



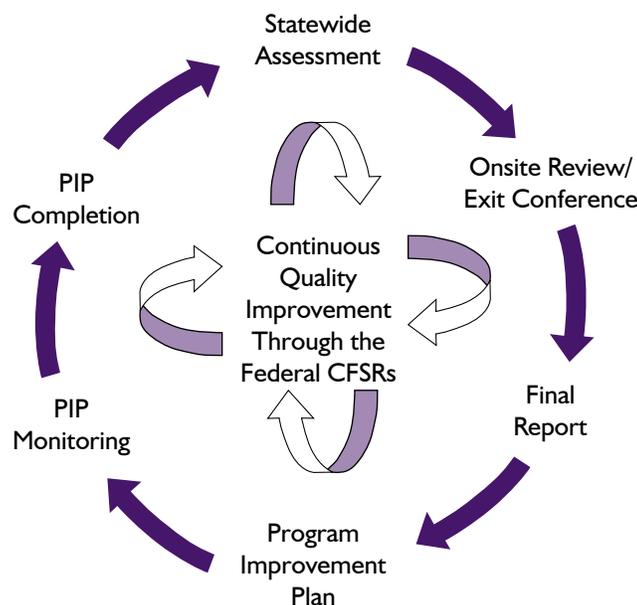
May 2006

## Supporting Improvements in Child Welfare Systems Through the Child and Family Services Reviews: A Resource for State Legislators

Overseeing the performance of state government is an important function of state legislatures. Today, state legislators have a new resource to support that task: the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs; see the box on the next page for more information).

The CFSRs promote a continuous quality improvement process by child welfare systems and comprise numerous activities in which state legislators can become involved. Through that involvement, they can determine how best to support state child welfare agencies in using the CFSR to strengthen child welfare policies and practices.

Each component of the CFSRs is equally important, and the process is circular in nature, with each component building on state experiences in the previous one:



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



## Child and Family Services Reviews at a Glance

- Congressionally authorized review of state child welfare systems.
- The first round of onsite reviews was conducted from 2000 to 2004; and the second round will begin in 2007; administered by the Central and Regional Offices of the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- States conduct their own **Statewide Assessment** with support from the federal government.
- Federal and state teams conduct an **onsite review** of three sites in the state; the teams examine outcomes for a sample of children and families served by the state child welfare agency.
- States prepare a **Program Improvement Plan** to develop or enhance policies, training and practice identified as needing improvement.
- Federal penalties apply if states do not make the required improvements.

## Child Welfare Outcomes Assessed by the Reviews

- **Safety:** Children are protected from abuse and neglect and are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.
- **Permanency:** Children have permanency and stability in their living situations and continuity in their family relationships and connections.
- **Child and family well-being:** Families are better able to provide for their children's needs, and children are provided services that meet their educational, physical health and mental health needs.

## How Performance Is Assessed Through the Reviews

- State child welfare data are compared with national standards.
- Qualitative information on state performance is collected through reviews of actual case records and interviews with children, families and others.
- State performance is evaluated with regard to how well critical components of the child welfare system function ("systemic factors," such as the agency's responsiveness to the community and the training of child welfare staff).

More information about the reviews is available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/index.htm#cfsr>.

Legislators and their staff can use the questions below to engage their state child welfare agency administrator and others in discussions about the CFSR during each component of the process.

Legislators might begin by asking the following:

- What were the findings of the previous CFSR?
- In what ways can those findings be compared with those of other States?
- What strategies is the state employing to make the required program improvements?
- What resources are necessary to participate in the CFSR process, including available federal resources, and does the state have sufficient funds to fully conduct all of the review-related activities?
- Did the state make the required program improvements, and if not, what are the consequences?
- What strategies will the state employ to sustain the momentum of the program improvements underway, especially in areas in which ongoing improvements will be necessary?
- How can the legislators with child welfare oversight responsibility in our state become more involved in the agency's current or next CFSR?

Legislative staff then can use the following questions to further explore the state child welfare agency's participation in each CFSR component, the CFSR outcomes and the State's efforts to address areas needing improvement:

### **Statewide Assessment**

**During the Statewide Assessment process, state child welfare agencies engage a range of internal partners (agency staff) and external partners (for example, personnel from other state agencies) in assessing the state's performance on key child welfare practices.**

- What did the state learn through its last Statewide Assessment and Program Improvement Plan (PIP) process, and how will it apply those lessons to the current Statewide Assessment?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) how the state conducted the Statewide Assessment, (2) the partners that it engaged, (3) the child welfare policy and practice challenges and strengths identified and (4) what the state learned and accomplished through its PIP that will guide its next Statewide Assessment process.

- In which policy or practice areas does the state child welfare agency plan to use the Statewide Assessment to further analyze its performance?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the process that the state uses to identify performance areas that require further attention and (2) who is/will be engaged in that process.

- How is the state child welfare agency making information about the Statewide Assessment (and the overall CFSR) available to agency staff and other professional colleagues, the media and the general public?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the groups targeted to receive information, (2) the venue for disseminating information and (3) how the state agency expects that the recipients of the information will use it.

- How is the state using the Statewide Assessment, in conjunction with its other planning processes, to engage others in child welfare reform efforts?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the agency's planning process(es) for all federal and other child welfare funding streams, (2) the coordination of those planning processes, as possible, (3) the benefits of joint planning and (4) how legislators can promote and support enhanced collaborative planning among state agencies during the CFSR process and other child welfare reform efforts.

### **Onsite Review/Exit Conference**

**During the onsite review, federal and state teams assess state performance on seven child and family outcomes and seven systemic factors that affect those outcomes. At the onsite review exit conference, the federal team leadership reports the preliminary review findings to the state.**

- What did the state learn through its last onsite review, and how will it apply those lessons to the current process?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) how the state planned for the onsite review, (2) strategies for streamlining the planning and implementation of the next onsite review and (3) opportunities for legislators or their staff to participate in the onsite review.

- Which community and professional stakeholders will the agency invite to participate in the onsite review, either serving as state review team members or providing input about the state system?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) how the agency engages its stakeholders, routinely and through the CFSRs, (2) the benefits of those collaborative relationships and (3) laws or procedures that hinder or promote collaboration.

- In which policy or practice areas does the state child welfare agency plan to use the onsite review to further analyze its performance?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the process that the state uses to identify performance areas that require further attention and (2) who is/will be engaged in that process.

- How can legislators work with state child welfare staff after attending an onsite review exit conference at which the preliminary review findings are shared by the federal review team?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) how the state plans to use the preliminary findings to begin program improvement planning and (2) how the legislature can support those initial planning efforts.

## **Final Report**

The state is officially notified of the review findings via a **Final Report** that is submitted to them by the federal government 30 days after the end of the onsite review.

- How do the findings of the previous review compare with the current findings? In what ways can the state's review findings be compared with those of other states, and what do those comparisons show?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the limitations of and options for comparing review findings across a state's review cycles because of changes to the data measures, (2) the limitations of comparing review findings between states and (3) how the state will address issues raised by researchers who plan to analyze the data across states, or media personnel who plan to prepare stories about those comparisons.

- How, and with whom, did the state share the review findings after the previous review, and what are the plans for doing so after the current review?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) how the state is providing context for the review findings for various internal and external audiences and (2) the state's strategies for engaging others in a meaningful discussion of the findings.

## **PIP Design, Implementation, Monitoring and Completion**

Using the CFSR findings, states develop a **PIP**, which outlines the improvements that they are proposing to make, the strategy and action steps that they will take to do so and the person(s) responsible and how the proposed improvements will be measured. The federal staff monitor the state's progress in making proposed improvements.

- What is required with regard to designing, implementing and measuring child welfare program improvements? What type of support does the state child welfare agency need during that process? How much support is the agency receiving from other entities inside and outside of state government in designing and implementing its PIP?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the state's key strategies for making improvements, (2) the challenges associated with making and measuring program improvements, (3) areas in which legislative support would enable the state to make greater progress and (4) which other entities must be involved to ensure the state's success and how the state might most effectively engage them.

- How often does the state receive feedback and guidance on its PIP progress from the federal government?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the feedback that the state is receiving from the federal government, (2) how the state is responding to that feedback and (3) the process by which the state might periodically update legislators on its PIP progress and the type of legislative support needed.

- What does the state feel has been the most successful outcome(s) of its completed PIP?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) how the state achieved this positive outcome(s) and (2) how they will apply/adapt the successful strategies to other areas.

- What happens if the state is not successful in achieving the necessary improvements?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the state's process for analyzing the reasons why their proposed strategies did not result in improvements, (2) who the state engaged in that analysis and (3) the state's plans for redesigning their program improvement process in areas in which the current strategies did not yield positive results.

Applicable penalties are suspended while a state is implementing its PIP. However, the suspension can cease and withholding of federal funds can begin under certain circumstances. These include failing to submit PIP status reports or failing to make satisfactory progress toward achieving the PIP goals and action steps, as described in the approved PIP.

If a state is successful in implementing all required activities and attaining all progress goals in the approved PIP, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) will rescind applicable penalties. But if a State does not implement all required activities and attain all progress goals in the approved PIP, the ACF will cease the suspension of penalties and begin withholding Federal funds. The withholding will continue until the State either achieves substantial conformity on the outcomes or systemic factors subject to the withholding in a subsequent CFSR, or completes a PIP designed to improve the areas subject to withholding.

- What are the state's plans for continuing the program improvement process until the next review cycle begins?

Legislative staff will want to discuss (1) the state's plans for continuing its child welfare reform efforts between PIP completion and the next CFSR, (2) how the state will sustain stakeholder involvement during that period and (3) the state's plans for communicating with its internal and external partners about the ongoing nature of the review process, the reality that there likely will be a second and subsequent PIPs to address areas in which the state faces significant ongoing or new challenges and the need for continuing support for the program improvement process.

This publication was produced for the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), by JBS International, Inc. (JBS), which manages the provision of technical assistance to state legislators through the State Team Training Project, contract no. GS-10F-0285K, delivery order no. 01Y00148001D, from the Administration for Children and Families, HHS. JBS and its subcontractor, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), provide technical assistance to state legislatures on the CFSRs, conduct educational sessions on review-related topics, and produce reports on the reviews for state legislators and state child welfare agencies. For more information and/or to request technical assistance, please contact Steve Christian, NCSL, at [steve.christian@ncsl.org](mailto:steve.christian@ncsl.org), (303) 856-1370, or Tori Russell, JBS, at [LegTa@jbs1.com](mailto:LegTa@jbs1.com), (240) 645-4615.