



STATE PROGRESS TOWARD CHILD WELFARE IMPROVEMENT

FINDINGS FROM FISCAL YEARS 2007 AND 2008 OF THE
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICE REVIEWS



NATIONAL
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Improving futures for children by reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect remains a persistent challenge for the nation. The costs of abuse and neglect for states, communities, families and children have been well documented, including permanent and damaging effects on children's well-being and significant economic consequences for state governments.

State child welfare agencies work to both prevent abuse and neglect and protect abused and neglected children from future harm. When children are at risk, child welfare systems intervene to investigate possible cases of abuse, support families with services that can help them care for their children and provide alternative living situations for children when necessary. Child welfare systems are charged with meeting these children's needs for a safe place to live, permanency in their living situations and services that promote their well-being. As a result, there is perhaps no area in which legislative engagement and oversight are more critical than in child welfare.

Through the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), the federal government works closely with states to achieve these safety, permanency and well-being results. (See box *The CFSRs at a Glance*.) The CFSRs examine state child welfare agency performance in ensuring that children grow up safely, are raised in a permanent living situation, and receive services that promote their well-being.

Following a CFSR, the federal government provides technical assistance and other support to help states develop program improvement plans (PIPs) to address areas in need of improvement. The plans are intended to bring about long-term reform in child welfare systems. To that end, states are encouraged to base their plans on practice principles that can support positive results for children and families:

- Working with and addressing the needs of the entire family;
- Providing easily accessible, community based services;
- Helping families learn how to best care for their children; and
- Tailoring services to the specific needs of each family.

State PIPs must be developed in collaboration with a range of key stakeholders—including state legislators, the judicial system and other agencies that serve children and families—to identify shared goals and establish a purpose and framework for improving child welfare services. Most important, this collaborative process should result in changes that promote improved results for children and families.

Ultimately, the CFSRs are designed to support states as they move toward self-evaluation of the services provided through their child welfare systems.

The CFSRs 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 runs from 2007–2010. Reviews are administered by the central and regional offices of the Children’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- States conduct their own **Statewide Assessment** with support from the federal government and submit it to the Children’s Bureau 60 days before the onsite review.
- 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, including interviewing children and families engaged in services and community stakeholders such as court personnel, community agencies, foster families and caseworkers to assess a number of systemic factors that affect the child welfare agency.
- States prepare a **program improvement plan (PIP)** to develop or enhance policies, training and practice identified as areas needing improvement.
- Federal funds are withheld if a state does not successfully complete its PIP.

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

- Statewide safety and permanency data indicators 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 in regard to safety, permanency and well-being.
- 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 child welfare staff training).
- More information about the reviews is available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/index.htm#cfsr>.

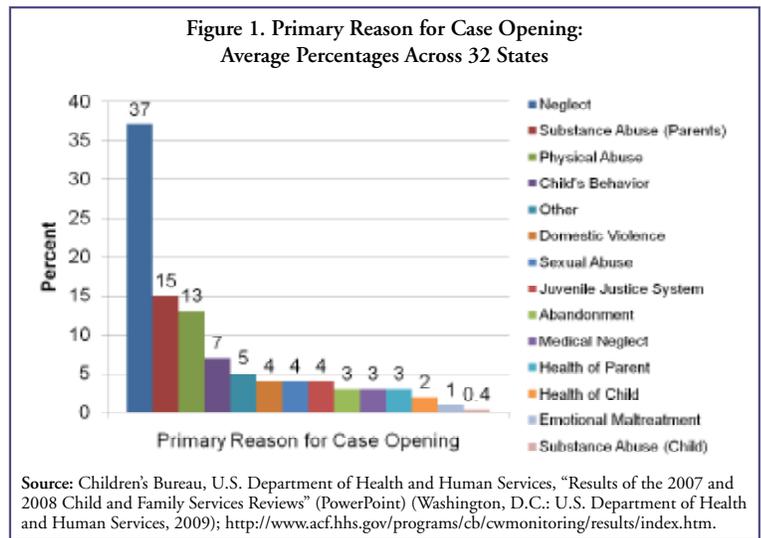
Purpose of This Report

The second round of CFSRs began in March 2007 and will continue through September 2010. To date in the second round, 42 states have been reviewed—14 in fiscal year (FY) 2007, 18 in FY 2008 and 10 in FY 2009. This report presents an overview of state performance to date in the second round, using the data published in the final reports from the first 32 states reviewed: it also discusses key findings that have been gleaned through an analysis of the review results.

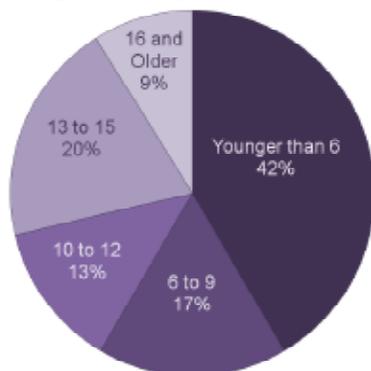
Obviously, there are limits to using aggregate findings across states to draw conclusions. State child welfare systems vary greatly, such as in their populations of children in care, per capita spending on child welfare and form of administration of their child welfare systems (for example, county- versus state-administered). The first two years of the second-round CFSR data provide a useful snapshot of themes and trends across the country that legislators can use to work with child welfare agencies to assess areas for improvement.

Profile of Children and Families Served

The first two years of the second round of reviews have provided a wealth of information about the children served by state child welfare systems. Cases are being opened for a range of reasons. As noted in Figure 1, the three most prevalent issues among the cases reviewed in fiscal years 2007 and 2008 were neglect, substance abuse by parents and physical abuse.



**Figure 2. Ages of Children at Entry into
Most Recent Foster Care Episode:
Average Percentages Across 32 States**



Source: Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Results of the 2007 and 2008 Child and Family Services Reviews" (PowerPoint) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009); <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/results/index.htm>.

In addition, the second-round review information gathered to date indicates that child welfare systems continue to serve a large proportion of very young children (Figure 2). Among the cases reviewed in 2007 and 2008, 42 percent of all children served came into foster care when they were younger than age 6.¹

Results Measured by the CFSRs

The CFSRs identify strengths and areas needing improvement in state child welfare systems, focusing on children's and families' safety, permanency, and child and family well-being. The reviews assess seven outcomes under those three areas.

1. The ages of children were not available for all cases reviewed through the CFSRs.

Safety:

- Safety Outcome 1 (S1): Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Safety Outcome 2 (S2): Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Permanency:

- Permanency Outcome 1 (P1): Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
- Permanency Outcome 2 (P2): The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

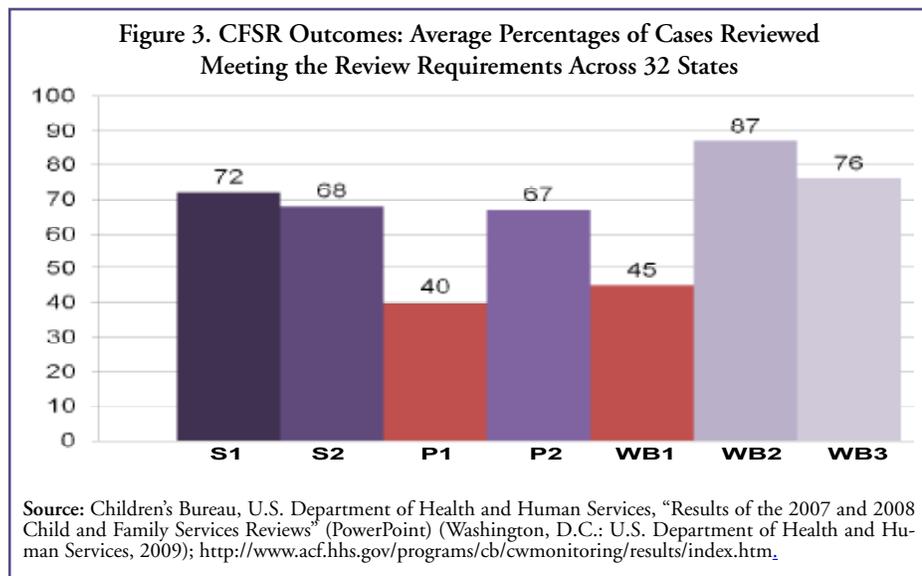
Child and Family Well-Being:

- Well-Being Outcome 1 (WB1): Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.
- Well-Being Outcome 2 (WB2): Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
- Well-Being Outcome 3 (WB3): Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

Within each of these seven outcomes, a review measures state performance on several specific performance items; the scores on each item are used to develop an overall score for the outcome. Further, a state is considered to have substantially achieved the requirements for an outcome if two conditions are achieved. First, 95 percent of the applicable cases reviewed in an outcome area must show that the state substantially achieved the outcome. Second, a review of state child welfare data must show that the state met the CFSR's national standards for that outcome (for those outcomes for which national standards exist).

Areas of Challenge

To date, the initial second-round CFSR results show that states are having difficulty achieving positive results in a sufficient proportion of cases across all seven outcomes. However, state achievement varies significantly among outcomes: performance is stronger in the areas of Safety Outcome 1 (Figure 3), Well-Being Outcome 2, and Well-Being Outcome 3 and weakest for Permanency Outcome 1 and Well-Being Outcome 1. The factors affecting performance on Permanency Outcome 1 and Well-Being Outcome 1 are discussed below.



Permanency Outcome 1

As Figure 3 shows, the second-round review data to date indicate that states struggle with helping children achieve permanency in their living situations, as reflected by Permanency Outcome 1. Analysis of the review results indicates that several factors might affect performance on this outcome. For example, within Permanency Outcome 1, the item on which states had most difficulty was achieving finalized adoptions for children in a timely manner (item 9). Analysis of the review results indicated that the following factors affected low state performance on that item.

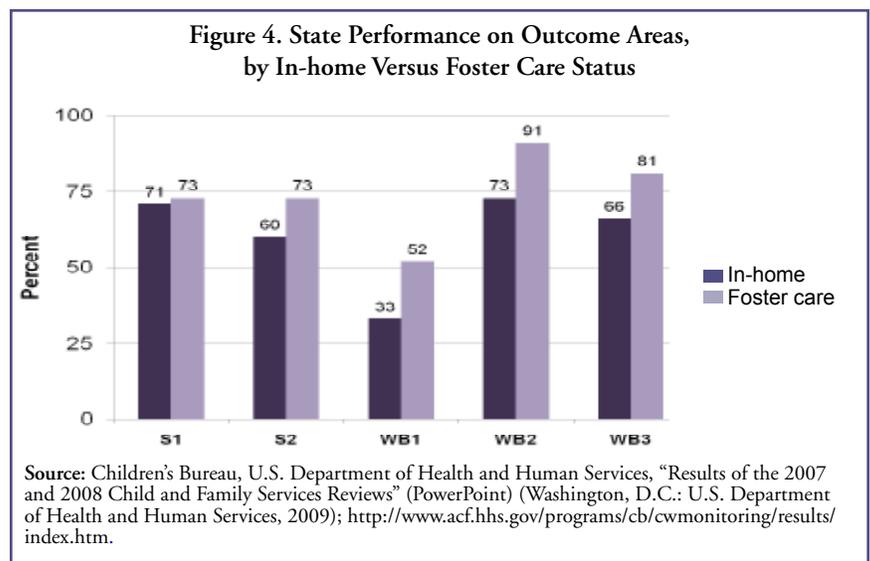
- Lack of effective concurrent planning (pursuing family reunification as a primary goal while simultaneously developing an alternative permanency plan, such as adoption);
- Lack of effort to identify pre-adoptive families;
- Worker turnover and lack of urgency on the part of the state agency to pursue the goal of adoption;
- Court delays, including multiple and ongoing continuances, lengthy termination of parental rights appeals, provision of additional time for reunification and changes in bench officers;
- Not establishing the goal of adoption until after Termination of Parental Rights;
- Delays in progress on the adoption goal because the child was maintained in foster care so that necessary services could be kept in place; and
- Lack of clarity regarding the availability of adoption subsidies to parents.

To address the critical need for improvement on Permanency Outcome 1, legislators in some states are working closely with their state child welfare agencies to craft or provide resources for improvement strategies through the state's PIP.

Well-Being Outcome 1

States also are experiencing challenges in enhancing the capacity of families to provide for their children's needs, as indicated by Well-Being Outcome 1. Analysis of the review results indicates that two factors may play a role in state performance on this outcome: difficulty in providing services to children who remain at home and difficulty engaging fathers in case planning and services.

- **Difficulty providing services to children who remain at home.** The review results indicate that, in general, states are performing better in addressing the needs of children in foster care (and their parents) than they are in meeting the needs of children and their parents who remain at home instead of being in the foster care system. As shown in Figure 4, state performance differences in serving children at home versus children in foster care are most pronounced for the items covered by



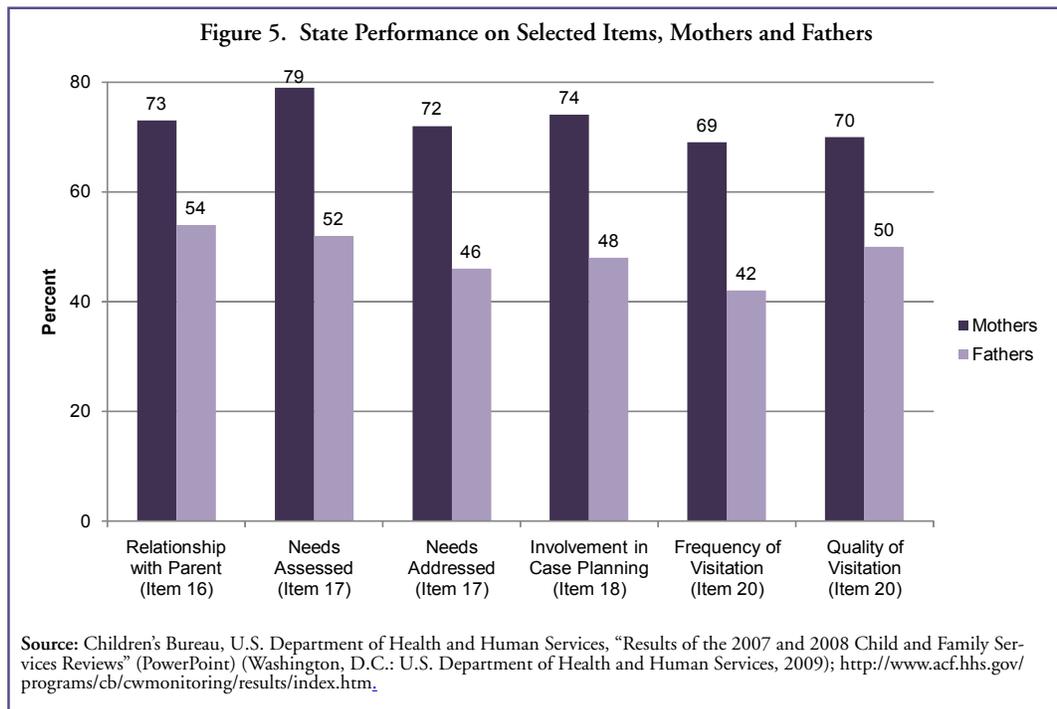
Well-Being Outcome 1 (to a lesser degree, differences also appear for the items covered by Safety Outcome 1). States therefore may wish to focus program improvement efforts on strengthening services to the in-home population.

- **Difficulty engaging fathers in case planning and services.** The reviews indicate that states face challenges in serving and involving fathers. The CFSR process specifically addresses state services to both mothers and fathers as part of three of the four items covered under Well-Being Outcome 1 and one item covered under Permanency Outcome 2. Under Well-Being Outcome 1, the following items assess state efforts to serve mothers and fathers.
 - Item 17, “Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents,” measures state performance in accurately assessing the needs of children, parents and foster parents (both at the child’s entry into foster care and ongoing) to identify needed services. It also examines whether states then provide the identified services.
 - Item 18, “Child and family involvement in case planning,” measures state performance in ongoing involvement of involving parents and children, whenever appropriate, in the case planning process.
 - Item 20, “Caseworker visits with parents,” measures state efforts to ensure that the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and mothers and fathers are sufficient to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and promote achievement of case goals.

In addition, under Permanency Outcome 2, item 16, “relationship of child in care with parents,” measures state efforts to promote positive relationships between the child in foster care and his or her mother, father or other caregiver.

Figure 5 compares state performance in serving mothers and fathers on these four items.

As Figure 5 illustrates, a lack of services and contact with fathers, relative to that provided to mothers, may affect state performance on Well-Being Outcome 1 (and, to a lesser extent, on Permanency Outcome 2). State agencies and state legislatures therefore may wish to focus attention on the child welfare agency practices and structural issues that make engaging fathers challenging.



The Promise of Improvement

For the most challenging areas of state CFSR performance—Permanency Outcome 1 and Well-Being Outcome 1—the review findings also offer lessons about possible promising practices for improving performance. For these two outcome areas, the review analysis identified the best-performing metropolitan areas and the strategies they used to achieve positive results.

Permanency Outcome 1

The review analysis identified the three metropolitan areas from the 32 states reviewed that performed best on Permanency Outcome 1 (that is, the three metropolitan sites where the highest average percentage of cases substantially achieved that outcome). The analysis indicated that several strategies were used in these sites to achieve high performance for the five items assessed under Permanency Outcome 1.

- Item 5, “Foster care re-entries” (preventing re-entries of children into foster care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode)
Strategies
 - Providing post-reunification services; and
 - Using risk tools and reintegration assessments to determine about the appropriateness of reunification.
- Item 6, “Stability of foster care placement” (ensuring that children are in a stable placement and that any changes in placement are in the child’s best interest)
Strategies
 - Using relative placements; and
 - Improving independent living services for youth.
- Item 7, “Permanency goal for child” (ensuring that timely appropriate permanency goals are established for children)
Strategies
 - Providing ongoing and meaningful concurrent planning; and
 - Developing goals and case plans quickly.
- Item 8, “Reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives” (achieving timely reunification, guardianship or permanent placement with relatives for children)
Strategies
 - Ensuring cross-system collaboration (such as between the child welfare agency and court system);
 - Providing an early emphasis on reunification; and
 - Using relative placements.
- Item 9, “Adoption” (achieving timely finalized adoptions for children)
Strategies
 - Ensuring ongoing and meaningful concurrent planning;
 - Filing for Termination of Parental Rights before the child has been in foster care for 15 months, when appropriate;
 - Addressing permanency issues (including the option of adoption) meaningfully in family team meetings; and
 - Conducting an early search for adoptive families.

- Item 10, “Other planned permanent living arrangement” (achieving another planned permanent living arrangement for children in a timely manner)

Strategies

- Engaging youth in independent living services at a young age; and
- Emphasizing use of standardized assessment tools.

The review analysis also indicated important and statistically significant correlations between performance on Permanency Outcome 1 and performance on other items covered by the CFSRs. Specifically, better state performance for Permanency Outcome 1 is correlated with strong state performance in:

- Providing services to families that prevent children’s removal from or re-entry into foster care while keeping them safe in their homes (covered by item 3);
- Once a child has entered foster care, assessing the needs of the children, parents and foster parents and providing services that meet those needs (covered by item 17); and
- Ensuring that, once a child has entered foster care, caseworkers visit the child and parents with sufficient frequency to address the issues that led to the opening of the case, and ensuring that caseworkers provide high-quality services and support during those visits (covered by items 19 and 20).

Well-Being Outcome 1

The review analysis also identified the three metropolitan areas that performed best on Well-Being Outcome 1 (that is, the three metropolitan sites that had the highest average percentage of cases that substantially achieved that outcome). Analysis indicated that several strategies were used in these sites to achieve high performance for the four items that are assessed under Well-Being Outcome 1:

- Item 17, “Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents” (accurately assessing the needs of children, parents and foster parents—both at the child’s entry into foster care and on an ongoing basis—to identify the services they need, and then providing those services)

Strategies

- Using a formal team decision-making structure, such as family team meetings and team decision making;
- Ensuring coordination among all involved agencies and providers regarding ongoing assessments and service planning;
- Ensuring the availability of a wide array of services; and
- Ensuring that workers are highly responsive to the needs of children, parents and foster parents.

- Item 18, “Child and family involvement in case planning” (involving parents and children, whenever appropriate, in the case planning process on an ongoing basis)

Strategies

- Actively engaging noncustodial and incarcerated parents;
- Using family-centered and strengths-based approaches (family team meetings, mediation) to build working relationships; and
- Ensuring the development of strong rapport between workers and children/parents.

- Item 19, “Caseworker visits with child” (ensuring that the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and children are sufficient to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and promote achievement of case goals)
 - Strategies**
 - Increasing the frequency of visits on the basis of case circumstances;
 - Anticipating and addressing transitions in the visit pattern for children;
 - Providing a high frequency of visits for children who are in their parents’ care (in-home cases); and
 - Ensuring that youth develop a bond with workers and perceive visits as helpful in moving toward permanency.

- Item 20, “Caseworker visits with parents” (ensuring that the frequency and quality of visits between caseworkers and mothers and fathers are sufficient to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children and promote achievement of case goals)
 - Strategies**
 - Making persistent efforts for frequent contact with the parent by the caseworker;
 - Making repeated attempts to locate absent parents and engage noncustodial parents;
 - Ensuring a high frequency and quality of visits with fathers;
 - Adjusting the scheduling of visits to meet the needs of parents;
 - Visiting incarcerated parents;
 - Ensuring that the relationship between caseworkers and parents progresses over time; and
 - Ensuring that the caseworker continues to visit even after there is a shift from reunification to other permanency goals.

Using the CFSRs to Move Toward Child Welfare Reform

These national findings provide context for the initial second-round CFSR findings in individual states. State legislators can use the findings to provide better oversight of child welfare reform efforts in their own jurisdiction.

Of course, because each state’s circumstances, range of reform efforts and agency-legislature relationship is different, there is no single, best approach for legislators to use the CFSR results to address areas of need. In addition, states are at various stages in the review process; most now are working on their PIPs, while a few are preparing for onsite CFSRs. Legislators therefore will need to work with the state child welfare agency to determine the agency’s plans for preparing a PIP or planning the CFSR onsite review. Some steps legislators can take to use the state’s second-round results follow.

- Read the CFSR results. Key findings and final reports on the second-round reviews are available on the Children’s Bureau website, http://basis.caliber.com/cwig/ws/cwmd/docs/cb_web/SearchForm.
- Use the CFSRs to establish a closer working relationship with the state child welfare agency administrator. Ongoing contact between legislators and the agency can ensure that legislators are kept apprised of the status of the review, its results and the degree to which the results are being used to make positive changes in the child welfare system.
- Participate in development of the PIP or, if the PIP already is being implemented, in monitoring PIP implementation. Request updates from the state child welfare agency administrator on state progress in making improvements. (For key questions to ask state child welfare agencies about the CFSR process, see the publication *Supporting Improvements in Child Welfare Systems Through the Child and Family Services Reviews: A Resource for State Legislators*, available on the Children’s Bureau website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/index.htm#cfsr>.)
- Ask the state administrator what you can do to support them. This might include help to obtain increased collaboration from other state agencies; more outreach to communities regarding the need for citizen involvement (for example, the need for foster parents); and/or changes in state systems that might make a difference in agency

functioning (for example, changes in state law that might improve results, such as timelines for investigating reports of abuse).

- Plan how to become involved in future reviews. You or your staff might plan to attend the statewide exit conference or offer to serve on a statewide assessment committee during future reviews.

The preliminary second-round CFSR results are an important resource for state legislators in both providing oversight to State child welfare agencies and working with state agencies to address areas where improvement is needed. The CFSRs provide national standards against which agency performance is assessed; an overview of how children and families are actually faring within a state's child welfare system; and, through the PIP, a framework for long-term reform. The Children's Bureau will conduct additional analyses of the round two results in the coming months and years and will share those with state legislators as they become available. Working with the state child welfare agencies, legislators can use these findings to ensure that attention and resources are directed to those practices and services that will result in positive change for the state's children and families.

Technical Assistance to State Legislators on the CFSRs

In planning how to work with state child welfare agencies regarding the second-round results, state legislators can, at no charge, take advantage of technical assistance on the CFSRs that is provided through the federal Children's Bureau. Technical Assistance can help legislators and state agencies address specific areas of need during PIP planning and implementation. For example, Technical Assistance staff can summarize the latest research on specific issue areas, provide information on promising practices for serving children and families, and link state legislators with lawmakers in other states that have addressed similar issues.

If you are interested in arranging a TA event, please contact us at legta@jbsinternational.com or cyf-info@ncsl.org.



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