
CHAPTER 7

Despite positive trends in DFS quality assurance, some critical CPS processes are not reviewed

Chapter Summary

Our 1999 CPS evaluation recommended that DFS develop an institutional research function to evaluate both program and administrative effectiveness. Since that report, DFS has made good strides to provide more information, accountability, and measurement on CPS, including setting up a Quality Assurance Unit. However, almost all of the emphasis is on one evaluation method, a state Child and Family Services Review (called the state CFSR), which is modeled after the federal review.

Ensuring fair and consistent processes is as important as program outcomes.

Several important DFS processes, such as track assignments and the central registry, are not part of quality assurance monitoring. The public and the agency need to understand not only the outcomes staff and processes are achieving, but also how consistent, clear and fair those processes are. Both state-level and local staff now have access to CPS reports from WYCAPS data, and the state CFSR is a solid foundation for quality assurance. DFS needs to enhance this foundation with additional reviews of CPS casework and administrative processes.

DFS works with multiple boards to oversee CPS activities

Citizen Review Panel (CRP) is DFS' most active oversight board.

For child welfare matters, DFS has oversight from several boards, including the DFS Advisory Board, the Interagency Children's Collaborative, and the federally-mandated Citizen Review Panel (CRP). Each has a distinct but somewhat overlapping duty to review aspects of the child welfare system and make recommendations for improvement. The most active of these boards, the CRP, is a stand-alone, nonprofit agency with federal funding; it administers the state CFSR process (explained later in this chapter) and has recently incorporated the functions of the Child Major Injury and Fatality Review.

DFS has expanded reporting and use of data from WYCAPS

DFS data use and analysis capabilities have greatly improved since 1999.

A central theme in our 1999 CPS evaluation was the lack of useable data at the state level by which managers could gauge program effectiveness. This made it difficult for state-level consultants and program managers to identify specific CPS processes that needed improvement, or where needs might not be met. Implemented at about that time, WYCAPS has provided considerably more data analysis capacity. For example:

- **Alerts** WYCAPS notifies caseworkers to enter data and complete necessary fields. The system has alerts for both required data and discretionary or informational data.
- **Statpack** This reporting module gives statewide, district, county, and office-level aggregate statistics on all child welfare incidents for certain activities.
- **CARD** This confidential report provides DFS staff with information on an individual child and family.

DFS reviews CPS through the state CFSR

Since late 2004, DFS has worked closely with the CRP to conduct state CFSRs. These annual reviews are a replica of, and supplement to, the federal CFSR, entailing a series of highly-structured case file reviews. State CFSRs focus on a target child and family, with each case consisting of one or more incidents reported to DFS during a specified period of time.

State CFSR reviews are complex, time consuming, and expensive.

To date, the CRP and DFS have completed four cycles of the state CFSR and have reviewed over 400 child welfare cases, about half of which have been CPS cases. DFS quality assurance and field office staff assist with these reviews by drawing case samples from each office, performing or monitoring the reviews, and analyzing the data. Due to the size and complexity of these reviews, working with the state CFSRs is the focal point of almost all DFS quality assurance activities.

The state CFSR process covers 7 outcomes with 23 different casework items that focus on child safety, permanency, and wellbeing. Outcomes use multiple data points to gauge DFS compliance and performance with child welfare casework requirements, each scored individually. Figure 7.1 lists the outcomes and items scored for the reviews.

Figure 7.1

**State CFSR evaluation instrument
Outcomes and items measured**

Safety Outcome 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect

Item 1 – Timelines of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

Item 2 – Repeat maltreatment

Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their home whenever possible and appropriate

Item 3 – Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

Item 4 – Risk of harm to child(ren)

Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations

Item 5 – Foster care re-entries

Item 6 – Stability of foster care placement

Item 7 – Permanency goal for child

Item 8 – Reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives

Item 9 – Adoption

Item 10 – Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children

Item 11 – Proximity of foster care placement

Item 12 – Placement with siblings

Item 13 – Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

Item 14 – Preserving connections

Item 15 – Relative placement

Item 16 – Relationship of child in care with parents

Wellbeing Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs

Item 17 – Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

Item 18 – Child and family involvement in case planning

Item 19 – Worker visits with child

Item 20 – Worker visits with parent(s)

Wellbeing Outcome 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs

Item 21 – Educational needs of the child

Wellbeing Outcome 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs

Item 22 – Physical health of the child

Item 23 – Mental health of the child

Source: LSO summary from DFS-CRP documents.

Individual items receive ratings of “an area of strength” or “an area needing improvement.” An additional step incorporates interviews with system stakeholders and family members, which help to enhance understanding of a case. DFS uses this review process to help gauge expected compliance (termed “substantial conformity” at the federal level) with the federal CFSR performance benchmarks. Caseworkers travel to other offices to participate in these reviews each review, giving them opportunity to share ideas and improve practices.

State CFSR focus does not complete DFS quality assurance responsibilities

Assurances that CPS procedures are fair and efficient remain important.

Daily, caseworkers make important decisions about whether and how government should intervene in families’ lives for the purpose of child protection. The agency and the public need assurances that CPS procedures at all stages are effective, efficient, and fair. According to DFS officials, the CRP annual report acts as the agency’s own quality assurance annual report.

DFS has already acknowledged CPS process studies are needed.

However, the CRP reports do not address DFS problems alone, or concern only CPS issues; they focus on systemic issues such as challenges with the legal system, and only some recommendations directly affect CPS processes and practices. On an intermittent basis, DFS staff examine some CPS-related processes. Examples include a limited analysis of the prevention track when it was relatively new, and brief studies of methamphetamine use among child welfare families, children of incarcerated parents, and placement episodes.

State CFSR shortcomings point to need for other review methods

In order to assess how fully state CFSRs fulfill the DFS quality assurance responsibility, we participated in the state CFSR process. We concluded that although the state CFSR is a good foundation from which DFS can provide some assurance of program quality, it is not by itself sufficient. Despite the strengths of the state CFSR, it will take additional components to fulfill the institutional research recommendation of our 1999 report.

CFSR is a complicated, limited review method

State CFSR citizen reviewers may rely too heavily on DFS personnel.

We were trained in how to score the state CFSR instrument, but despite the training and having reasonable background knowledge, we have three concerns about how complicated, cumbersome, and incomplete this process is. Unless a citizen reviewer is very well-versed in CPS terms and concepts, it is a challenge to grasp CPS policy and casework requirements. Also, each office's organization of hard copy case files is different, and the review timeframe of a few hours is too short to gain full understanding of larger cases with multiple incidents. We think this may cause third-party citizen reviewers to rely too heavily on the DFS personnel on each team.

Many families cycle in and out of the system beyond the state CFSR's "period under review" criterion.

The state CFSR period under review is short, covering approximately the most recent year of a family's DFS involvement, while many case files reviewed include all reports and contacts with DFS over time. Families tend to come in and out of the system frequently, and the one incident or one year of it covered by a state CFSR review may not give a full picture. This is borne out by results of our sample review: the median investigation case (from first through final incident) lasted about 2.5 years and involved four distinct incidents. Finally, since the review focuses on outcomes for all types of child welfare cases, it does not review CPS-specific processes such as track assignments and their effectiveness.

System professionals debate possible flaws in the federal CFSR process

CFSR shortcomings suggest other program review methods are needed.

The CFSR does not appear to be a temporary review process at either the federal or state level. However, professionals in the child protection field have concerns about its methodology: small sample size and cases taken from only a few offices; samples are really not as "random" as stated since families must agree to be reviewed and interviewed; and many reviewers are professionals working in the system, so may be inherently subjective and sympathetic toward the agency. Wyoming's state CFSR overcomes some of these concerns by sampling cases from every office and performing reviews annually. Nevertheless, such concerns suggest that DFS needs to complement the state CFSR with other reviews and measurements.

DFS can build additional review capacity

Greater data analysis can help DFS oversight boards refine their purposes.

State managers currently have little information on what local protocols either enhance or detract from policy and practice requirements. To date, the state's own process studies have been irregular, performed when state-level staff have the time or expertise. Moreover, both the DFS Advisory Board and the Interagency Children's Collaborative appear to be at cross-roads. From interviews we found that these boards intend to re-define their work with respect to CPS; both wish to complement instead of duplicate the state CFSR process. DFS is in a position to help these boards refine their missions by recommending more targeted study areas identified through data analysis.

Recommendation: DFS should continue to expand quality assurance efforts with CPS casework and administrative process reviews.

DFS should incorporate CPS process evaluations into their program improvement plan for the federal CFSR.

We acknowledge the significant contribution the state CFSR process has made to DFS quality assurance since our report in 1999, and it is a positive move to include citizen participation through the CRP. Yet these efforts do not fully meet our 1999 recommendation to include consistent and rigorous analyses of CPS casework and administrative processes, as distinct from delinquency or CHINS casework. To complement the state CFSR, DFS needs to integrate ongoing evaluations of CPS processes into its quality assurance program.