



May 20, 2011

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Children's Bureau
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Administration for Children and Families
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Comments submitted electronically to CBComments@acf.hhs.gov

RE: Comments on CFSR Federal Register Notice

The County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) is pleased to submit our responses to questions posed by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) as it contemplates changes to State Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR) process. CWDA has also engaged in the work of the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) in their development of recommendations for improving the CFSRs, and we support the recommendations put forth by those organizations.

California counties administer the child welfare program through the 58 county welfare departments, with state oversight by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). California has a robust quality review system that is data-driven and utilizes broad stakeholder involvement to effectuate continuous improvement in our child welfare program. The state and counties have worked in partnership to improve safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for children and families served by the program. As a result of these state-mandated quality improvement efforts, and after participating in two federal CFSRs, we have learned much about the value of continuous quality improvement (CQI), and how a well-structured CQI system can bring needed positive change to child welfare programs. These "lessons learned" can help inform both state-level and federal-level CQI efforts and strategies.

We respond below to the specific questions posed by the federal administration. Our responses highlight priority areas for consideration and are aligned with the framework proposed by APHSA and NAPCWA.

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?

The existing federal CFSR currently measures the extent to which each state has an adequate quality assurance system. Requiring both a state-level system and a separate, federal on-site review and assessment process, however, is redundant and inefficient and it unnecessarily bifurcates scarce resources of state and county staff. With every federal review, a significant amount of resources must be directed towards intensive activities that include data review, on-site stakeholder convenings, and case-level reviews. California mirrored its own quality improvement process to that of the federal government. As a result, all counties already perform similar activities to the existing CFSR process, with state oversight, including stakeholder engagement, case reviews, self assessments, and development of local improvement plans.

We support the recommendations of APHSA/NAPCWA to enable states to use established CQI processes to identify strengths and areas needing improvements and serve as the basis for statewide system improvement efforts. This would eliminate parallel processes of a federal review and state/local reviews, since state and local entities must have an approved CQI process under the CFSR. State CQI processes can be validated by the federal administration and should incorporate elements already found in systems such as California's, which includes data-driven self-assessments, qualitative feedback obtained through peer quality case reviews, broad stakeholder involvement and participation, and a plan for improvement. Federal CQI rules should encourage states to improve from their own baselines with targets for improvement that are reasonably attainable.

We encourage moving to a five-year cycle of improvement planning so states can work towards meaningful improvement and to give sufficient time to establish necessary policies, secure needed funding, and implement practice changes that allow for improvements. We also support folding in the state's CFSR and Program Improvement Plan (PIP) into the Annual Progress Services Report (APSR) to reduce multiple reporting and allow for continuous discussion and reporting of statewide strategies leading to improved outcomes. The concept would in many ways mirror California's process, where counties develop multi-year System Improvement Plans (SIPs) with child welfare stakeholder and DSS input, and these plans are submitted to and approved by county Boards of Supervisors. On an annual basis, counties submit updates on their progress to the state.

A strong CQI process encourages states to improve as stakeholders with vested interest in the outcomes are directly involved in the planning and delivery of services, and ultimately have a sense of ownership of the outcomes. To further promote CQI, the federal administration could

provide technical assistance, tools, guidance and resources where necessary to help states improve their CQI processes. We also support the APHSA/NAPCWA recommendation that states select a limited number of outcomes, for example three outcomes, for focused improvement activities, as the current process requires states to often focus on several areas for improvements at the same time. This more targeted approach is very much the concept used in California's CQI system, based on the principle that a focus on too many outcomes spreads resources thin, while focusing on three outcomes for improvement enables more intensive work in those areas most in need of improvement. It is also important to allow states and local entities, in partnership with stakeholders, to identify priority areas for improvement, so they remain committed to support the strategies that will yield improvements.

2. To what extent should data or measures from national child welfare databases be used in a Federal monitoring process and what measures are important for State/Tribal/local accountability?

We urge adoption of APHSA/NAPCWA recommendations concerning changes to 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 also strongly support the APHSA/NAPCWA position, "data or measures from the nation's child welfare databases should only be used by each state to look at its own performance and to set improvement goal against its own baseline. These standards should be state-specific and not result in national standards." It is simply impossible to make cross-state comparisons. In California, even cross-county comparisons are not possible due to differing demographic populations served and local resources. Cross-state comparisons are not possible as states vary greatly in their financing and operations of child welfare programs. Holding states accountable to national standards serves as a disincentive, as such standards have little meaning and connection to the state's specific data and performance. At worst, national standards lead to misleading information about state performance that may inappropriately result in federal fiscal penalties.

CWDA encourages the use of outcome measures that help all stakeholders understand the meaning of the data and inter-relatedness of the data measures. It is critical for policy makers, child welfare workers and supervisory staff, and community stakeholders to understand what data say in order to have meaningful discussion on strategies for improvement. In particular, the use of principal components analysis should be abandoned. In California, data from our statewide child welfare case management system is critical in drilling down to county-specific performance; however, AFCARS and NCANDS does not allow for this level of analysis.

California's system also allows for longitudinal analysis of data to view the impact of practice and policy changes over time and which further informs systemic improvement efforts.

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?*

The CQI should continue to rely on both qualitative and quantitative data to drive system improvements. Our ability to collect information at the child level enables us to analyze information in both an aggregate and disaggregate way and inform policy and practice. Quantitative data may largely be derived from the state's case management information system; however, the information in each state's system is likely to vary and may not provide a complete picture of state performance. This is due to lag time in SACWIS system changes, resource and training issues, and federal processes to obtain approval for needed changes. To the extent such information isn't readily available, states should continue to have flexibility in gathering information from other sources that may shed light on practices that contribute or hinder positive outcomes. This may include stakeholder interviews, surveys, or case reviews which can and should supplement data gathered from state case management systems.

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?*

We recommend State/Tribal/local child welfare agencies maintain a primary role in establishing targets for improvement. State/Tribal/local child welfare agencies have a vested interest in making improvements as they are directly accountable to the federal government in administering these programs. A transparent CQI process ensures that all child welfare stakeholders are informed and are able to engage in the process towards improvement. Targets for improvement will vary by jurisdiction and many factors must be considered, including available state/local resources, capacity for change, and stakeholder input. On the other hand, federally dictated improvement targets undermine State/Tribal/local child welfare agencies' efforts to focus strategies where improvements are needed and achievable, and it usurps these entities' ownership of the change process.

In California, stakeholders participate in the assessment and planning process, helping to identify priority areas for improvement and their role in the strategies that will be implemented to achieve improved outcomes. We support continued involvement of stakeholders, including courts, clients, and child-serving agencies (such as foster care agencies and nonprofits) as such involvement encourages ownership to outcome improvements. Yet there are many, diverse

stakeholders, and each has their specific and often limited role in the child welfare delivery system. While their input regarding targets can be informative, we believe only child welfare agencies have the statutory and regulatory obligation for the care and supervision of children served by the child welfare system. Child welfare agencies are directly responsible for implementing practice changes, and thus should have a direct role in setting targets for improvement.

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

We support integration of the state assessment, PIP and APSR into a single document, as these efforts are currently redundant by requiring duplicative stakeholder input and identification of policies and practices impacting outcomes. Not only would this be a more efficient process, but it would also be more readily discernable to policy makers and other stakeholders to have statewide improvement activities described in a single process/document.

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

The current federal CFSR penalty policy is punitive, does not encourage states to improve performance, and diverts scarce resources away from child welfare systems where improvements are needed. Under an improved CFSR system that uses accurate measures of progress and allows states to achieve real improvements over a five-year time span, we anticipate fewer penalties will be necessary. In egregious cases, poor performance instead should be tied with increased investment into areas requiring improvement. Good performance should be also be rewarded, such as through financial incentives to further support State/Tribal/local policies and practices contributing to positive outcomes. For example, prevention and early intervention activities are inadequately funded, yet such efforts contribute to reduced rates of abuse and neglect and entry into foster care. Similarly, post-adoption and kinship care services help families remain intact and promote permanency for foster children, but more funding is needed to support these efforts.

We also believe it is critical for ACF to identify strategies at the federal level to strengthen cross-system collaboration in support of child welfare outcomes. Systems including mental health, substance abuse, and education play vital roles in the well-being outcomes for our foster youth, yet have little incentive to improving services to abused and neglected children. Access to data across systems continues to be a barrier, and federal policies in other systems often stymie

CWDA Comments on Federal Register – CFSR

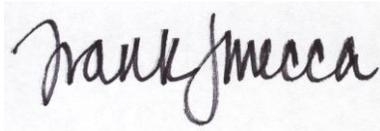
May 20, 2011

Page 6

services to abused and neglected children and their families. California has created a state-level, cross-departmental model, known as the State Integration Team (SIT), which is working to break down barriers in serving foster children across systems. Similar efforts at the federal level can increase services locally and ultimately help improve child welfare outcomes.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank J. Mecca". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Frank J. Mecca
Executive Director

C: Board of Directors