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Comments submitted electronically to CBComments@acf.hss.gov

The California Department of Social Services is pleased to provide feedback on, and support of, the Administration for Children and Families efforts to improve the current federal Child and Family Services Review process. In addition to providing these comments, California has been actively participating in the work of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) and American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) to identify better ways to review, monitor and promote accountability of the child welfare system. California fully supports the recommendations provided by these organizations.

Since 2002, California has utilized a quality assurance system that relies on quantitative and qualitative data to promote better outcomes for children and families served by the child welfare agencies. This process has allowed us to work collaboratively at the state and local levels with courts, tribes, care and service providers and consumers to identify areas of strength or that need improvement in each of our jurisdictions on a continuous basis. California's quality assurance system is a living process with each cycle of reviews improving upon the last in an ongoing effort to reflect the constantly changing processes of delivering child welfare services. It is through the lens of continuous change and the lessons learned that California provides to you the following comments.

1. How could ACF best promote and measure continuous quality improvement in child welfare outcomes and the effective functioning of systems that promote positive outcomes for children and families?

Response: The CFSP and its PIP should be folded into and complement the state's CFSP and APSR processes resulting in one overarching plan for a five-year, continuous quality-improvement cycle. As they currently exist, these processes can be redundant and require a significant amount of resources and collaboration with the same stakeholders. We believe that there is more value in developing a process whereby the cycle of assessment and improvement is continuous and not limited to

the two year PIP cycle. By blending the CFSP/APSR process and the CFSR/PIP states will have the ability to assess the effectiveness of systematic change continuously and have the opportunity to refocus valuable resources to new areas as necessary.

The method by which a state's performance is measured should be revised to support states efforts to continuously improve. We recommend that the federal government eliminate the 75th percentile methodology and associated data measures in support of those being proposed by NAPCWA/APHSA. This promotes greater accountability by the state to continuously improve as the baseline and subsequent performance on the outcomes is limited to only that state.

The federal government should incentivize system improvements and penalize states only in the most egregious of circumstances.

2. To what extent should data or measures from national child welfare databases (e.g., the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System) be used in a Federal monitoring process and what measures are important for State/Tribal/local accountability?

Response: California continues to support the ongoing improvement of its child welfare system and value of promoting positive outcomes for children and families which stemmed from the federal review process. However, the current data utilized for the CFSR does not allow for the level of analysis that would provide states the ability to better understand the influences brought forth through practice change. For an effective national dialogue to take place, data must be gathered and analyzed in a way that captures the differences between the populations that states serve. Use of longitudinal data by the federal government provides for a broader look at a state's performance and trends which promotes better accountability for all. California has developed and utilizes an enhanced set of data that provide for a longitudinal view of the performance in each of the federal data measures allowing for robust evaluation of information. We agree with American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)/National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) recommendations for outcome measures, process measures, and additional optional indicators. In particular, it is critical that entry rates be included in any analysis of outcomes from foster care, and that measures based on exit cohorts not be used to monitor permanency.

We agree with APHSA/NAPCWA in that data should be gathered and analyzed in a manner that facilitates understanding of how one area of practice affects another either positively or negatively in simple, accurate formats that are easily understood and provide a clear picture of how well a state system is functioning. The use of principal components analysis should be abandoned. It is critical that data are understood and can be analyzed by front-line supervisors and workers to inform practice. States should be able to disaggregate data down to a county or local office

level. The current utilization of the AFCARS and NCANDS data profiles prohibits this type of analysis.

3. What role should the child welfare case management information system or systems that States/Tribes/local agencies use for case management or quality assurance purposes play in a Federal monitoring process?

Response: There are benefits and concerns about the utilization of administrative data captured by a state's information system. The ability to collect information at the child level enables states to analyze information in both an aggregate and disaggregate way and inform policy and practice. The drawback to using *only* the state's SACWIS system as the means to collect administrative data is that the process for making SACWIS changes most often occurs years after the practice is implemented. This is primarily driven by the federal process for approving changes to the SACWIS system and the time needed for development, training and implementation. In many instances, system change is years behind the practice and does not allow for analysis of the impact that practice had upon the outcome. With this in mind we would suggest consideration be given to utilization of other data sets that might provide useful information about emerging practices.

The federal government should continue to assess the effectiveness of the state quality assurance (QA) system for federal oversight purposes. The QA program that a state has in place should be relied upon to measure improvement, drive state performance, and meet federal review and accountability requirements. The QA system should rely upon both qualitative and quantitative information in its assessment to determine the strengths and areas needing improvement of local jurisdictions. Additionally, a state QA system relies on a continuous evaluative cycle to inform policy and practice. This provides a more robust method to evaluate a systems performance across the state than is possible with the current three jurisdiction onsite review and a small case sampling.

4. What roles should State/Tribal/ local child welfare agencies play in establishing targets for improvement and monitoring performance towards those targets? What role should other stakeholders, such as courts, clients and other child-serving agencies play?

Response: State/tribal/local child welfare agencies are best able to assess their capacity and know how much change is reasonable within a given period of time. These agencies should set their own targets for improvement, with federal government input and approval. This is especially important in systems where the state has oversight and the programs are administered locally. In collaboration, the state and local child welfare agencies can identify trends to guide the local agency so that efforts and resources are focused in areas where they will have the most impact over time to improve performance at all organizational and practice levels. Improvements at the local levels will allow for greater flexibility and accountability while moving outcome improvements statewide.

The existing CFSR and PIP processes, along with the state's QA system have improved collaboration with a multitude of stakeholders including parents, youth, the courts and service providers. One of the bigger challenges with the current CFSR process is not with engaging stakeholders in setting performance targets, but rather asking these same stakeholders to be accountable to their role in system improvements. The successes rest with the degree they can be held accountable or are willing to be responsible for them. An environment where resources and funding are stretched also creates barriers to full engagement. Decisions are made to resource out the core functions for many social service programs including health and mental health with little time available to devote to resourcing a project that is perceived as the responsibility of the child welfare agency. What is needed is a renewed effort at the federal level to develop outcome measures and guidance across these interdependent systems to support cooperation and a shared responsibility for the children and families that we all serve.

5. In what ways should targets and performance goals be informed by and integrated with other Federal child welfare oversight efforts?

Response: We strongly encourage the federal government to support all suggestions provided by APHSA/NAPCWA to integrate as many planning and oversight activities as possible to reduce duplication. We would highlight the following:

- 1) Integrating the Self-Assessment, CFSR/PIP and CFSP/APSR into one process with one streamlined document for planning, implementing, measuring and reporting purposes.
- 2) The IV-E review may need to stand alone as a compliance review that relates to the whole system, although it could be an added component to a selected number of case reviews.

We further encourage the federal government to work across systems at the federal level to identify common programmatic goals and outcomes to improve cross jurisdictional accountability and reduce redundant planning activities.

6. What specific strategies, supports, incentives, or penalties are needed to ensure continued quality improvement and achievement of positive outcomes for children and families that are in substantial conformity with Federal child welfare laws?

Response: Penalties are designed to be punitive, not to improve performance. However, financial incentives, such as the recent federal adoption incentives, are an optimal way for motivating change across states. These financial incentives recognize and encourage building on the programs and practices that have proven effective. Incentives could be tied to achieving outcome measures and can be leveraged effectively with the state legislature to increase child welfare allocations.

Threatening the funds for the resources needed to make improvements often forces states to become defensive and leads them to planning and allocating resources to avoid the loss of funds. Penalties do not support innovative solutions and setting goals that could potentially improve outcomes. In addition, loss of funds or the threat of loss promotes adversarial relationships between states and the federal government, generates negative effects for staff morale and potentially leads to wasted time and high attorneys' fees in an effort to alleviate penalties.

We further support the recommendations made by APHSA/NAPCWA regarding specific improvement strategies:

7. In light of the ability of Tribes to directly operate title IV–E programs through recent changes in the statute, in what ways, if any, should a Federal review process focus on services delivered to Indian children?

Response: The Tribes should have the opportunity to conduct a review on their own and the federal government should provide the consultation and technical assistance required to develop an adequate QA system.

8. Are there examples of other review protocols, either in child welfare or related fields, in which Tribal/State/ local governments participate that might inform CB's approach to reviewing child welfare systems?

Response: The federal government could look at how state-supervised, county-administered states function in collaboration with their counties to inform ACF's approach to reviewing the child welfare system.

California appreciates this opportunity to comment and looks forward to working with our federal partners to improve outcomes for children and families served by our child welfare services system.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

GREGORY E. ROSE
Deputy Director