

**REPORT
 HIGHLIGHTS
 PERFORMANCE AUDIT**

Subject

Child Protective Services (CPS), a function of the Department of Economic Security, has statutory authority to remove abused and neglected children from their homes. In these cases, CPS is required to place a child in the most family-like environment possible. If a child cannot be placed with a relative, he or she will be placed in foster care.

Our Conclusion

Children placed in out-of-home care can be unnecessarily harmed by being moved from placement to placement. Arizona, like most states, does not meet the national standards for placement stability. Although CPS is already trying to increase stability, it can do more. Also, CPS can assist foster parents by taking additional steps to improve communications.



2003

**CPS Should Improve
 Foster Care Placement
 Stability**

Background

As of March 31, 2003, over 6,800 children were in foster care in Arizona. The largest percentage of these children (36 percent) were in family foster care homes, while 28 percent lived with a relative, and 17 percent lived in group homes. Over one-third of the children in foster care were under the age of 6, 28 percent were from 6 to 12 years old, and almost a third were from 13 to 17 years old.

Over the 6-month period from October 1, 2002, to March 31, 2003, almost 2,300 children left foster care. Almost half were



reunited with their families, while about 30 percent were adopted or were appointed a legal guardian.

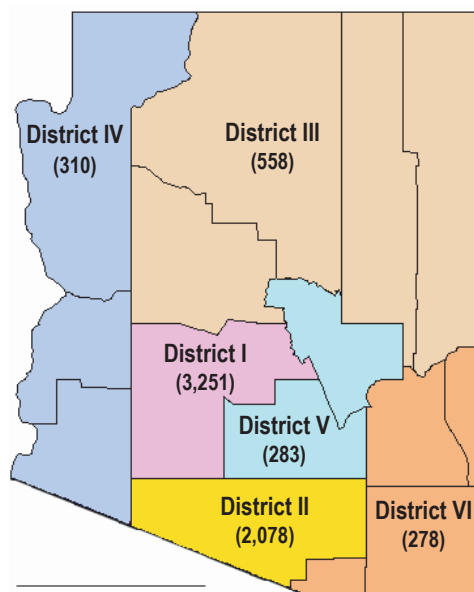
Foster children need stability

Abused and neglected children have a greater need for a permanent, secure environment and a constant emotional attachment. Research shows that multiple placements can affect a child's ability to form attachments to significant others. Multiple placements can also contribute to a variety of mental health issues, such as depression, distrust of others, and cognitive and language delays.

For these reasons, the federal government uses the number of placements a child has in his or her first year of foster care as one way to measure the effectiveness of a state's foster care program. Federal requirements prescribe that 86.7 percent or more of foster children in care for less than 1 year have no more than two placements. Arizona reported that 82 percent of foster children met this standard in federal fiscal year 1999.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) also sends

Number of Children in Foster Care by District
 As of March 2003¹



¹ In addition, 68 children were not included in this district breakout for reasons such as being placed with a relative outside the State of Arizona.

evaluators to conduct file reviews to gauge the extent to which any placement changes are consistent with the child's needs, such as moving from a mental health facility to a private foster home after successfully completing mental health treatment. In 2001, federal reviewers examined 31 case files and found that only 71 percent (22) of the foster children had stable placements or, if they experienced placement changes, the placements were consistent with the child's needs.

Steps taken to address stability problems

CPS has developed a Program Improvement Plan to improve placement stability, in addition to other federally identified problems. For example, three major elements of the plan regarding placement stability include:

- **Increasing the number of foster homes for older children, sibling groups, and children from diverse ethnic groups**—For example, more than half the cases with multiple placements involved older children, who are difficult to place. CPS' plan calls for increasing the number of foster homes available to older children to allow for better matches.
- **Better identifying and planning for needs**—Federal reviewers found the main reasons children were moved were that foster parents were inadequately prepared and supported to meet the children's needs. For example, some children were moved for relatively minor behavioral problems. CPS' plan calls for better identifying the children's needs and assessing the services the foster parents will need to meet them.
- **Correcting data errors**—CPS' data system inaccurately counted some placements.

Areas for further improvement

CPS can further improve foster care stability by:

- **Rarely allowing substitute visits**—CPS requires case managers to visit foster

children monthly. However, CPS allows visits by other CPS staff and/or a child's visit to a counselor or other service provider to be substituted for a case manager visit. Allowing other visits to substitute for case manager visits can impact placements because the case manager is in the best position to identify and address problems in the home before a placement change is needed. Alabama and Delaware, two states with high placement stability rates, report that they rarely allow substitute visits.

- **Increasing support for foster parents**—Delaware and New Mexico provide more support to foster parents through liaisons, mentoring, and support groups. These mechanisms allow for general support, sharing of best practices, and the provision of respite care, which should encourage placement stability.
- **Monitoring policy changes intended to enhance stability**—CPS can use its internal peer review process to ensure that policy changes are working. CPS staff review a sample of cases each quarter and can use these reviews to see that any new policies are being implemented.

Areas for further study

The Division should also evaluate the benefits of adopting innovative practices used by other states to increase placement stability. Because Arizona is currently considering the future of its child protective services functions, there is a unique opportunity to consider options that may not be feasible under existing operations and resources. Although these practices might require additional resources, the Division should consider whether the potential benefits justify the possible costs. For example, the Division should consider the feasibility of two changes:

- **Limiting placements to sibling groups**—CPS should study placing only children from one sibling group in a foster home rather than mixing children from different families. This would allow foster parents to focus on the needs of only one family and they would have to work with only one case manager.
- **Placing children directly into a foster home**—CPS sometimes places children into

a shelter while it evaluates the children. However, these children may then end up being moved to another placement. Alabama and New Mexico place children

directly into a foster home while they do the evaluations and find that many children can remain in that initial foster home placement.

Recommendations

The Division should:

- Continue to implement its Program Improvement Plan.
- Revise its policies to only rarely allow other staff or service provider visits to substitute for case manager monthly visits.
- Use its peer review to ensure that policy changes are effective.
- Consider the relative costs and benefits of adopting innovative practices, such as making single family-group placements, and decreasing the use of shelter care.

Although Adequate, Communication Could Be Better

Foster parents need adequate information about the children in their care, including their case plans and medical and behavioral health information. Further, research shows that good communication is important in retaining foster parents. We interviewed 26 foster parents and learned that some communications are beneficial, such as:

- Case manager's monthly visits
- Foster Care Review Board hearings, at which foster parents can attend and participate
- Foster parents' newsletter published by CPS in collaboration with a private vendor

Improving communications

Foster parents and federal reviewers also indicated that some communication needs improvement, such as:

- **Evaluating information provided about the foster children**—The majority of the parents

we interviewed said they did not receive enough information about the children in their care. For example, one foster parent said that an 11-year-old child who had been in foster care since the age of 3 was placed in her home, but she was not told that the child had been in foster care for that long, nor were the child's behavioral problems explained. This lack of information caused the child to be removed from the foster home.

Sixteen of the 26 foster parents interviewed believed that CPS withheld medical and behavioral information about the children. However, in some cases, CPS notes that it may not know much information about the children, and therefore, cannot provide it.

- **Providing more practical training**—Foster parent training should include more practical information on handling real-life health and behavioral problems.
- **Notifying parents about Juvenile Court hearings**—Three foster parents told us they are not notified about hearings, and two

said CPS had discouraged them from attending.

- **Informing parents about the appeal and grievance process**—Foster parents have three different processes to file appeals or grievances regarding CPS decisions. However, very few of the 26 parents we interviewed were aware of all three processes.

Methods used by other states

A review of best practices and the methods other states use suggests that the Division could also improve communications by:

- **Soliciting additional foster parent feedback**—CPS has three different surveys that provide limited feedback on different topics, but none provides meaningful feedback on how foster parents feel about

the foster care system that can be used to make improvements.

- **Expanding and strengthening support groups**—The Division may also want to consider establishing a more comprehensive system of support groups, mentoring, and respite care systems by collaborating with its licensing agencies. Arizona is one of a very few states that do not have a state-wide foster parent association, and there are some areas of the State that do not have local associations. Foster parents we interviewed indicated that some of the best information and support they receive is from other foster parents.
- **Improving the Division's Web site**—The Division should also update its Web site to include a special section that would be useful to Arizona foster parents. Currently, there are no specific portions of the Division's Web site that are devoted solely to providing information and support to foster parents.

TO OBTAIN MORE INFORMATION

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(602) 553-0333



or by visiting
our Web site at:
www.auditorgen.state.az.us

Contact person for
this report:
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Recommendations

The Division should:

- Provide foster parents with all known medical and behavioral information.
- Continue plans to improve foster parent training.
- Ensure that foster parents know about court hearings.
- Ensure that foster parents know about grievance procedures.
- Enhance existing surveys or create a new survey to obtain more input from foster parents.
- Ensure all foster parents in Arizona can participate in support groups.
- Update its Web site to include information that would be helpful to foster parents.

Department of Economic Security

Division of Children, Youth, and Families
Child Protective Services—Foster Care Placement
Stability and Foster Parent Communication

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