

Washington State PTA Briefing Paper -- Kids Come First

A Comprehensive Reform Plan for Children's Administration Division

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services

Quick Facts - Children's Administration

In 2003, there were 77,200 CPS referrals. 7,100 children were placed in out-of-home care. Social workers average 25 cases per month.

Background

Recent analyses of deaths of three children – Rafael Gomez, Zy’Nyia Nobles, and Lauria Grace – who died while in the care of the Department of Social and Health Services and a federal review of this state’s welfare system have prompted more scrutiny of our welfare system. Safety for children is a top priority of WSPTA; we advocate for every child. The fatality reviews and the federal review come at a time when the department and children’s advocates have been preparing a Program Improvement Plan as well as Kids Come First implementation strategies. These needs and possible solutions will be legislative policy and fiscal issues in the next legislative session. This briefing paper is intended to give WSPTA decision makers a “heads up” on pertinent information and what advocacy issues may be on the horizon in human services.

The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services was recently part of a **Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), which is a federal review of performance-based outcomes for children and families.** The review examined the delivery of child welfare services and the outcomes for children and families served by child protective services, foster care, adoption and other related programs. Conducted by the federal [Department of Health and Human Services](#), the **review looked at outcomes for children and families in the three main areas of safety, permanency, and child and family well-being, and examined the state's infrastructure or 'system' that supports the delivery of child welfare services.**

*Washington, like the other 41 states that completed the review, **did not meet the federal standards in many areas examined by the reviewers.** The reviewers identified strengths in Washington, but found inconsistency in practice across the state. The reviewers also recognized that other systems (e.g., courts, mental health and substance abuse treatment) are factors in achieving permanency and well-being for children and families. Washington was found to be in substantial conformity on four of the seven systemic factors. Washington met the federal standards for two of the six data indicators and was within five percent of meeting two others. **Washington was not in substantial conformity on any of the seven child welfare outcomes- safety, permanency and well-being- assessed during the review.***

***Reallocation of and/or new resources will be needed to provide the capacity, training, and systemic changes to reach the desired outcomes for children.** Financial penalties are possible for all states that do not implement a successful program improvement plan. Penalties are one percent of the federal funds for each of the 14 areas that are not in substantial conformity with federal requirements. Washington could have an initial deferred penalty of \$1.5 million if there is not demonstrated significant improvement when the state is reassessed in two years.*

This briefing paper:

- **Identifies Challenges to Improving Washington’s Child Welfare System**
- **Reports Goals of the Program Improvement Plan for Children’s Administration**
- **Highlights “Kids First Phase II” Needed Reforms**
- **Notes Possible Implications for WSPTA’s Advocacy Efforts**

I. Challenges to Improving Washington's Child Welfare System

From the DSHS review, several challenges emerged that need attention. These challenges are listed below.

Permanency and Stability for Foster Children:

The federal standard is that 86.7 percent of children have two or fewer moves in 12 months. Washington's percentage is close at 83.7 percent. The assessment noted that Washington was not consistent in efforts to prevent children from re-entering foster care and establishing permanency goals in a timely manner. Reviewers recognized that overburdened court dockets, continuances and insufficient representation for parents and the department are barriers to more timely permanency decisions.

Kinship Care and Continuity of Family Connections:

Washington increased the number of children placed with relatives to 32 percent last year and is diligent in placing children with their siblings and in close proximity to their parents. Challenges include the barriers to both licensed and non-licensed care provided by family and extended family members, engaging fathers, involving children and parents in case planning, and ensuring frequent visitation between parents and children and between siblings.

Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention:

Some gains have been made in recruiting new foster parents over the last few years, but more has to be done to recruit a diversity of homes to serve minority populations. Retaining foster homes continues to be a challenge.

Child Safety:

Of most concern is the need to develop a higher level of consistency and quality in the areas of safety assessments and timely responses to reports of child abuse and neglect, including timely face-to-face interviews with alleged child victims.

Services for Children:

Another challenge is services and educational and vocational opportunities for adolescents in the foster care system. Washington needs to assess the scope of authority and the parameters of involvement with children who have been referred to the department, who have educational needs, and are living in their own homes.

Children's Mental Health Services:

The existing mental health system is structured to provide short-term care that does not meet the long-term mental health needs of children in foster care. The DSHS Children's Administration is working collaboratively with the DSHS Health and Rehabilitative Services and Juvenile Rehabilitation administrations to redesign the entire children's mental health delivery system.

Contact between Social Workers and Families:

Data and research shows clearly that more face to face contact with children and parents improves outcomes for children and families. *Washington needs to improve the ability of workers to spend more time with the families and children they serve.*

II. The Program Improvement Plan (PIP)

DSHS convened several workgroups to create an Eight-year Blueprint for Reform. The fundamental components of the plan include but are not limited to:

- Keeping children safe while strengthening and preserving families;
- Changing the way the agency responds to families;
- Engaging and supporting birth, kin and resource families and communities earlier;
- Making services and supports available earlier;
- Improving safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for all children including adolescents and children of color;

- Encouraging research based practice modalities that focus on outcomes for all services delivered by public and private agencies;
- Improving strong public-private partnerships;
- Emphasizing and achieving consistency of practice across the state;
- Emphasizing data driven decision-making;
- Re-aligning headquarters functions to better support reform implementation in the field;
- Recognizing that such an overwhelming reform of the system will require additional resources and legislative changes and strategically mapping these out.

Washington's plan is a comprehensive reform of the system, with the goal of creating changes that significantly improve the lives of the children in the state. This is a plan that the agency believes will return financial savings in the long run through practice improvements to offset up front investments while increasing federal funding capacity. [Based on the General Accounting Office report of April 2004, the most common challenges affecting the ability of states to implement the Program Improvement Plans were: insufficient funding; insufficient staff, insufficient time; and high caseloads.]

III. Needed Reforms: Kids Come First: Phase II Safe Kids in Healthy Families -- Highlights

Restructure Child Protective Services (CPS)

- Reduce CPS investigation times from 90 to 75 days;
- Require face-to-face contact with child victims within 72 hours for all referrals rated moderate to high risk, but not life threatening.

Restructure Child Welfare Services (CWS)

- Transfer responsibility for permanency planning from CPS to Child Welfare Services (CWS) in 72 hours- Generally cases are currently transferred when the child becomes a dependent of the state;
- Transfer in-home cases from CPS to new CWS in-home services program within 75 days of the referral;
- Require area administrators to review CPS investigations on active CWS cases.

Implement Family Team Decision Team Meetings

- Convene meetings within 72 hours of a child's placement in out-of-home care;
- Require early identification and involvement of fathers, relatives and Tribes;
- Design protocols for resolving disagreements in meetings.

Strengthen Child Protection Teams (CPTs)

- Conduct a statewide review of the CPT system, including membership, participation, information sharing and the review process;
- Develop new training for CPT members and DSHS staff.

Improve Partnerships with DSHS, Families and Caregivers

- Increase culturally appropriate and individually tailored services for children, families and kinship providers;
- Increase early and ongoing involvement of children, parents, caregivers and Tribes in assessing and developing case plans and making major decisions.
- Increase quality and frequency of social worker contact with children, parents and caregivers;
- Increase the quality and frequency of visits between children, parents and siblings;
- Develop strategies to appropriately match children and caregivers during the initial out-of-home placement;
- Develop after-hours crisis support line for caregivers;
- Training to improve foster parent and social worker relationships.

Improve Services to Children, Adolescents and Families

- Develop a new policy allowing adolescents to remain in care until age 21 if they are in college or in a vocational program and help implement a Foster Care to College Partnership Plan with Washington Educational Association;
- Improve strategies to help adolescents earn high-school diplomas;

- Develop a Parent Aid Program to increase visitations, facilitate access to services and improve parenting skills;
- Develop assessment tools that can more precisely determine the needs of adolescents in care;
- Develop a statewide interagency domestic violence protocol;
- Establish a youth advisory group;
- Establish chemical dependency experts in select offices and improve social work training around chemical dependency issues.

IV. Implications for WSPTA Advocacy Efforts

WSPTA has long been active in advocating for children and families that are in most need. Our mission, legislative platform, and past lobbying efforts have emphasized the importance of “every child.” WSPTA will be monitoring legislative efforts to implement a plan which has as goals the increase of service to those often truly “left behind” from a human services standpoint.

The expected cost of implementing the Program Improvement plan is between \$35-50 million. This represents a 7-10% increase in the total agency budget. The Children’s Administration is currently preparing its decision package for the “Priorities of Government” request for the ‘05-07 biennium, and will include requests to begin funding the plan. In addition to the fiscal implications of the plan, many policy and regulation changes will need to occur -- for example, legislation that creates reductions in caseload.

[It is the short term goal of the plan to reinvest program offsets back into direct services. A long term goal of the department {not necessarily of the PTA} is to reduce tort liability. Last year \$17 million was paid out in tort settlements.]

Given our support of education funding, and concomitantly, our support of health and human services funding for children and families, the next session will most probably hold many challenges for PTA advocates as well as legislators.

To learn more about Washington State’s Program Improvement Plan visit:

Overview: http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/ca/about/imp_KCF2.asp

The Plan: http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/ca/pdf/imp_comprehensive.pdf#page=1

Review Results: http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/ca/CFSR/res_intro.asp

“USE YOUR VOICE” Opportunities for Advocacy

- Learn about the Court Appointed Special Advocates program: www.washingtonstatecasa.org. CASAs are volunteers speak for the child’s best interest in court.
- Families for Kids: 1.888.794.1794 – Lutheran Community Services program to recruit foster families.
- Read about Casey Foundation foster and adopt programs and opportunities: www.casey.org