

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Subject

The Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) advises the juvenile court on progress toward finding a permanent placement for children in out-of-home care. To carry out FCRB's responsibilities, citizen volunteer review boards located throughout the State are required to conduct periodic reviews of children in out-of-home care.

Conclusions

FCRB adds value to the foster care system but can be more effective by ensuring more of its reports are provided in time for court hearings, and by better identifying services (such as behavioral health services) that foster children need but are not receiving. ♦ FCRB should further enhance its volunteer management. ♦ FCRB should report to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee its retention of federal reimbursements.



2005

Foster Care Review Board

FCRB Adds Value, but Can Improve Report Effectiveness

The Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) was established by the Legislature in 1978. It assists the courts by conducting citizen reviews of cases of children who have been placed in out-of-home care. There is at least one foster care review board in each county and several boards in the more populated counties. The boards are composed of court-appointed volunteers.

Foster care process—Most children enter the foster care system through investigations of abuse or neglect. After a child is removed from his/her home, the juvenile court will then decide whether the child should be made a dependent (ward of the court). If the court makes that determination, then a DES case manager develops a case plan to help the child receive a permanent placement.

According to FCRB management, within 6 months of the placement and every 6 months thereafter, the local boards review each child's case and report the findings and recommendations to the juvenile court. The purpose of the review is to advise the court on:

- The child's safety.
- The necessity and appropriateness of the out-of-home placement.
- Case plan compliance.
- Progress toward mitigating the need for foster care.
- A likely date when the child may be returned home or permanently placed by adoption or guardianship.



FCRB by the Numbers (as of May/June 2005)

- 1—state board (7 state-wide positions, 35 local board members)
- 94—local boards
- 417—volunteers (53 vacancies)
- 12+—hours/month dedicated by volunteers
- 38—staff positions
- 8,451—children in care
- 5,241—cases

FCRB adds value but should be more timely—We surveyed 57 juvenile court judges and commissioners, representing all counties in the State, to solicit their input on FCRB, and 36 responded. Most reported that FCRB adds value to the process. They also reported that FCRB's recommendations were reasonable and its reports were accurate.

"I like to have the objective view provided by the Board. It is another piece of good information to use in arriving at a fair, just, and equitable decision for each case ..."

—Juvenile court judge

However, survey responses and audit work indicate that FCRB can improve its effectiveness by improving the timeliness of its reports. According to FCRB management, FCRB generally schedules its reviews 1 month before the 6-month court reviews. This coincides with the statutory requirement that FCRB provide its reports to the courts within 30 days following its reviews. However, according to our analysis of FCRB data, reports for 104 of 596 (17 percent) review meetings were sent to the courts more than 35 days after the FCRB reviews, meaning they may have arrived too late for use in the court hearing.

FCRB lacks a comprehensive tracking system to ensure that reports are submitted to the courts on time. Such a system should track the number of days that have elapsed from the FCRB review date.

FCRB can improve its service gaps report—FCRB reviews whether children are receiving all the services that they

need. It voluntarily began reporting on service gaps in 2004 in response to the Governor's 2003 child protective services action plan. However, FCRB under-reports several important service gaps, such as:

- Monthly visits by case managers
- Gaps in behavioral health services

Further, FCRB service gap reports do not address all relevant services, such as a child's education.

One information source FCRB could use to better identify service gaps is DES' case plans. These plans contain details about the children's unmet needs. However, the FCRB local boards do not always receive the plans, and they cannot currently access the information in DES' information system, CHILDS.

In addition, local board members have not received training on identifying and reporting service gaps.

Recommendations

FCRB should:

- Develop a comprehensive tracking system and monitor it to ensure that reports are filed in a timely manner.
- Improve the identification of service gaps through training and access to CPS' case management computer system.

FCRB Can Further Enhance Its Volunteer Management

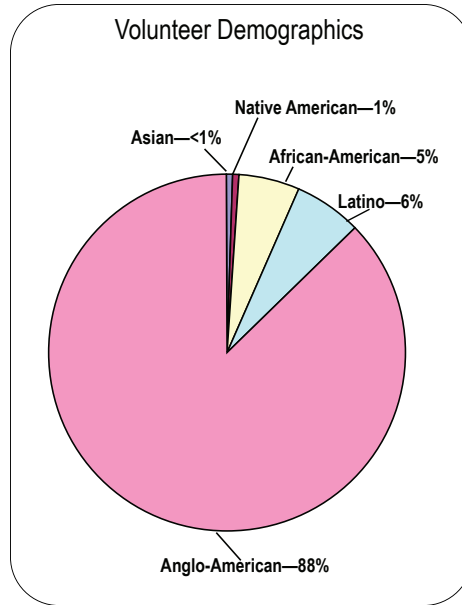
FCRB has the key elements needed to effectively manage volunteers. These include:

- **Selection process**—FCRB has a process to screen and select volunteers based on their applications and commitment to serve.
- **Define role and responsibilities**—FCRB's volunteer manual has detailed information about volunteers' role and responsibilities.
- **Training**—FCRB has a 2-day initial training program and ongoing annual training requirements.
- **Evaluation**—FCRB uses several methods to assess volunteers and provide feedback.
- **Recruiting**—FCRB uses a number of recruiting methods to help ensure that it has an adequate number of volunteers.

FCRB should continue to improve training compliance—In 2002, FCRB reported that only 33 percent of volunteers met their training requirements. To improve, FCRB sent letters to volunteers and also conducted training at board meetings. FCRB’s data shows that 77 percent of volunteers met the annual training requirements in 2004.

FCRB should improve diversity—FCRB should develop a diversity plan to enhance its recruiting efforts. According to statute, volunteers are supposed to represent the demographics of their county to the extent possible. However, most FCRB volunteers are Anglo, about

two-thirds are over 50 years of age, and about one-third are retired.



Recommendations

FCRB should:

- Continue efforts to ensure that volunteers meet training requirements.
- Establish a diversity plan to ensure that recruiting is effective.

Notification of Federal Reimbursements

State law requires state budget units to either deposit federal reimbursement monies in the State General Fund or notify JLBC of the reimbursements. FCRB receives federal Title IV-E reimbursement monies from DES to cover costs associated with reviewing children in out-of-home care. Although FCRB is not required to deposit its Title IV-E

reimbursements in the General Fund, it should notify JLBC about them. However, FCRB has not notified JLBC that it has accumulated a \$1.2 million balance in unused Title IV-E monies since 1999. According to FCRB management, the annual budget request reflects Title IV-E monies. However, FCRB should provide annual written notification to JLBC regarding its retention of Title IV-E monies as required by law.

TO OBTAIN
MORE INFORMATION

A copy of the full report
can be obtained by calling
(602) 553-0333



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

Contact person for
this report:
Shan Hays



Foster Care Review Board

REPORT
HIGHLIGHTS
PERFORMANCE AUDIT

September 2005 • Report No. 05 – 10