking for themselves, and what services they think are required to meet these goals

- Added a Meeting Families’ Underlying Needs training to the training curriculum to support assessing the needs of children and families
- Developed and implemented a MAT that is completed every 6 months for all children who are either considered for placement or already placed in Moderate and Intensive Residential Care or TFC
- Developed *Minimum Standards for CW Supervision* and a *Guide for Supervisory Case Review* to further assist in supervision and monitoring
- Required supervisors to develop a Professional Development Plan (PDP) with their employee that addresses the caseworker’s individual strengths and needs surrounding such issues as ISP facilitation, fieldwork, interviewing, case management, court presentation, documentation, and other practice issues.
- Required development of an ISP for each family receiving child welfare services that is built upon input from the family, caseworker, and others who are involved with the family in preparing a written, comprehensive assessment

Item 18: Child and family involvement in case planning

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

Item 18 was applicable for 63 (98 percent) of the 64 cases. A case was not applicable if parental rights had been terminated prior to the period under review, parents were not involved with the child in any way, and the child was too young, had cognitive delays, or other conditions that were barriers to participation in case planning. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether parents and children (when age appropriate) had been involved in the case planning process, and if not, whether their involvement was contrary to the child's best interest. A determination of involvement in case planning required that a parent or child had actively participated in identifying the services and goals included in the case plan. This assessment produced the following findings:

Item 18	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total N	Percent
Strength	18	12	12	42	66
Area Needing Improvement	12	4	5	21	44
Total Applicable Cases	30	16	17	63	
Not Applicable Cases	0	1	0	1	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 75 percent of Lee County cases, 70 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, and 60 percent of Jefferson County cases. Performance also varied substantially based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 74 percent (29 cases) of the 39 applicable foster care cases compared to 54 percent (13 cases) of the 24 in-home services cases.

Item 18 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that all appropriate parties had actively participated in the case planning process or that the agency had made concerted efforts to involve them in the case planning process. The item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not made concerted efforts to involve the mother, father, and/or child (when age appropriate) in the case planning process. Specific information regarding involvement in case planning is provided in the table below. The data indicate that in the cases reviewed, mothers (94 percent) and children (89 percent) were far more likely to be involved in case planning than were fathers (55 percent). The exclusion of fathers from case planning occurred even when fathers' whereabouts were known. In some cases fathers were excluded even when they were actively involved in the lives of their children. This information is provided in the table below:

Involvement in Case Planning	Evaluation Results		No. of Applicable Cases
	Yes	No	
Mother involved in case planning?	50 (94%)	3 (6%)	53
Father involved in case planning?	23 (55%)	19 (45%)	42
Child (when age appropriate) involved in case planning?	39 (89%)	5 (13%)	44

Rating Determination

Item 18 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 66 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined the agency had made diligent efforts to involve parents and/or children in the case planning process. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in Alabama's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that although most parents and age appropriate children participate in the case planning process, this practice is not consistent in all cases. They noted that parents and children are present for ISP meetings, which occur at least every 6 months, and parents and children are invited to participate in court hearings, when appropriate.

Stakeholders noted, however, that the fathers are less likely than the mothers to be participants in the planning process. Some stakeholders suggested that this was due to the agency not knowing the identity of the fathers. They noted that some judges will order the mother to work cooperatively with the agency to identify the father, if she previously was unwilling to do so.

A concern voiced by some stakeholders pertained to the quality of case plans developed for older youth in foster care and the involvement of youth in case planning, which appears to vary across the three sites. Youth appear to be included in most ISPs, but they may not always be given an opportunity to voice their opinions or, if they do speak, their opinions may not always be reflected in

the case plan. Stakeholders suggested that independent living plans are not always well developed with regard to addressing issues relevant to the youth, particularly those transitioning from foster care to independence, and that plans tend to be “boilerplate.”

Additional comments regarding the case planning process are provided in the Systemic Factors section of this report under item 25.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, focus groups held by DHR have conveyed that although case planning is family-driven and involves parents, children, and other significant parties, this continues to be an area that needs improvement.

Item 19: Worker visits with child

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 19 was applicable for all 64 cases. In conducting the assessment of this item, reviewers were to determine whether the frequency of visits between the caseworkers and children was sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being and whether visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. The results of the assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 19	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total N	Percent
Strength	16	17	15	48	75
Area Needing Improvement	14	0	2	16	25
Not applicable	0	0	0	0	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Performance on this item varied substantially across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 100 percent of Lee County cases, 88 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, and 53 percent of Jefferson County cases. However, performance on the item did not vary substantially based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 77 percent (31 cases) of the 40 foster care cases and 71 percent (17 cases) of the 24 in-home services cases.

Item 19 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and children were sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being and promote attainment of case goals. Item 19 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- The frequency of caseworker visits was not sufficient to meet the needs of the child, and the visits did not focus on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment (six cases).

- The frequency of caseworker visits with children was not sufficient to meet the needs of the child, although when visits did occur, they were substantive (two cases).
- The frequency of caseworker visits was sufficient, but the visits did not focus on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment (seven cases).
- There was a long period of time during the period under review in which the agency caseworker did not visit the child (one case).

The quality of caseworker’s face-to-face contact was identified as a concern in 13 cases. The concerns pertained primarily to the fact that the caseworker did not see the child separately from parents or foster parents and/or the caseworker did not engage the child in meaningful discussions.

Specific information regarding the frequency of visitation is provided in the table below:

Typical frequency of caseworker visits with child (during the period under review)	Foster Care Cases (Number and Percent)	In-Home Services Cases (Number and Percent)
Visits occurred on at least a weekly basis	3 (7.5%)	1 (4%)
Visits occurred less than weekly, but at least twice a month	8 (20%)	6 (25%)
Visits occurred less than twice a month, but at least once a month	23 (57.5%)	14 (58%)
Visits occurred less frequently than once a month	6 (15%)	3 (12.5%)
Total cases	40	24

Rating Determination

Item 19 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 75 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that caseworker visits with children were of sufficient frequency and/or quality. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State’s 2002 CFSR. A key finding of the 2007 CFSR was that even when frequency of contacts was sufficient, the quality of the contacts was not adequate to ensure the child’s safety or promote attainment of the child’s permanency goal.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item expressed differing opinions regarding the frequency and quality of caseworker visits with children. A few Jefferson County stakeholders said that they thought caseworkers were visiting children every 30 days. However, other stakeholders in that county questioned whether this was being done because of the high caseloads carried by the caseworkers in the county. They noted that even when caseworkers make the required number of visits, it is difficult to ensure that they are high-quality visits because of workload.

In contrast, stakeholders in Lee County and Tuscaloosa County expressed the opinion that children are being visited by caseworkers at least once every 30 days and sometimes more often. They also noted that visits were of high quality, and caseworkers often arranged for activities to engage children during the visit.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the first CFSR. The Statewide Assessment notes that, since the PIP, DHR has established reasonable minimal requirements and issued In-Person Contact Requirements that clarify requirements for contacts by caseworkers with the children and parents. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, QA case review data has shown that tremendous strides have been made with regard to increasing the frequency of caseworker visits with children and families.

However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that participants in focus groups expressed concern that visits are being made to children to meet standards, but the visits are not always meaningful. When the quality of caseworker visits is identified as an issue in a particular county, the agency provides training, coaching, and modeling with supervisory staff to attempt to reinforce this critical piece.

Item 20: Worker visits with parents

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 20 was applicable for 54 (84 percent) of the 64 cases. Cases were not applicable for this assessment if parental rights had been terminated prior to the period under review, and parents were no longer involved in the lives of their children. All cases that were not applicable were foster care cases. Reviewers were to assess whether the caseworker’s face-to-face contact with the children’s mothers and fathers was of sufficient frequency and quality to promote attainment of case goals and/or ensure the children’s safety and well-being. The results of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 20	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total N	Percent
Strength	7	6	9	22	41
Area Needing Improvement	19	8	5	32	59
Total Applicable Cases	26	14	14	54	
Not Applicable Cases	4	3	3	10	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Performance on this item varied across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 64 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, 46 percent of Lee County cases, and 26 percent of Jefferson County cases. There was little variation, however, based on the type of case. The item

was rated as a Strength in 40 percent (12 cases) of the 30 applicable foster care cases and 42 percent (10 cases) of the 24 in-home services cases.

Item 20 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that visits occurred with sufficient frequency to meet the needs of parents and children and that visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. Item 20 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined one or more of the following:

- Visits with the mother and father were not of sufficient frequency and/or quality (five cases).
- Visits with the mother were not of sufficient frequency and/or quality (10 cases).
- Visits with the father were not of sufficient frequency and/or quality (17 cases).

Case rating documentation indicates that although the frequency of visits occurred less than once a month in a large percentage of the cases for both mothers and fathers, caseworkers were more likely to visit fathers less than once a month or not at all (78 percent of the cases) than they were to visit mothers less than once a month or not at all (42 percent of the cases).

Rating Determination

Item 20 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 41 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the frequency and/or quality of caseworker visits with parents were sufficient to monitor the safety and well-being of the child or promote attainment of case goals. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders from one county stated that visits occurred once a month. Stakeholders from another county indicated that visits with parents may vary due to parents' work schedules and that caseworkers may engage in more telephone contacts with parents.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the first CFSR and continues to be an Area Needing Improvement for the State. The Statewide Assessment reports that policy requires that families receiving ongoing protective services shall be seen in their own homes at least once a month or more frequently when directed by the ISP. When reunification is the plan, parents or primary caregivers whose children are in foster care shall be seen where they live on a monthly basis. Families may be seen in additional settings as indicated by the ISP, but these contacts are not expected to take the place of the monthly in-person visit to the home.

The Statewide Assessment indicates that participants in focus groups expressed the opinion that caseload standards do not reflect the complexity of many cases. Some family issues/problems are getting more difficult to work with, especially when they comprise large sibling groups, etc. Due to the consent decree, Alabama has set manageable caseload standards in all counties to address this issue. Alabama continues to monitor this through a child welfare staffing committee that looks at workload versus caseload when there is a

need. The State recognizes that despite the fact that it has systems to monitor visitation, this area of practice continues to present challenges.

Well-Being Outcome 2

Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total	Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	13	12	11	36	84
Partially Achieved	1	0	0	1	2
Not Achieved	4	0	2	6	14
Total Applicable Cases	18	12	13	43	
Not Applicable Cases	12	5	4	21	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Status of Well-Being Outcome 2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2. The outcome was substantially achieved in 84 percent of the cases reviewed. This is less than the 95 percent or higher required for substantial conformity. There were differences in performance on this outcome across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 100 percent of Lee County cases, 85 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, and 72 percent of Jefferson County cases. There also was some variation in performance based on the type of case. The outcome was substantially achieved in 91 percent (29 of 32 cases) of the applicable foster care cases compared to 64 percent (7 of 11 cases) of the applicable in-home services cases.

Key Concerns of the 2002 CFSR

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2 in its 2002 CFSR. The key concern identified at that time was that although educational assessments were generally completed, services were not routinely provided to address the identified needs. In response to this concern, the State developed and issued guidelines for an education/DHR protocol to be used statewide as part of its PIP.

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

The key findings of the 2007 CFSR indicate that the concerns found in the 2002 CFSR continue to be an issue. Although educational assessments are usually completed, services are not always provided to address the identified needs.

Item 21: Educational needs of the child

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 21 was applicable for 43 (67 percent) of the 64 cases reviewed. Cases were not applicable if any of the following applied: (1) children were not of school age, or (2) children in in-home cases did not have service needs pertaining to education-related issues. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether children’s educational needs were appropriately assessed and whether services were provided to meet those needs. The results of this assessment are provided below:

Item 21	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total N	Percent
Strength	13	12	11	36	84
Area Needing Improvement	5	0	2	7	16
Total Applicable Cases	18	12	13	43	
Not applicable	12	5	4	21	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Item 21 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that the child’s educational needs were appropriately assessed and services were provided, if necessary. Item 21 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in seven cases when case reviewers determined the following:

- There was a lack of assessment of educational needs even when there was clear evidence that the child was experiencing school-related problems (two cases; one in-home services case and one foster care case).
- Educational needs were identified and noted in the case record, but no services were provided to address those needs, and educational issues were not included in the case plan (five cases: three in-home services cases and two foster care cases).

Rating Determination

Item 21 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 84 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to meet the educational needs of children. This percentage is less than the 95 percent required for this item to be rated as a Strength. A 95-percent standard is established for this item because it is the only item included in the outcome.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed a variety of opinions regarding the effectiveness of the agency in meeting the educational needs of children. Several stakeholders suggested that for older youth in foster care, meeting educational needs can be problematic when there are frequent placement changes that require a change in schools, or when they are “schooled” in their group homes, but do not get some of the classes and credits that they need for the public high school.

Lee County and Tuscaloosa County stakeholders expressed the opinion that in their counties children’s educational needs are being met by the agency. Stakeholders in both counties indicated that a key to achieving this goal was the coordination between the agency’s ISP and the child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) to ensure that they are incorporating the same education-related concerns. Stakeholders in both counties also indicated strong collaboration with the schools and participation of the schools in ISP meetings as well as the participation of the DHR caseworker in IEP meetings. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders noted, however, that school policy in that county does not make an exception for children in foster care to attend a school other than the one designated in the foster home’s community.

Many Jefferson County stakeholders were concerned about the problem of educational neglect in that county, particularly the high rate of truancy. They noted that the agency no longer accepts reports of educational neglect as reportable allegations, and that schools must address educational neglect issues by filing a truancy petition directly with the family court. Although stakeholders noted that parents are fined if a child is truant, there are concerns about accessing services for these families.

Other Jefferson County stakeholders noted that there are agency educational liaisons who provide in-service training to schools on child abuse and neglect, review cases to make sure children’s education needs are being met, help facilitate special education testing, and encourage caseworkers to attend IEP conferences. Stakeholders suggested that the staff in these positions often serve as educational advocates for the children.

Comments from a variety of stakeholders dealt with education issues for teens and children who spend time in escalated placements. DHR makes every effort to keep teens in school, and a GED is pursued only if there is a valid reason. There were a number of comments made about the impact of placement changes, often due to a step-up or step-down in care, on the ability of teens to get classes and credits they need for graduation. Teens placed in a group or residential setting with an education program have particular issues with credit transferability. When they return to a community school, not all credits from a facility’s “in-house” school are accepted, or not all required coursework is offered, and the youth is then short the credits needed to complete diploma requirements for graduation.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in Alabama’s 2002 CFSR and continues to be an Area Needing Improvement. The Statewide Assessment notes that DHR policy requires a comprehensive assessment to address each child’s educational needs, including information regarding academic performance and reading level, social interaction

with peers and school faculty, and involvement in extracurricular activities. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, counties that are more effective in working with the school system are those that have an education liaison who serves as the DHR point of contact for schools.

The Statewide Assessment notes that educational well-being is an area that continues to be addressed in QA reviews conducted by local QA Committees and State QA teams. The reviews examine the following:

- Whether educational needs of children are being met appropriately
- Whether school personnel are routinely involved in ISP meetings/planning
- Whether educational advocacy is implemented when needed

Well-Being Outcome 3

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement					
	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total	Percent
Substantially Achieved	21	15	15	51	85
Partially Achieved	4	1	0	5	8
Not Achieved or Addressed	2	0	2	4	7
Total Applicable Cases	27	16	17	60	
Not Applicable	3	1	0	4	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Status of Well-Being Outcome 3

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 85 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 95 percent required for substantial conformity. Performance on this outcome varied across sites. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 94 percent of Lee County cases, 88 percent of Tuscaloosa county cases, and 78 percent of Jefferson County cases. However, performance did not vary based on the type of case reviewed. The outcome was determined to be substantially achieved in 85 percent of the 40 foster care cases and the 20 applicable in-home services cases.

Key Concerns From the 2002 CFSR

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with this outcome in its 2002 CFSR. Although the item pertaining to meeting children’s physical health needs was rated as a Strength in that review, a key concern identified in the 2002 CFSR was that although

the agency was somewhat effective in assessing children for mental health needs, it was less effective in providing services to meet identified needs.

To address these concerns, the agency implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Developed practice guidelines to include assessment, screening, treatment, and monitoring of mental health needs and provided training to staff on the new guidelines
- Implemented an assessment tool to evaluate outcomes for children in residential placements
- Implemented a reporting process for in-home service providers to monitor progress on meeting children’s mental health needs
- Maintained and updated the tracking system for children in restrictive placement settings to enable them to move to a less restrictive placement as soon as goals were achieved
- Developed interagency protocols to share information regarding the care of children in licensed or certified care facilities throughout the State
- Collaborated with the Departments of Mental Health and Youth Services to fund the development of new family, school, and community services

The State met its target goals for this outcome by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

In the 2007 CFSR, the item pertaining to meeting children’s physical health needs continued to be rated as a Strength as it was in the 2002 CFSR. However, meeting the mental health needs continued to be rated as an Area Needing Improvement. The key concern identified in the 2007 CFSR was the lack of service provision, or extensive delays in service provision, to address identified mental health needs. In three cases, however, the agency also did not assess children for mental health needs when there were clear indications of potential mental health concerns.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 3 are presented and discussed below.

Item 22: Physical health of the child

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Case Review Findings

Item 22 was applicable for 49 (77 percent) of the 64 cases reviewed. Cases that were not applicable were in-home services cases in which physical health concerns were not an issue. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) children’s physical health needs (including dental needs) had been appropriately assessed, and (2) the services designed to meet those needs had been, or were being, provided. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 22	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total N	Percent
Strength	21	14	12	47	96
Area Needing Improvement	1	0	1	2	4
Total Applicable Cases	22	14	13	49	
Not Applicable Cases	8	3	4	15	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

Performance on this item did not vary substantively across sites or by type of case.

Item 22 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children’s health needs (medical and dental) were routinely assessed, and indicated services were provided. Item 22 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in two cases. In one foster care case, reviewers determined that several medical concerns for the child had not been addressed. In the other in-home services case, there was no information in the case file that the children had received needed medical attention, despite the mother reporting that all but one of the children in the family have asthma.

Rating Determination

Item 22 is rated as a Strength. Reviewers determined that the agency was effective in assessing and meeting the physical health needs of children in 96 percent of the cases, which exceeds the 95 percent required for an overall rating of Strength. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders in all sites who commented on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that children in foster care receive Early Prevention Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) medical assessments and indicated services to address medical (including vision care) and dental needs. A few stakeholders reported that there is a special DHR project that provides funding for children for orthodontic services and to have wisdom teeth pulled.

A few Jefferson County stakeholders suggested that although there are no delays in receiving routine medical care, there are sometimes delays in foster children receiving emergency care at local hospitals because the hospital requires in-person authorization from the agency, which is not always immediately possible. Stakeholders in Jefferson County indicated that the local office has a medical liaison at Children’s Hospital. The liaison serves in an intake role for cases coming to DHR from the health system and as the point of contact for all child abuse/neglect reports going to the hospital. The liaison also assists caseworkers in interpreting medical treatment plans and acts as a consultant to community medical and dental service providers.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this area is a strength for the State. The Statewide Assessment notes that the ISP process is the mechanism for identifying children’s medical needs. Once identified, DHR caseworkers work with foster parents to ensure that the needs are met. Caseworkers, foster parents, and biological family members may all be involved in the process of meeting a child’s medical needs. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, children with special medical needs can receive specialized care in foster homes that are approved for medically fragile children.

The Statewide Assessment reports that participants in focus groups expressed the opinion that policy regulations for timely physical exams and for EPSDT are routinely adhered to.

Item 23: Mental health of the child

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Case Review Findings

Item 23 was applicable for 45 (70 percent) of the 64 cases reviewed. Cases were not applicable if the child was too young for an assessment of mental health needs, or if there were no mental health concerns. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) mental health needs had been appropriately assessed and (2) appropriate services to address those needs had been offered or provided. The findings of this assessment are presented in the table below:

Item 23	Jefferson	Lee	Tuscaloosa	Total N	Percent
Strength	14	12	13	39	83
Area Needing Improvement	5	1	2	8	17
Total Applicable Cases	19	13	15	47	
Not Applicable Cases	11	4	2	17	
Total Cases	30	17	17	64	

There was some variation in performance on this item across sites. The item was rated as a Strength in 92 percent of Lee County cases, 87 percent of Tuscaloosa County cases, and 74 percent of Jefferson County cases. However, there was no variation in performance based on the type of case. The item was rated as a Strength in 83 percent of the applicable foster care cases and the applicable in-home services cases.

Item 23 was rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children’s mental health needs were appropriately assessed, and the identified mental health needs were addressed. Item 23 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined the following:

- There was a delay of several months in providing necessary mental health services (two cases: one foster care and one in-home services case).
- Mental health needs were assessed, but services either were not provided or were not adequate to address identified needs (three foster care cases).
- No adequate mental health assessment was conducted (three cases: one foster care and two in-home services cases).

Ratings Determination

Item 23 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. In 83 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made concerted efforts to address the mental health needs of children. This percentage is less than the 90 percent or higher required for a rating of Strength. This item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in Alabama's 2002 CFSR.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed different opinions regarding the agency's effectiveness in meeting children's mental health needs. Lee County stakeholders reported that the agency is effective in meeting children's mental health needs. Stakeholders in Jefferson County and Tuscaloosa County, however, voiced concerns about access to mental health assessment and services for older youth in foster care, particularly those who are about to age out of foster care.

Tuscaloosa County stakeholders reported that although mental health needs are generally assessed and addressed in that county, the mental health needs of children in foster care may receive more attention than those of children remaining in their homes. Stakeholders also noted that at times there are funding issues with regard to mental health services due to a lack of service providers who accept Medicaid payments. It is noted that DHR offers services through contract providers who do not accept Medicaid, and DHR purchases services from contract providers other than those paid for by Medicaid.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, this item was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the first CFSR and continues to be an Area Needing Improvement. The Statewide Assessment reports that DHR policy requires that the ISP include an assessment of mental health needs including the identification and provision of services to address mental health needs.

The Statewide Assessment states that participants in focus groups expressed the opinion that one barrier to meeting a child's mental/emotional needs is that these problems do not necessarily show up when a child first enters foster care. New caseworkers are especially challenged in knowing if services that are authorized are meeting the needs of the child. As this need has been identified as an issue in counties, the agency is focusing training on coaching and modeling with supervisory staff to attempt to reinforce this critical piece of assessment and identifying underlying needs to assist in meeting the needs of children. Supervisors and consultants continue to coach and model assessment and recommend formal psychological assessments at any time they are needed for a child or family. Adding a formal psychological assessment is an integral part of the ongoing assessment to identify underlying needs and to design appropriate services to meet the needs of the child and family.

SECTION B: SYSTEMIC FACTORS

This section of the CFSR Final Report provides information regarding the State’s substantial conformity with the seven systemic factors examined during the CFSR. Six systemic factors are rated on the basis of multiple Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and other program requirements, while the remaining one (Statewide Information System) is rated on only one CFSP requirement. Information on the items included in each systemic factor comes from the Statewide Assessment and from interviews with stakeholders conducted during the onsite CFSR. The following table describes how the CFSP and other program requirements are used to determine substantial conformity with the systemic factors, using the ratings shown; for a specific systemic factor to be determined to be in substantial conformity, it must be assigned a rating of “3” or “4.”

Rating the Systemic Factor			
Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
1	2	3	4
None of the CFSP or program requirements are in place.	Some or all of the CFSP or program requirements are in place, but more than one of the requirements fail to function as described in each requirement.	All of the CFSP or program requirements are in place, and no more than one of the requirements fails to function as described in each requirement.	All of the CFSP or program requirements are in place and functioning as described in each requirement.

Information regarding the State’s performance on each systemic factor for the State’s first CFSR is provided in the report. If the systemic factor was part of the State’s PIP, the key concerns addressed in the PIP and the strategies for assessing those concerns would be noted, as well as any changes in ratings that occurred as a result of the State’s second CFSR.

I. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3X	4
Rating				

Status of Statewide Information System

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Statewide Information System. The State also was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR and was not required to address the factor in its PIP.

Item 24: State is operating a statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 24 is rated as a Strength. The State’s information system can provide information to identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is in foster care.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR operates several automated information systems for child welfare as well as many manual recording and reporting systems. The legacy systems are all mainframe, stand-alone applications designed to support specific operational programs. The Statewide Assessment notes that one of these systems, ACWIS, tracks children in foster care and in adoptive placements. This system is used to identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for children in foster care.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the multiple data systems suffer from a number of severe and intractable deficiencies, such as redundant data entry required across systems, and data and system maintenance activities which are very labor intensive and introduce opportunity for data inconsistencies among data in the systems. As a result, Alabama is in the process of implementing a SACWIS that is designed to resolve the problems inherent in having multiple data systems.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that a new system, the Electronic Report Distribution (ERD), has had a positive effect on the ability of staff to access data 24/7. With this system, all reports, with the exception of confidential adoption reports, are available via desktop computers, and staff at the county level can compare data from one month to the next within their own county, or see how well they compare with other jurisdictions. Each caseworker can see his or her caseload electronically, and managers have access to over 200 reports a month.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the current data systems capture important information related to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children who are in foster care or in-home placements, including their location, demographic information, and case goals. They noted that the current systems are used for reporting required data to NCANDS and AFCARS. The current systems also collect and report on financial information. There also is a system in place to ensure entry of data regarding placement changes for children who are being served by private child-placing agencies.

Stakeholders identified the following Strengths of DHR’s current information system:

- Data usually are entered on a timely basis. There is a county-level investment in ensuring that caseworkers are timely in entering data because staffing allocations are linked directly to system information.
- Quarterly reports and county “report cards” are generated from the system and are used for quality improvement.
- There are ticklers from the system to assist caseworkers in monitoring investigation timeliness, frequency and due dates of ISPs, frequency of permanency hearings, and time frames for filing for TPR.

Despite these Strengths, a few stakeholders noted that there are problems with the current system, including the lack of a single data entry, the need for workers to access several different systems to get information, duplication of information in some places, and inability to link to other program systems such as Food Stamps, TANF, child care, etc. Stakeholders noted that the current system will be replaced by an integrated SACWIS system called FACTS. They reported that the first pilots are expected to be implemented in April 2008 and that training has already started. Stakeholders indicated that agency staff are fully involved in the development of business requirements, system design, testing, and preparation.

II. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
		1	2X	3

Status of Case Review System

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Case Review System. The State also was not in substantial conformity with this systemic factor in its 2002 CFSR and was required to address it in its PIP.

The following key concerns were identified in the 2002 CFSR:

- The agency was not consistent with respect to involving parents in case plan development.
- The State was not consistent with regard to holding permanency hearings in a timely manner.
- Although the State had a process for filing for TPR in accordance with ASFA, adherence to these timelines varied across counties and court systems.

To address these concerns, the State implemented the following strategies in its PIP:

- Revised policy to require random supervisory review of ISPs to ensure parental involvement
- Provided training on parent locator services and activities and parental/family involvement in ISPs

- Used QA Committees to survey parents on whether they were involved in their child/family ISP to measure county performance in this area
- Enhanced systems to capture ISP attendees, distributed tracking report, and modified ACWIS to link TPR and compelling reasons fields
- Identified counties with unacceptable timely permanency hearing rates and subsequently provided them with AOC assistance in working with problematic jurisdictions
- Provided AOC training on identified needs to legal/judicial community
- Provided policy re-issuances, clarifications, and technical assistance (TA) on permanency hearings, TPR, and compelling reasons through central office
- Coordinated with AOC to review hearing notification and scheduling policies and practices
- Provided onsite consultation and TA to county caseworkers on the identification of compelling reasons and determining when “enough is enough” related to goal changes

The State met its target goals with regard to this systemic factor by the end of the PIP implementation period.

Key Findings of the 2007 CFSR

The concerns identified in the 2007 CFSR were the same as those identified in the 2002 CFSR. In the 2007 CFSR, inconsistency of practice was found with regard to involving parents in case planning, holding permanency hearings in a timely manner, and filing for TPR in accordance with ASFA. In addition, the 2007 CFSR also identified practice inconsistencies with regard to providing notice to foster parents, relative caregivers, and pre-adoptive parents regarding hearings and providing them with the opportunity to be heard. Specific findings for each item included in this systemic factor and the reasons for item ratings are presented below.

Item 25: Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child’s parent(s) that includes the required provisions

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 25 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Although the State has instituted a process to develop case plans jointly with parents and children, information from the Statewide Assessment indicates that this is not always implemented as intended. In addition, the CFSR case reviews show that in 44 percent of the cases reviewed, parents were not engaged in developing their case plans. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State’s 2002 CFSR

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has extensive policy on developing ISPs for all children in all foster care and on-going protective service cases, as well as other cases open to services. Initial ISPs are required within 72 hours for children placed in

foster care and within 30 days of opening a case for all other children. The Statewide Assessment notes that, in practice, an ISP should be the result of engagement of the family and the multidisciplinary family planning team to complete a written, comprehensive assessment that identifies strengths, risks, and underlying conditions/needs that create the risks.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, since the 2002 CFSR and as part of the PIP, ISP policy was revised in July 2004. ISP teams now include both custodial and noncustodial parents as well as primary caregivers for children who are not in foster care but who are being cared for by someone other than a parent. Documentation is required to show that efforts were made to locate noncustodial and/or absent parents for inclusion in the ISP team. In addition, the ISP process includes documenting invitations and attendance at all ISPs.

The Statewide Assessment reports that during the 2004 PIP, the Qualitative Service Review (QSR) was revised to capture whether appropriate family members were involved in the ISP and whether their input and opinions were sought, valued, and utilized. The QSR report indicates that having appropriate family members present at ISPs is an area that needs improvement.

The Statewide Assessment reports that the agency has worked with the AOC and several juvenile court judges to assure that names and addresses of both parents and all relatives are obtained, preferably at the shelter care hearing, but no later than the adjudicatory hearing, in order to include them in the ISP meetings and in permanency planning.

Stakeholder Interview Information

There was general agreement among stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR that the agency prepares case plans for all children in foster care and in-home services cases, and that these case plans are developed in a timely manner. A few stakeholders noted, however, that some case plans tend to be “boilerplate,” because high caseloads often prevent caseworkers from developing more comprehensive individualized plans.

There were differences in stakeholder opinions across the sites included in the CFSR with regard to the extent of involvement of parents in case planning. Some stakeholders indicated that involving fathers in case planning activities has been a longstanding problem for the State and, although more efforts are currently being made in this regard, fathers remain less likely to be involved than mothers. State-level stakeholders and stakeholders from Jefferson County and Lee County reported that the involvement of parents in the case planning process is inconsistent and varies across caseworkers. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders, in contrast, indicated local caseworkers usually involve parents in case planning.

Stakeholders identified the following as strategies developed by the agencies to engage parents in case planning:

- Using family team meetings to develop ISPs
- Scheduling meetings around the family schedule
- Scheduling ISP meetings whenever there is a change in case circumstances or the need to move a child
- Using CFA to inform the ISP development

- Conducting ongoing reviews of ISPs every 30 days and updating them every 6 months
- Using the Child Support Parent Locator service to search for absent parents

Item 26: Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review

X_ Strength ___Area Needing Improvement

Item 26 is rated as Strength. The State has a process in place for cases to be reviewed by the court at a minimum of every 6 months.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, all counties have a process whereby there is either a 6 month judicial review or an administrative review of the ISP. In those counties that have a judicial review system, a report is sent to the court each 6 months and copies are sent to the parents, parents’ attorneys, and guardians *ad litem*. The Statewide Assessment notes that judicial reviews include a summary of the reason for child welfare involvement including how, why, and when the family became involved with DHR; the family conditions and circumstances that need to be addressed for the children to have a safe, stable, and permanent living situation; a statement of the permanency goal and concurrent planning goal; the current out-of-home placement and any changes in placements since the previous review; current status of parents and children in terms of progress made towards addressing the identified needs; array of services provided to address the needs and achieve the established permanency and concurrent planning goal; and recommendations to the court regarding future steps and a time frame for addressing them.

The Statewide Assessment notes that in those counties that conduct 6-month administrative reviews, the administrative review panel consists of the professional staff involved in the case. The issues that are covered in the judicial reviews also are addressed in the administrative reviews.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that cases are being reviewed at least every 6 months. They also indicated that, in general, the case reviews are substantive and help move the case forward in terms of achieving case goals and objectives.

Stakeholders reported that because there is no statute in Alabama that stipulates how reviews are to be conducted by the court, the structure of the reviews varies across locations. Some of the structural variations noted by stakeholders were the following:

- In some locations, reviews are completed by a court referee, rather than a judge.
- In Lee County, the agency provides a report to the court every 6 months based on an ISP meeting, and the judge reviews and signs off on the report outside of a hearing. If there are contested items, a court hearing is docketed. Reviews in Jefferson County are held in court, and there is an effort by new judges to review and eliminate a backlog of cases.

- In Tuscaloosa County, the review is a report to the judge for children in foster care prior to TPR. Following TPR, there are paper reviews conducted internally by agency supervisors who are not directly responsible for the case.

Stakeholders noted that the CIP recognizes that there are some courts that are still conducting paper administrative reviews rather than full hearings, and the CIP is working to change this practice.

Item 27: Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the State has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 27 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Although the State has been involved in ongoing efforts to ensure that permanency hearings are being held in a timely manner, according to the Statewide Assessment, timeliness of permanency hearings is being impacted across the State by continuances and docketing delays. This item also was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, after the passage of ASFA, Alabama established a process for each child in foster care to have a permanency hearing no later than 12 months after entering foster care and every 12 months thereafter. Implementation of the PIP required that formal permanency planning policies and procedures be developed. These were completed in October 2003. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, permanency hearings are held to determine whether county child welfare staff made reasonable efforts to achieve a child’s permanency goal, and reasonable efforts must be articulated in the court order resulting from the hearing.

The Alabama court system provides for permanency hearings to be conducted by a family or juvenile court with the judge being a district judge or a circuit judge. In some jurisdictions, court referees conduct permanency hearings with the juvenile judge ratifying the referees’ findings and recommendations. To qualify as a permanency hearing, the hearing must be open to the age appropriate child, the child’s parents, the child’s foster parents, and any pre-adoptive parents.

The Statewide Assessment notes that although there has been almost a 20 percent improvement in timely permanency hearings, postponements of permanency hearings are still experienced. The Statewide Assessment also notes that training for judges about the relationship between timely permanency hearings, improved permanency outcomes, and Federal funding is alleviating this problem.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that Alabama has placed emphasis on the timeliness of permanency hearings and has provided training to address this issue. They suggested that although continuances were a

problem in the past, they currently are occurring less often than they used to. A few stakeholders suggested that sometimes hearings are delayed because caseworkers and attorneys are not adequately prepared.

Stakeholders identified the following strategies that have been implemented either statewide or in specific localities to improve the timeliness of permanency hearings:

- The agency and courts have collaborated to eliminate continuances of permanency hearings.
- The Alabama courts are moving toward a paperless model that will improve tracking cases, monitoring compliance with orders, and finalization of orders.
- The agency is using the *Caseworker's Guide for Working With the Court* in its training for caseworkers.
- There are tickler systems or reports at the local level to assist caseworkers and agency attorneys with timely preparation for permanency hearings.
- Tuscaloosa County courts have dedicated a specific monthly time for permanency hearings, as well as a court tickler protocol, that has reduced continuances.
- Jefferson County courts ensure that all parties leave hearings with a copy of the court order that identifies requirements and the date of the next hearing.
- The Lee County juvenile judge sets the date for the next permanency hearing in the court order and sets it on the docket calendar a year in advance.

Several stakeholders indicated that over the past 3 years, there has been an effort to rewrite the Juvenile Code. They expressed the opinion that although the impetus for this project was to comply with Federal law, the code will support juvenile judges and provide clarity for the bench and DHR. The revised code is a legislative priority of the State Supreme Court. Stakeholders reported that confusion exists around the State regarding definitions of entry into foster care, time frames for due dates, and differences between district courts in naming conventions for permanency hearings. These factors become an impediment to effective monitoring and evaluation of those hearings.

Item 28: Provides a process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 28 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement. Although the State has made improvements in filing for TPR in accordance with the provisions of ASFA, information in the Statewide Assessment indicates that the findings of a State review indicate that in 24 percent of the cases in which the child met the ASFA timelines, TPR was not filed, and compelling reasons for not filing were not documented in the case file. In addition, among the cases reviewed for the Federal CFSR, compelling reasons were not documented in three (37.5 percent) of the eight cases in which TPR had not been filed in accordance with ASFA time frames.

Statewide Assessment Information

In October 2003, the agency released *Permanency Planning Policies and Procedures* as part of its PIP implementation. This document incorporated the circumstances under which a petition for TPR should be filed. The Statewide Assessment reports that child welfare caseworkers are notified through “Monthly Worker Action Reports” of children who have met the 15 out of 22 month requirement.

The Statewide Assessment reports that there has been improvement in the percentage of cases that meet the ASFA timeline requirements with regard to filing a petition for TPR or documenting compelling reasons for not filing the petition. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, in March 2004, there were 240 cases either needing a compelling reason or a TPR petition and only 8 (3 percent) were completed. However, in March 2007, 76 percent of the cases needing a compelling reason or a TPR petition had been completed.

The Statewide Assessment attributes improvements in the TPR filing process to the following actions:

- Evaluation of county director performance based on child welfare management reports
- Establishment of thresholds for permanency practice
- Permanency and concurrent planning training (provided in Alabama Certification Training or ACT)
- The work of the DHR QA Policy Subcommittee to ensure notice to caseworkers of children in foster care for 15 out of the past 22 cumulative months and children in foster care for 13 consecutive months

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that DHR and the courts are making progress with regard to filing for TPR in a timely manner, holding hearings in a timely manner, and documenting compelling reasons when a TPR petition is not filed. They also noted that despite the progress that has been made, there are frequent delays in holding TPR hearings due primarily to continuances requested by the attorneys for all parties. Stakeholders identified the following as additional factors contributing to delays in TPR hearings:

- The lack of effort to identify fathers or establish paternity until the time that TPR is filed
- The fact that some courts are not willing to consider TPR unless an adoptive family has been identified
- The lack of “reasonable efforts” by the agency to provide services needed for reunification
- Judicial orders for a continuance to give parents another opportunity to make reasonable efforts
- Problems with scheduling hearings on court dockets due to heavy court caseloads

Some stakeholders reported that in Alabama, if a child is placed with a relative, the State generally does not pursue TPR. They noted that, in these cases, the expectation is that DHR will maintain custody through the age of majority while the child remains with the relative.

Item 29: Provides a process for foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child

Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Item 29 is rated as a Area Needing Improvement because there are inconsistencies in the manner in which foster and adoptive parents are notified of reviews and hearings and afforded the opportunity to be heard. This item was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relatives providing care for children must be provided notification of court hearings. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, the 2004 Foster Parent Bill of Rights provides that a foster parent has a right to notice for any type of hearing involving a foster child placed with them. The Statewide Assessment reports that it is the responsibility of the child welfare caseworker to provide notification directly to providers, or ensure that notification is provided by the court and to provide the court with the current name and address of the provider. Child welfare caseworkers are notified through the "Worker Action Reports" of upcoming permanency hearings or judicial reviews 3 months in advance of the month the hearing is scheduled.

The Statewide Assessment reports that the manner in which notification of foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers occurs varies from county to county. In most counties, caseworkers notify caregivers verbally. In some jurisdictions, the court will make the notification, but that is the exception since courts are not required to make these notifications.

Although this item was found to be a Strength in the previous CFSR, and the PIP did not address it, the State has decided that this is a part of their system that they wish to improve. As a result, for each QA review done by the agency, this item is addressed in stakeholder interviews. Findings from QA reviews indicate that notification varies from county to county. In addition, some jurisdictions allow foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers to be in the hearing and to be heard. Other jurisdictions (judges) elect not to allow this. The Statewide Assessment reports that legislation is being pursued that will address the rights of certain parties to be heard in child abuse/neglect court proceedings. Training on the new legislation, when it passes, will be conducted.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the consistency of notification of relatives, foster parents, and adoptive parents varies across locations. Lee County stakeholders indicated that foster parents receive notice of hearings. However, Jefferson County stakeholders indicated that in that county foster parents often do not receive notice of hearings.

Stakeholders also expressed the opinion that the opportunity for foster parents, relative care givers, and pre-adoptive parents to be heard in hearings varies across courtrooms. They noted that in some courts, foster parents are not allowed in the courtroom; in other counties, they are allowed in the court room but only as observers. However, some judges will allow caregivers to submit written reports to the court, and other judges will permit caregivers to testify in court.

Stakeholders reported that presently there is not a court rule that supports consistency with notification and the right to be heard. However, a few stakeholders said that the State’s foster parent association is working with the AOC and the CIP to establish a rule.

III. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
		1	2	3

Status of Quality Assurance System

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Quality Assurance System. The State was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR and was not required to address the factor in its PIP. Specific findings for each item included in this systemic factor and the reasons for item ratings are presented below.

Item 30: The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 30 is rated as a Strength because information in the CFSR found that the State has implemented standards that are sufficient to protect the safety and health of children in foster care. This item also was rated as a Strength in Alabama’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

The Statewide Assessment provides a thorough description of how the State utilizes its QA process to monitor the State’s standards, but does not specify what those standards are.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that DHR has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect their safety and health. They noted that there are minimum standards for placement service providers, and that placement service providers have an initial formal review process followed by annual informal reviews. They also noted that therapeutic foster homes are licensed by the State and undergo an annual review using selected cases. Stakeholders also reported that foster care caseworkers visit the foster homes on a monthly basis to

monitor for safety. Stakeholders also noted that the agency's Resource Development Office (RDO) has a process in place for ensuring the quality of contract services and facilities. They indicated that the RDO conducts annual visits and reviews cases to ensure that children's needs are being met, and that services are delivered in accordance with the ISP. County offices are notified when the RDO identifies any concerns.

Item 31: The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluates program improvement measures implemented

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 31 is rated as a Strength because the State has a functioning quality assurance system that addresses key practice areas and provides feedback on key findings. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the agency's QA system is comprised of the following core components:

- The Office of Quality Assurance in the Family Services Division
- A State QA Committee that includes representatives of the department and stakeholders representing other interests and entities in the State
- A QA coordinator in each county department
- A local QA Committee in each county consisting of representatives of the county department and community stakeholders

The Statewide Assessment reports that statewide Quality Service Reviews are performed by the Office of Quality Assurance within the State DHR and the State QA Committee.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State's quality assurance system performs the following functions:

- Examines and assesses the department's Best Practice Indicators
- Identifies areas of need and recommends corrective actions necessary to improve services, capacity, outcomes, and conformity with Federal, State, and department program requirements
- Identifies strengths and successful strategies, and recommends ways in which effective practice and/or system performance can be replicated and/or improved

The Statewide Assessment reports that DHR has developed a QA review system that is based on 50 indicators of best practice. These indicators are divided into three outcome areas and seven systemic factors. The outcome areas are safety, permanency, and child and family well-being, and the systemic factors are community collaboration, service array and resource development, individualized service plans, quality assurance, supervision, staffing and caseloads, and staff and provider training.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, each county department directs and monitors its own QA system that includes routine data collection and analysis along with case review activities, special studies, and recommendations as to system improvement in its function as a citizen's review panel. The county QA system, through the local staff person designated as the QA coordinator, submits periodic reports on the functioning of its system to the State QA office, its local QA Committee, and others as needed. Recent changes in the reporting system for QA include the counties completing reports on a biannual basis and the use of more evaluative language in the reports as well as using them to evaluate their county improvement plans and assess their ongoing progress toward practice improvement.

The Statewide Assessment reports that onsite QA reviews are conducted every 3 years if practice/system performance remains at a high level unless concerns arise necessitating an earlier time frame. It was noted in the Statewide Assessment that Jefferson County, home of Alabama's largest metropolitan area, is scheduled for an onsite QA review every other year. Any onsite review is conducted in collaboration with the county QA Committee and staff of the county department. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has been collecting data from QA Service Reviews since 1995. These reviews are essential to improving practice and each child welfare outcome. The data have been used by the department to design resources, change practice, design training, and monitor expectations that practice continues to improve and that families achieve the desired outcomes.

Examples of system and practice changes resulting from QA reviews include the following:

- After QA reviews placed emphasis on foster parent adoptions, Family Services designed new strategies to support foster parent adoption and, in 2006, 92.1 percent of the adoptions completed in Alabama were foster parents. This is an increase from 89.0 percent in 2005.
- The data gathered on the functionality of the ISP from QA reviews resulted in an agency effort to reevaluate the training methods used to increase ISP capacity. A new effort to train supervisors to coach and model the process to improve planning with families as well as improving the monitoring and measurement of outcomes was implemented.

A need identified during the last year has been an enhancement of the local QA Committee and the State committee. County reports have been redesigned to include more evaluative information. Another need identified has been the increasing visibility of the way the department shows that it values and respects the work done by its local QA Committee. A workgroup has been formed to address this issue and will be reporting back to the group during the next quarter.

Stakeholder Interview Information

The majority of stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the QA processes are very effective in identifying Strengths and Areas Needing Improvement in the system and in providing feedback to all levels of agency operations, including case-specific feedback to individual caseworkers and supervisors. Stakeholders all agreed that the QA reviews drive practice and focus on exceeding minimum standards. They all also praised the fact that reviews include both case file reviews and interviews with parents, children, and other relevant stakeholders. Stakeholders also expressed positive opinions about the interest

of the agency commissioner in using data as a basis for implementing practice improvements. They noted that QA information is used to support implementation of new practices and to monitor and evaluate program improvement efforts.

Stakeholders at the county level indicated that the county QA Committee reviews mirror the State reviews and are an effective and important component of improving individual case practice. Stakeholders praised the quality of the individuals serving on the QA Committees, and agency stakeholders indicated that the feedback provided by the QA Committees is very helpful and guides their practice.

Stakeholders also praised the types of feedback received from the QA Committee reviews, which they indicate includes both debriefing sessions and written feedback on individual cases. A few stakeholders in Jefferson County, however, voiced concern that the QA Committee does not always receive feedback from caseworkers and supervisors regarding the committee’s recommendations and whether they have been implemented.

The DHR commissioner initiated “A-1” meetings in Jefferson County that are facilitated by an outside consultant who meets monthly with staff to review general data and develop and test hypotheses regarding possible underlying factors contributing to outcomes. Additionally, the same consultant co-chairs the Governor’s Task Force on Child Welfare Data. The purpose of the Task Force is to assist the Governor to maintain and sustain systemic reform realized as a result of Alabama’s child welfare Consent Decree, from which the State has recently been released. The primary foci of the Task Force are (1) general appraisal of data, (2) development of recommendations to support local QA processes, (3) development of recommendations on a “report card,” and (4) strengthening the monitoring tool.

The A-1 meetings also were conducted in Birmingham to facilitate the use of data as a management tool with supervisory staff and consultants. These were a series of trainings conducted in the State for county directors and supervisors on using data to build better outcomes including monitoring data over time.

IV. TRAINING

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2X	3	4

Status of Training

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Training. The State was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR.

Specific findings for each item included in this systemic factor and the reasons for item ratings in this round are presented below

Item 32: The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the CFSP, addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training for all staff who deliver these services

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 32 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because there are significant delays in providing the initial staff training, called ACT I, to new caseworkers, and caseworkers usually are assigned caseloads prior to receiving training. This item was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama's ACT is a skill-based training designed for new child welfare employees. The Statewide Assessment reports that ACT currently consists of 11 days of skill-based classroom training and two days of computer-based training, taught over a 3 week period, with weeks in between for the child welfare caseworkers to be in the county offices. According to the Statewide Assessment, a survey of ACT groups conducted between August 2006 and March 2007 found the following:

- Approximately 51 percent of the ACT participants reported having been employed with DHR for longer than 6 months at the time they began ACT.
- Approximately 19 percent of caseworker staff reported having been employed by DHR for longer than 12 months prior to beginning the ACT training.
- Approximately 95 percent of the ACT participants said that new staff should begin the ACT training within the first 6 months of employment, with approximately 76 percent of these participants suggesting that ACT training should begin within the first 3 months of employment.
- Almost all workers who attend ACT reported having some cases assigned to them prior to beginning the training.

The Statewide Assessment notes that the lack of timeliness of training participation and the fact that caseworkers carry caseloads prior to training participation can be attributed to factors such as staff turnover, the need to ensure that cases are covered, and concerns about whether licensure or permanent status should be obtained before investing in costly training. The Statewide Assessment reports that DHR believes that the best scenario would be for new caseworkers to attend training within 3 months of employment with a minimal caseload prior to training.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that some of the larger counties in the State (Jefferson, Madison, Mobile) have their own training for staff prior to their participation in ACT. It was noted that DHR is currently assessing these programs for content to see if they can sustain their own training program within their county, so that their staff would not have duplication of material and possibly would not have to be sent to ACT.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, training is rated by local directors and managers as “Acceptable and Professional Quality,” but timeliness of the training is considered to be only “Adequate.” DHR believes that there is room for improvement. The Statewide Assessment notes that the department currently is exploring alternative ways to present the training to the participants, including distance learning ideas and options, pretesting to test out portions or all of the basic training, and post-testing to give participants ideas of their strengths and needs for their professional development plan with follow-up on achievement of goals within their plan.

The Statewide Assessment reports that Alabama uses the Pathlore Learning Management System computer program to document completion of training of individual caseworkers. The Statewide Assessment also reports that the department is currently exploring other capabilities of the Pathlore software such as using it to identify the new hires whom have not begun training.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, at least two slots are reserved for each ACT training session for private agency staff and for the Poarch Band of the Creek Indians. The Statewide Assessment notes that although the Poarch Band has not taken advantage of the training slots, the current Executive Director of the Family Services Department of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians is a former DHR director who sees the value of ACT and has pledged to send staff for future trainings.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite review reported that ACT training often is not provided until caseworkers have been on the job for several months to a year. All stakeholders noted that caseworkers have been assigned cases before they complete the ACT training. They also noted that the larger counties have the capacity to provide their own training and in those counties, new staff may be precluded from attending ACT until they complete the local training. Other counties may not allow staff to attend ACT until they complete a period of new hire probation, which is 6 months. Stakeholders reported that, as a rule, smaller counties tend to send staff to ACT sooner because they do not have other training alternatives.

Jefferson County stakeholders reported that the county has developed an internal, 12 week course and that a new caseworker is assigned cases three at a time through the training period. Jefferson County stakeholders praised this training program and, as noted in the Statewide Assessment, DHR is currently assessing local training to see if it can take the place of ACT. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders also reported that the county has an initial orientation for new caseworkers and provides them with opportunities for shadowing experienced workers. However, stakeholders in this county noted that it can take 6 to 12 months for a new caseworker to be able to receive the ACT training, and that only about two-thirds of the caseworkers are licensed. In comparison, Lee County stakeholders did not report having a local training program for new caseworkers. They reported that new caseworkers can expect to

experience delays of 1 to 3 months before they can participate in the ACT training, and that caseworkers receive a caseload prior to attending training.

Stakeholders identified several barriers to staff attendance in ACT. ACT can be offered locally, however, this is done only when there is an adequate number of new staff ready to be trained on the curriculum. When there are not enough staff, then new caseworkers must incur overnight travel in order to join training cohorts in other parts of the State. When on training travel status, new employees are expected to cover their travel expenses and be reimbursed, as well as be away from home, both of which can be a hardship to the employee. Furthermore, if a caseworker is already carrying a caseload by the time they are able to participate in ACT training, then the local office must assign the caseload to other workers, temporarily increasing peer workload.

Item 33: The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 33 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because the State does not have mandated requirements for ongoing training for all staff. This item was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR. The State has ongoing training requirements for licensed caseworkers (in order to ensure continued licensure), but there are no ongoing training requirements for caseworkers who are not licensed. The State indicates that they try to hire licensed caseworkers, however, not all caseworkers are licensed.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, ongoing training to staff is offered through a system called ACT II. The Statewide Assessment notes that the Office of Child Welfare Training currently offers six advanced curricula or ACT II training components. These are: (1) Concurrent Permanency Planning, (2) Practical CPS Training, (3) Practical Child Sexual Abuse Training, (4) Individualized Service Planning Process for Families Who Experience Substance Abuse, (5) Meeting Families' Underlying Needs Training, and (6) Supervisors Training. The Statewide Assessment also reports that all curricula from the Office of Child Welfare Training have been approved for continuing education credits from the Alabama State Board of Social Work Examiners.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, ACT II receives favorable ratings from participants and county managers. However, training resources are limited by the number of trainers available, and training is prioritized. The priorities for providing training are as follow: (1) ACT I training for new staff, (2) Group Preparation and Selection certification training, (3) Supervisor Training, and (4) Underlying Needs Training. The Statewide Assessment reports that after these priorities are addressed, additional training is provided as requested by each county office.

The county offices are responsible for requesting training for their staff as needed. As requests are made for training, the Office of Child Welfare Training schedules training sessions based upon the requests received and schedules them at a site closest to the majority of participants so that travel costs are kept to a minimum. The Pathlore Learning Management System is used to track agency

staff participation in ACT II trainings. Training also is offered to Family Options provider staff, and slots are available for the Poarch Band of the Creek Indians.

The Statewide Assessment reports that as part of State's PIP, a training curriculum was developed on concurrent/permanency planning. A training pilot was conducted and the curriculum finalized on September 30, 2003, based on feedback from the pilot. The Statewide Assessment notes that 298 supervisors and caseworkers have completed the ACT II Concurrent Permanency Planning training.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR noted that there is no required ongoing training for either caseworkers or supervisors. Many stakeholders expressed particular concern about the lack of training for supervisors. They noted that although there is a supervisor training curriculum in ACT II, it is not required for all supervisors. They also noted that because of the high level of turnover in the State, many caseworkers are being promoted to supervisory positions without sufficient clinical and management experience. Many stakeholders expressed the opinion that there is a strong connection between the quality of casework and the degree and quality of supervision provided. Several stakeholders suggested that caseworkers would do a better job if they were properly supervised.

Licensure is not a State policy or a statutory requirement, and stakeholder comments suggest that the structure and extent of ongoing training varies across counties. Jefferson County stakeholders, however, noted that all caseworkers must be licensed and that, to maintain licensure, caseworkers must participate in 30 hours of ongoing training over 2 years. Stakeholders in this county expressed generally positive views about the quality and availability of ongoing training in the county. However, several stakeholders noted that the ACT II training is not easily accessible because there is not enough of it in the county.

Lee County stakeholders reported that although licensed caseworkers assigned in the county are required to take 30 hours of ongoing training over a 2-year period, those caseworkers who are not licensed do not have that requirement. However, a few stakeholders reported that there is mandated in-house training in the county that occurs once a month, and the caseworker must sign a sheet to document attendance. They noted that the training topics are determined by both management and staff. Stakeholders in this county also stated that ACT II training is available.

Tuscaloosa County stakeholders noted that caseworkers in that county must be licensed and therefore must participate in 30 hours of ongoing training every 2 years to maintain their licensure. Stakeholders in that county indicated that they usually participate in training opportunities offered locally because they are in a college town. It also was reported that the agency encourages training and mails pamphlets to caseworkers to notify them of available training opportunities. There is a week of training for new supervisors in Montgomery, but it has a management and administrative focus, rather than a clinical focus in child welfare. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders indicated that if a caseworker or supervisor is not licensed, there are no further required hours of ongoing training.

In addition to training opportunities, a few stakeholders reported that the State has contracts funded by title IV-E with seven colleges and universities for a stipend program in social work. DHR also has an educational leave program for staff that allows up to 4 hours of leave a week for part-time and up to 20 hours a week for full-time staff pursuing B.S.W. and M.S.W. degrees.

Item 34: The State provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 34 is rated as a Strength because the State has required pre-service training for foster parents and ongoing training requirements of 15 hours of every year for regular foster homes and 30 hours every year for therapeutic homes. Pre-service completion is required before a family can accept foster children for placement. This item also was rated as a Strength in Alabama’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has been using the Group Preparation and Selection of Foster and/or Adoptive Parents (GPS) curriculum for over 10 years. GPS is a component of the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) program. The Office of Child Welfare Training conducts the GPS certification training for county, agency staff, and foster parents who will be conducting the GPS groups in the county. It is an expectation that all counties have GPS capacity. The GPS Leadership Training supports staff and foster/adoptive parents wishing to become GPS Leaders who can lead GPS groups for their county/agency. By the end of the 2-week certification training, participants are able to use the tools of GPS to enable prospective foster parents to make a mutual decision with the agency about fostering and adopting. The Statewide Assessment reports that evaluations are conducted for each week of training, and that GPS participants uniformly give the course high marks for benefit, effectiveness, and applicability to foster children.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that the Office of Child Welfare Training conducts certification in Deciding Together, which is a component of MAPP that can be conducted with one family. For a person to be certified in Deciding Together, they must first be a GPS leader, have conducted at least one group, and completed the family consultations with at least one family. Alternatively, a person can be certified in Deciding Together by shadowing another leader as they guide a family through the process. Deciding Together is particularly important in the rural counties of Alabama where a group may not be feasible.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR noted that foster parents and relatives who are licensed attend either GPS pre-service training or participate in the Deciding Together training. Stakeholders reported that foster and adoptive parents have positive perceptions of the training, and that there is little delay in getting into classes. Jefferson County stakeholders reported that one-on-one training in the home can be provided if prospective parents are unable to attend classroom sessions. Stakeholders also

noted that youth who are currently in foster care and youth who were formerly in foster care participate on a panel for GPS training for potential foster parents.

Finally, stakeholders advised that foster parents are required to complete 15 hours per year of continuing education, and that the agency has a library of materials that can be accessed by foster parents as part of their ongoing requirements.

V. SERVICE ARRAY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3X	4

Status of Service Array

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Service Array. The State was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR and was not required to address the factor in its PIP.

Item 35: The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 35 is rated as a Strength. Although there are resource concerns in some areas of the State, based on information from the Statewide Assessment and the onsite CFSR, Alabama has developed a broad array of services. This item was rated as a Strength in Alabama’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State provides an array of services that can meet the increasing challenges presented by the families and children that it serves. A major shift is underway regarding provision of intensive, in-home services to families that prevent children from being removed from their homes. In addition, intensive reunification services are being offered to families in several areas of the State to expedite a safe return home when children have been removed.

The Statewide Assessment reports that there is a continuum program offered in several counties, and that families may be referred to the continuum if removal from the home is imminent and can be prevented with intensive in-home services. Should removal take place, the continuum provider will provide the out-of-home care to the children while continuing to offer intensive treatment services to the family. Continuums are expected to expand each new fiscal year with statewide implementation by FY 2009.

The Statewide Assessment also reports that DHR currently has permanency projects in several counties, with other counties to be added in the coming year. Under the permanency project, service providers offer intensive in-home assessment and treatment services for families whose children have been placed outside of the home. The providers are able to make accurate assessments as to whether families are viable for reunification. If not, additional family supports are sought for possible future permanent placements.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, none of the QA reviews that were conducted from April 2005 through March 2006 identified the systemic factor of Service Array as an Area Needing Improvement or a “Both” (a term used by agency QA instruments to indicate both a Strength and a need in the county reviews).

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that Alabama has a strong array of services available to assist families. They noted that there is a particular emphasis in the State on maintaining children safely in their own homes and suggested that the service array is geared toward supporting this practice. Stakeholders noted that family preservation services are effective in maintaining children in their own homes and in providing aftercare services for families in which children have been reunified.

Many stakeholders, however, also identified some concerns regarding the following services in targeted areas of the State:

- Inpatient drug treatment for youth
- Child psychiatrists
- Methamphetamine treatment
- Foster parent support
- Domestic violence services and shelters

Item 36: The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State’s CFSP

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 36 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement. There is a discrepancy between the larger and smaller counties with regard to access to critical services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment. There also are long waiting lists for both children and parents to access some services. This item was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, services are provided to children and families through contracts with private providers in all regions of the State. Children are expected to be served in their own region, unless the permanency goal is other than reunification and there is no home available in the region that can meet the child's special needs. In these cases, the Office of Child Welfare Consultation must give special permission to place a child outside their home region. The Statewide Assessment also notes that residential services are awarded on a statewide basis, but the department attempts to ensure that each region of the State has, within its confines, an array of providers to meet regional needs.

Two of the specialty placement services that have been developed over the past 2 years are the programs for sexual behaviors and females with self-injurious behaviors. All programs under contract providing treatment for sexual behaviors must offer placement services in a single occupancy room. One of the programs also has a foster care component for children with sexually reactive issues and children that are ready to step down from the residential arena.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the State will continue to expand continuum-type reunification and prevention services until they are accessible on a statewide basis. TFC and the Family Options prevention as well as reunification programs are already available statewide. Foreign language translation services are available statewide, either by telephone or actual face-to-face services. Some remote counties may not have access to face-to-face translation services, but this gap will be addressed in a RFPs scheduled to be released later this calendar year.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Many stakeholders commenting on this item during the Onsite Review expressed the opinion that the State has been effective in building a service array that ensures the ability to develop creative responses to the service needs of children and families and has made efforts to ensure that smaller jurisdictions are covered in terms of resources. However, other stakeholders noted that services are not available at the level that is needed in all areas of the State, and lack of transportation services can often be a barrier to the ability of families to access key services associated with their case plan. Two areas noted by stakeholders that DHR is continuing to address are availability of the continuum model in only nine counties at the present time and the need for far more responsive, culturally, and linguistically appropriate services for the growing Hispanic population in the State. In particular, there is a need for service providers who speak Spanish.

Stakeholders' opinions regarding waiting lists for services differed. Lee County stakeholders noted that most of the time, there are no waiting lists. However, stakeholders in Jefferson County identified waiting lists for residential treatment facilities and inpatient substance abuse treatment. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders indicated that in their county, there is a lack of inpatient psychiatric treatment services for children.

Item 37: The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency

 X **Strength** **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 37 is rated as a Strength because State and local agencies have mechanisms in place that facilitate individualization of services. The majority of the stakeholders interviewed agreed that the State makes concerted efforts to ensure that services are individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families being served by the agency. This item also was rated a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the ISP drives all placements and the needed services for each individual family and child. Each individual need of a child or family is considered by the ISP team in deciding what services are needed and are provided. If the ISP team determines that existing contracted services do not meet a particular service need, the county department can authorize the service. The Statewide Assessment notes that the task of individualizing services is a county DHR responsibility as an integral part of the ISP team.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, QA reviews during the Federal period under review for the 2007 CFSR indicate some inconsistency in the reviewed counties’ “capacity to individualize” and “coordinate services,” although Alabama determines that its overall ability to individualize service remains a strength as determined by the 2002 CFSR.

In addition, information found in item 35 of the Statewide Assessment is applicable to this item. The department notes that it is attempting to meet the challenges of a growing multilingual society. The influx of Hispanics, especially in the northeastern section of the State, has caused an increased need for translation and interpreting services. After-hours coverage is a requirement, especially in service cases, when family stability is at risk. The department continues to modify the contract to provide emergency services, as well as written documentation translation.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the agency makes concerted efforts to individualize services to meet the needs of children and families. These stakeholders noted that individualization of services is a requirement of the ISP. Stakeholders also noted that there are flexible funds to pay for services that are not part of the core services provided under agency contracts. Several stakeholders reported that each county has a resource specialist to assist workers in tailoring services directly to the needs of children and families.

Stakeholders in all counties commented that when specific services are not available in a particular community, many of the providers and caseworkers are creative in ensuring that the necessary services are received by the child or family. Lee County stakeholders reported that the agency partners with other agencies and businesses that help provide for the special needs of families. Through flexible funding, stakeholders reported that the agency has the capacity to immediately arrange for utility payments and other concrete

needs to prevent the removal of children from their homes. Tuscaloosa County stakeholders reported that the local radio station in the county raised money for foster children.

VI. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2	3	4X

Status of Agency Responsiveness to the Community

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community. Alabama also was in substantial conformity with this systemic factor in its 2002 CFSR and was not required to address the factor in its PIP. Specific findings in the 2007 CFSR for each item included in this systemic factor and the reasons for item ratings are presented below.

Item 38: In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with Tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 38 is rated as a Strength because the State engages in ongoing consultation to develop and update the CFSP through various surveys, special studies, and collaborative efforts with internal and external partners.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the Alabama DHR has an ongoing process of community collaboration that is achieved through the use of its QA processes. There are 67 active local QA Committees that routinely review case practice, conduct stakeholder interviews, and process satisfaction surveys in order to give feedback to the county. In addition, there is a State QA Committee that looks at policy, practice, and other issues from a statewide perspective. The Office of Quality Assurance conducts State Quality Assurance Reviews in all 67 counties at least once every 3 years. The QA process provides the opportunity for input from families, including age-appropriate children and youth.

The DHR Legal Office has been working closely with the AOC to develop training that was provided to juvenile judges, guardians *ad litem*, DHR attorneys, and other attorneys throughout the State to improve the time frames within which children in the custody of the department are able to achieve permanency.

The Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parent Association is an invaluable asset to the department. On April 20, 2004, Governor Riley signed into law the Foster Parent Bill of Rights and the Act went into effect July 1, 2004. Currently, policies have been revised to incorporate the provisions of the Act as appropriate. Input on the development of the policies was received from foster parents, the Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, and DHR county directors. The Office of Permanency also participates in quarterly meetings with the Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parent Associations regional representatives. Meetings are centered on providing regional representatives with training to assist adoptive and foster parents in retention and recruitment.

As part of the evaluation and QA process for the Family Preservation and Support Services programs (Family Options programs, Family Service Centers, and Healthy Families program), a peer review is conducted at each site every 2 years. One of the major components of the peer review is the focus group. Stakeholders from within the community, including representatives from the courts, school systems, health and mental health care providers, other service providers, and community members at large are invited to attend.

In addition, item 39 of the Statewide Assessment provided the following examples of outcomes resulting from collaborative efforts: (1) improvement in the timeliness of hearings and the wording in court orders, (2) development of caseworker guidelines for working with the courts, (3) policy development regarding safety plans, and (4) implementation of the Foster Parent Bill of Rights.

The DHR FSD maintains its relationship with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. The Tribe is routinely involved in stakeholder discussions for the Annual Progress and Services Report. There is ongoing collaboration at the State and county level. In a current effort, Family Services has facilitated discussions with the Alabama Medicaid Agency toward seeking additional funding for the Tribe through Medicaid reimbursement for specified services. As a result of this discussion, the Tribe will soon be able to claim Medicaid reimbursement for 100 percent of costs for children it places in residential treatment facilities.

In addition to input opportunities provided to youth through the QA process, Family Services supports local youth advisory councils. Youth input is routinely sought as part of the continuous quality improvement process.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Several stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that at the State level, DHR collaborates with many stakeholders in the development of the title IV-B of the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP). This process is supported by numerous, local collaborative efforts for planning and service provision. Stakeholders also noted that the Poarch Tribe is a key stakeholder in the title IV-B planning process and its involvement includes input into and review of the draft plan.

Item 39: The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered pursuant to the CFSP

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 39 is rated as a Strength because the State consults with the State QA Committee and other community stakeholders to update the CFSP annually and develop the annual reports of progress and services. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR is required to submit a Federally-required Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR). As part of the reporting process, stakeholders are invited to participate in a focus group to discuss the progress, strengths, and needs of the child welfare system that is then captured in the report. This is one of several ways (e.g., State and local QA, ASFA Task Force, interagency collaboration, etc.) that DHR solicits a broad range of input into the department's child welfare system.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that the State regularly collaborates on developing the APSR. Stakeholders noted, in particular, that the State QA Committee submits annual reports to DHR, and the agency is responsive to the recommendations offered in the report regarding system and practice improvements.

Item 40: The State's services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or Federally assisted programs serving the same population

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 40 is rated as a Strength because the State has mechanisms in place to ensure coordination of services and benefits. The State established the Multi-Needs Program (MNP), which is a legislative initiative that involves a multidisciplinary approach with a county team staffing and includes education, DHR, public health, juvenile justice, and mental health. This item also was rated as a Strength in Alabama's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR continuously works with other agencies, both State and Federal, to ensure that the needs of children and families are being met. Working protocols between county DHR offices and local and State agencies have been developed as well as protocols between State DHR and other State and Federal programs and agencies.

The Statewide Assessment notes that, at the local level, there are functioning multi-needs and multidisciplinary teams that meet on a regular basis. State QA reviewers have seen evidence of comingled funding between DHR, the Department of Mental Health/Mental

Retardation, and the Department of Education to improve support for children in the custody of DHR. The Statewide Assessment also notes that the Children's Policy Council (through the Department of Children's Affairs) assesses needs and resources in communities and tries to develop resources to meet local needs. These policy councils are now in all 67 counties.

In addition, as indicated in the Statewide Assessment, most local agency offices have working protocols with local boards of education and law enforcement agencies. DHR also has collaborated with the Department of Youth Services (DYS) to develop a protocol that delineates how the two agencies will work together when children are being released from DYS and will be transferred to DHR. Agency collaboration also is ongoing with the Child Support Enforcement Division to ensure that counties are applying for child support benefits for children in the custody of the department. The Federal Parent Locator System is used to identify absent parents.

The Statewide Assessment also reports ongoing coordination with Alabama's CIP. It was noted that this collaboration has affected a number of program areas including child protective services, foster care, and title IV-E eligibility. The results of intensive work on improving timeliness and language in court orders was seen in the positive outcome of the recent Federal title IV-E Eligibility Review conducted in July 2006.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DHR collaborated closely with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, which is the only Federally-recognized Indian Tribe in the State of Alabama, to develop the Indian Child Welfare Policy and Procedures. In addition, DHR coordinates with the Alabama Medicaid Agency in the use of funds available through various Medicaid programs for children for whom the department provides child welfare services.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item expressed the opinion that DHR has aggressively pursued collaborative opportunities with key stakeholders in order to build a State system that supports children and families. They identified the following as examples of service coordination efforts:

- Child welfare has improved involvement in the activities of TANF and Child Support Enforcement programs.
- There is a strong linkage between TANF and Independent Living Program activities (e.g., the Healthy Marriage Program works with teens around issues such as choosing partners and building lasting relationships).
- Working with the Medicaid program includes a partnership in the plan to revamp the State's Medicaid information system, with DHR involved on the policy and steering committees.
- Working with the legislative committee on girls and women in the criminal justice system includes juvenile justice, mental health, and other DHR partners exploring ways to help incarcerated teens and women re-enter communities and reconnect to their children.
- There is a legislative initiative for the creation of the MNP as a separate, small agency formed as a collaborative approach to address the short-term placement concerns of multiple, special needs children. Placements are typically 3 months, but can last as long as 18 months and serve children who would generally need the services of two or more agencies. All agencies contribute

funds that are co-mingled with Children First money. The initiative is grounded in a multi-disciplinary approach with a county team staffing and includes education, DHR, public health, juvenile justice, and mental health.

VII. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		In Substantial Conformity	
		1	2X	3

Status of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with this systemic factor. The State was in substantial conformity with this factor in its 2002 CFSR and was not required to address the factor in its PIP.

Item 41: The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and child care institutions which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 41 is rated as a Strength because the State has established and implemented clear standards for licensing foster family homes and child care institutions. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR has developed the following documents that pertain to standards for foster family homes and child care institutions:

- *Minimum Standards for Foster Family Homes*
- *Minimum Standards for Child Placing Agencies*
- *Therapeutic Foster Care Manual*
- *Minimum Standards for Residential Child Care Facilities*

In addition, the Statewide Assessment reports that the “Application and Home Study” section of the *Adoption Policy and Procedure Manual* delineates the requirements that families wishing to adopt must meet.

The State requires pre-service training for foster and adoptive parents and also requires that foster parents must successfully complete 15 hours of continuing education in order to maintain their approval status.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, DHR does not have a policy that provides for a maximum amount of time that it should take for a home study approval to be completed. DHR recognizes that this will be an issue it will need to address pursuant to the Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act of 2006 expectation that home studies be completed in 60 days. This does not include the training component that is required by many States (including Alabama).²

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR indicated that DHR has licensing standards for group homes, child care institutions, and child placing agencies. The child placing agencies cover regular foster care, therapeutic foster care, adoption, transitional living, and independent living homes.

With regard to group homes and child care institutions, stakeholders reported that new facilities are licensed with a 6-month permit and within 6 months the agency returns to make a final inspection. The facility is then granted a 2-year license only if the child care facility is meeting minimum standards. If the child care facility is not meeting standards, nor has children residing in the facility during the final inspection, DHR has options to give another 6-month permit, 1-year license, suspension of placement, or termination of license. During those 2 years, there are visits to the facility by contracting staff, the resource development unit, and the licensing unit if a licensing issue or concern arises. If any issues arise, DHR has the option to move to a one-year license.

Item 42: The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or child care institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds

 X Strength _____ Area Needing Improvement

Item 42 is rated as a Strength because the State has consistent standards for licensing or approving child care institutions or foster family homes. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment

According to the Statewide Assessment, all standards apply to all foster families (traditional, therapeutic, related, etc.). The Statewide Assessment notes that one exception to these standards is provided in the Provisional Foster Home policy, which allows individuals with preexisting relationships with children in their care to become provisionally approved. All standards must be met by the end of

² Information provided in the Statewide Assessment was not accurate. The State has corrected this issue as indicated in Administrative Letter # 7215 dated September 27, 2006. This information was obtained after the Onsite Review was conducted.

the 6-month provisional approval period. The Statewide Assessment notes that the agency does not claim title IV-E funds for children placed in provisionally approved homes.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that licensing standards are applied equally for all providers, although they noted that there is “provisional” foster care for families who are related to the child in their care. Stakeholders reported that provisional approval of a foster care home still requires that the agency complete Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) checks, child abuse and neglect history checks, and a home safety check. In addition, the family must provide three references.

However, a relative can assume care of the child without being licensed, although the relative does not receive a foster care payment. Relatives are eligible to receive benefits from TANF and can receive assistance with purchasing beds or other items and services needed to support the child in their care. The State clarified that provisionally approved homes do not have to be related by blood, but there must be some existing relationship between the child and family. The home also should be in the same community as the child. Under State policy, the family has 6 months to complete all the requirements of a regular home, including GPS training, medical checks, background checks, etc. No extension can be granted to the 6-month time limit.

Item 43: The State complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances as related to licensing or approving foster care and adoptive placements and has in place a case planning process that includes provisions for addressing the safety of foster care and adoptive placements for children

Strength **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 43 is rated as a Strength because the State has a process in place for completing criminal background clearances. This item also was rated as a Strength in the State’s 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama Code provides for the department’s Office of Criminal History Checks (OCHC) to conduct criminal background checks. In November 2000, the Alabama Legislature passed Act 2000-775, allowing the State to complete criminal history background checks for licensed child-placing agencies and child/adult day care facilities to ensure that current licensees, license and volunteer applicants, prospective employees, current employees, and volunteers are suitable for employment, to perform volunteer work, or hold a license, permit, approval, or certification. Checks also confirm that individuals have not been convicted of a crime that bears upon their fitness to provide care or have responsibility for the safety or well-being of children, the elderly, or individuals with disabilities.

The Statewide Assessment notes that applicants complete a two-part criminal history application form, consent and release form, and a Mandatory Criminal History Check Notice. The OCHC receives a copy of the forms, and the Alabama Bureau of Investigation (ABI) receives the original forms along with two fingerprint cards, one card for ABI and one for the FBI. The case data are entered into the Criminal History Check database in the OCHC. ABI processes the ABI card and electronically forwards the FBI card to the FBI. After fingerprint processing is completed, reports are sent from ABI to OCHC. The OCHC then determines if the case is clear and issues suitability letters. If a case requires investigation of charges and convictions, the OCHC will investigate and issue suitability or unsuitability letters. Letters of unsuitability are issued when case or background checks indicate the need. The client has a right to request a Reversal of Determination of Unsuitability within 30 days of the date of notification. If the reversal is denied, the client has a right to request an administrative hearing.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, a survey conducted of resource staff found that the length of time it takes to obtain letters of suitability is a barrier to more timely approval of foster/adoptive family applicants. Manual fingerprint cases take a longer period of time to be processed by ABI; the general turnaround time is 12 or more weeks. Live Scan electronic prints can be processed as quickly as the same day or shortly thereafter, but can take up to 2 weeks to process. Live Scan printing is recommended for emergency cases as well as ICPC and adoption cases. The office is currently developing a special expedited envelope for all counties as well as a change of custody envelope for submission of fingerprint cards. Instruction will be provided to the field on these two new processes in the near future.

There are procedures in place to ensure that Federal funds are claimed only for homes that meet the Federal criminal background check requirements. The Office of Residential Licensing reviews records for criminal history check documentation when they conduct their review of compliance with other standards requirements. According to the Statewide Assessment, the last title IV-E review revealed concerns related to criminal history checks that have all been addressed and resolved.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that DHR requires criminal background clearances for all licensed foster homes and for staff of licensed child care facilities. They noted that there are FBI, ABI, and CPS registry and records checks.

Stakeholders also noted, however, that there are significant delays in processing background checks that include manual fingerprinting rather than Live Scan procedures. The Live Scan method has been helpful in shortening this part of the process, but is not available in all parts of the State.

Item 44: The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 44 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because the current recruitment mechanisms have not addressed the need for ethnic and racially diverse foster homes reflective of the State's foster care population. This item was rated as a Strength in the State's 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State Quality Assurance review system includes an indicator that examines whether there are an adequate number of foster homes in each county. During the review period for the CFSR, State QA conducted 17 county sustainability reviews. In six of these counties, additional foster homes were identified as a need.

The Statewide Assessment also notes that DHR recognizes that it needs to improve efforts to expand the racial/ethnic/cultural makeup of the foster families approved by the agency (does not include those approved and accessed through child placing agencies) in order to reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of the State's foster care population. As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the agency has made efforts to help counties improve their understanding of Multi-Ethnic Placement Act and Inter-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA and IEPA), particularly in the area of targeted recruitment of foster and adoptive parents. In addition, efforts have been made to ensure that key information and documents regarding adopting and fostering children are available in Spanish. The Statewide Assessment notes that when families who are monolingual in Spanish make contact with members of the Recruitment Response Team, conference calls are set up utilizing the services of the foreign language translator currently holding a contract with DHR. The Statewide Assessment also notes that, since the first CFSR, the State Quality Assurance Committee conducted a special study on the Latino population in the State and that concluded with several recommended strategies for local recruitment efforts.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, the availability of post-adoptive services is viewed as critical in supporting families during the adoption process and is an important recruitment tool. Alabama currently contracts for post-adoptive services. APAC has provided statewide training support, educational materials, a Buddy and Respite program, summer camp for children waiting or adopted, counseling services, crisis intervention, and a hotline. The contract was increased in 2006 to include marketing and recruitment services, an annual conference for 300 adoption and provider staff, and a staff position for responding to inquiries made to the State DHR hotline and website. Additionally, adoption assistance provides post-adoptive support. Agency staff are often unfamiliar with the Adoption Assistance Program, so there are efforts to educate staff and stakeholders on the availability of financial assistance for special needs children.

The Statewide Assessment reports that, since the first CFSR, the State's contract with Family Finders has been terminated and, in response, a Recruitment Task Force formed to help develop a direction and plan for recruitment and retention activities around the State. The Task Force, with onsite training and TA from the AdoptUsKids National Resource Center, developed a statewide recruitment and retention strategic plan in October 2004. Additional training and TA has been provided by the AdoptUsKids National Resource Center in an effort to prepare county resource staff to recruit and respond to families wanting to parent children in Alabama's foster care system. The Statewide Assessment also reports that upon the termination of the Family Finders contract, the website and toll-free recruitment hotline were moved to the FSD at the State DHR.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the Office of Resource Management released two RFPs last fiscal year in an effort to help Mobile County and Jefferson County with their recruitment of foster family homes along with conducting training and completing home studies. No agency responses were received to the RFP for Jefferson County (which was released twice). Three agency responses were received for the RFP for Mobile County.

As indicated in the Statewide Assessment, all 67 counties and the State office work together in diligent recruitment of foster and/or adoptive homes. Activities that the agency has pursued in this effort include the following:

- Participation in National Adoption Day events at the State and local levels
- Heart Gallery Alabama
- Adoption Month proclamations from the Office of the Governor
- Special adoption dockets

A significant portion of the 2006 Adoption Incentive Funds were used to fund a variety of recruitment efforts, including the following:

- Counties were allowed to use funds to pay for local advertising.
- The State DHR Office of Adoption put a statewide billboard campaign in the field using the “You don’t have to be perfect to be a perfect parent” theme of the AdoptUsKids and the US Ad Council campaign.
- A bid was released and accepted that provided novelty and other recruitment exhibit supplies.
- Laptop computers and LCD projectors were purchased to be used in recruitment and public awareness activities conducted by State DHR staff.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Most stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR indicated that although Alabama has a statewide recruitment campaign, most of the recruitment activities take place at the county level. Each local office has at least a part-time person devoted to recruitment, while larger counties have one or two recruiter positions. At the time of the review, it was stakeholders’ perception that two recruitment positions in Jefferson County were vacant; however, the State indicates that the staff were reorganized and duties were divided up among several staff.

Stakeholders shared that there are a variety of recruitment activities; however, most stakeholders expressed the opinion that there are not enough foster homes, the quality of many of the current homes is a concern, and current foster homes do not reflect the cultural, ethnic, and racial makeup of the foster care population. Additionally, some stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the number of children placed in homes where the child’s primary language is not spoken and the lack of interpretive services needed to ensure that families have the level of services needed to support them.

Stakeholders indicated that there is a need to train agency staff about the importance of recruiting families that match the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of children in foster care.

Item 45: The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children

Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 45 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because of delays in facilitating placements in a timely manner across jurisdictions. This item was rated as a Strength in the 2002 CFSR.

Statewide Assessment Information

According to the Statewide Assessment, a review of some of the information available related to State-placed adoptions revealed that about half of these adoptions are made out-of-State. The Statewide Assessment notes that out-of-State placements can delay achievement of permanency because of the ICPC process that is required. Recognizing the large number of out-of-State placements being made by the State office led to a 100 percent review of the families listed on the report of “Approved Adoptive Providers Awaiting Placement.” This review also was conducted as a first step for automating the database of available families and making it possible for out-based placement staff to be able to see home study files without having to travel to the State Program Office to see the actual record. This review has identified some issues in the approving and record keeping process. Strategies for addressing these issues are being developed.

The Statewide Assessment reports that the ICPC for the State of Alabama is governed by 10 Articles in Alabama Code that mirror the tenets of the national compact. The Statewide Assessment notes that Alabama has experienced some issues with bordering States related to complex ICPC cases. Close collaboration with those States, via phone, e-mail, and written correspondence, has helped to remedy issues that arise, and deputy compact administrators for bordering States have agreed to send cases with specific issues to one another for consultation and resolution. This has been beneficial for all States involved.

The Alabama ICPC office has experienced delays in receipt of completed home studies due to delays in receipt of ABI/FBI background clearances. The DHR Office of Criminal History has been working with the Department of Public Safety on issues related to ABI/FBI clearances. Currently, DHR is planning to issue an RFP to contract this service through a private provider to complete Live Scan on ICPC resources.

Stakeholder Interview Information

Several stakeholders commenting on this item during the onsite CFSR expressed the opinion that children are placed in adoptive homes across jurisdictions, including in other States. They noted that adoptive resources in other counties or States are used by the State, along with activities such as the Heart Gallery and adoption lists.

Most stakeholders agreed that the ICPC presents a barrier in the use of cross-jurisdictional resources for permanent placements because it slows the process considerably. Although DHR has an ICPC processing system in place, timeliness in completing criminal background checks on relative placements in other States continues to be reported as problematic.