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RE: Comments on CFSR Federal Register Notice

In response to the above referenced federal register notice, North Carolina submits the following responses to identified questions. Additionally, DSS staff, county staff and University of North Carolina child welfare leaders contributed to the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) recommendations submitted on May 9, 2011.

Questions:

- (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?*

After Round 2, North Carolina adopted the CFSR tool in its entirety. We have also received substantial technical assistance and continue to do so, in the realm of quality assurance of our internal CFSR system. North Carolina places great emphasis on the reliability of the review data based on the current instrument. ACF and state staff capacity would be better utilized in future CFSRs if uniform guidelines were required for states' quality assurance programs, allowing reliance on states' quality assurance findings and minimizing time spent on the onsite review. Resources could be targeted instead to assist in state's quality assurance design and ongoing technical assistance.

Additionally, considering data measures from national child welfare databases could eliminate the subjectivity of several items in the CFSR instrument.

- (4) *What roles should State child welfare agencies play in establishing targets for improvement and monitoring performance towards these targets? What role should other stakeholders, such as courts, clients and other child-serving agencies play?*

Well-being outcomes are especially difficult to measure. To enhance the states' abilities to measure continuous improvement and in order to set performance goals, federal funding and leadership should be targeted to enhance the ability to gather well-being data. The ability to more easily track these efforts within the state and provide objective data to the ACF could relieve the instrument of subjective measures rating well-being efforts.

State agencies should take an equal role with ACF in determining PIP improvement goals. While continuous improvement is key for all stakeholders, states that are already high-performing should not be penalized by having to meet an improvement goal that is unrealistic and not expected elsewhere, or face a penalty. A good quality assurance system should include community stakeholders in internal CFSRs, both in terms of case interviews, but additionally as inclusion on review teams. Administrative Office of the Courts' staff occasionally review with state staff on county reviews in North Carolina and the collaboration provides a valuable transfer of learning both to the NC DSS and to the AOC.

- (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?*

Penalties do not necessarily provide incentive. Furthermore, penalties, if based on negotiated improvement goals, are arbitrary. Guidance from CB Offices is inconsistent among the regions, and the expected improvement of states as defined in negotiated improvement goals, are based on baselines that depend entirely on where the state started. A state that starts out low has an easier time achieving their goal in the two year PIP time frame than one that is already achieving closer to the national standard and needs to implement longer term strategies to show improvement.

North Carolina also wishes to comment in regard to the Procedures for the review and the instrument itself as delineated in 45 CFR Part 1355. North Carolina experienced during Round 2 varying degrees of interpretation of the CFSR instrument among federal reviewers in county sites. Additionally, one site in particular noted that the onsite review experience was not one of partnership between federal, state and county staff.

The instrument itself is subject in several items. Diligent and concerted efforts required in many items, as well as the "appropriateness" of such, can be an arbitrary expectation. Those items not only could affect ratings during the onsite but can continue to have a large impact on the achievement of negotiated improvement goals of a PIP.