



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC SECURITY

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Janet Napolitano
Governor

Mary Gill
Acting Director

July 18, 2003

Debbie Davenport
Auditor General
Office of the Auditor General
2910 North 44th Street, Suite 410
Phoenix, Arizona 85018

Dear Ms. Davenport:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the evaluation of the Department's foster care services as related to foster care placement stability and foster parent communication. We concur with the recommendations made by your office, and will begin our implementation of the recommendations using current resources.

Our Department is very committed to the children of Arizona, especially those children who cannot safely remain in their own homes and require foster care placement. These children and their foster parents deserve our greatest attention. We must assure that the services we provide to foster children and foster parents are the services that will best meet their needs. Foster parents are viewed as an essential part of a child's service team. Open communication between Department staff and foster parents is needed for foster care placement stability and the successful achievement of permanency for children in out of home care.

As described in our enclosed response, improving foster care placement stability and enhancing our relationship with the foster parent community will remain a high priority for our Department. These efforts are also consistent with recommendations made by the Governor's Advisory Commission on Child Protective Services and the federal Child and Family Services Review.

Full implementation of the recommendations made by your office will require the Department to devote additional resources. This comes at a time of extreme budget reductions. Nevertheless, because of our commitment to the children, the children's families, and the children's foster parents, the Department plans on implementing the recommendations.

Please feel free to call me at (602) 542-5678, or Mary Lou Q. Hanley, Assistant Director for the Division of Children, Youth and Families at (602) 542-3598 if additional information is needed.

Sincerely,

Mary Gill
Acting Director

Enclosure

**DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC SECURITY'S RESPONSE
to the
AUDITOR GENERAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS
for
FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT STABILITY and FOSTER PARENT COMMUNICATION**

The Office of the Auditor General's evaluation of the Department's efforts to ensure that foster care placements are stable and that communication mechanisms with and from foster parents are effective includes two findings with eleven recommendations. Four of the recommendations pertain to foster care placement stability. Seven recommendations pertain to foster parent communication. The Department of Economic Security is pleased to provide the following comments regarding these recommendations.

The Department's Division of Children, Youth and Families administers the Child Protective Services Program, and is referred to as "the Division" in this response.

FINDING 1: FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT STABILITY CAN BE IMPROVED.

Recommendation 1:

The Division should continue to implement its federally mandated Program Improvement Plan, including increasing the number of homes available for older and other difficult to place youth, better preparing and supporting foster families, continuing to work to improve the accuracy of foster care data, and continuing efforts to improve placement stability.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

The Division is pleased to report several efforts that are currently underway or planned for the future. The Division plans to:

- increase the number of homes available for older and other difficult to place youth;
- better prepare and support foster families;
- continue to work to improve the accuracy of foster care data; and,
- continue efforts to improve placement stability.

First, the Division's efforts to increase the number of foster homes available for older children include:

- specific outcome-based incentives are included within the foster home recruitment, study and supervision (HRSS) contracts with private agencies for increasing and maintaining the placement of older children; and
- incentives are included in specific HRSS contracts in Maricopa County for developing and implementing targeted recruitment plans for older children, sibling groups, and other difficult to place children.

The outcomes of these contract tasks and provisions will continue to be assessed during the next year to determine their effectiveness.

The Division's Recruitment Plan includes general, targeted, and child specific goals and objectives that, as a whole, are designed to increase the number of foster and adoptive homes available for all ages of children, including children with specialized needs. This statewide Division-driven Plan is implemented, in part, through contracts with private agencies.

One of the most significant resources to enhance communication of the Division's need for foster and adoptive homes for children is the Arizona Foster Care and Adoption Coalition (AFCAC). AFCAC is chaired by the Division and includes statewide representation from the private agencies responsible for recruiting foster and adoption homes for the Division. This year, AFCAC developed the following Mission Statement: "The Arizona Foster Care and Adoption Coalition is a statewide collaboration that increases public awareness of children in the child welfare system through education and training. By capitalizing on Arizona resources and maximizing communication, the Arizona Foster Care and Adoption Coalition supports system changes to improve recruitment and retention of families for children". AFCAC consistently requests the active participation of foster and adoptive parents at meetings.

The statewide toll-free information line *1-877-KIDS NEEDU* is one of the Division's links to the public for disseminating information about foster and adoptive parenting. Information on the toll-free information line is also made available on the Division's Website, posters, brochures, bookmarks, magnets, license plate frames, and other recruitment promotional materials. Recently, this telephone line was expanded to provide information in Spanish.

To better prepare and support foster parents, the Division has intensified its collaboration with the behavioral health system. In-service training opportunities for foster parents at conferences will include more sessions related to the mental and behavioral health needs of children and effective strategies to meet the children's needs, including supports needed by the care giving family.

The Division is currently pursuing the use of a standardized, nationally-recognized foster and adoptive parent training curricula for statewide use. Within the next thirty days, the Division anticipates reviewing two nationally-recognized training packages.

Recently, discussions within the foster parent community have focused on the need for a foster parent association in Arizona. An initial meeting to discuss the feasibility of forming a foster

parent association is being scheduled for late August 2003. Information regarding the meeting will be disseminated through AFCAC, other contract agencies, and through the *Arizona Statewide*, a newsletter for foster and adoptive parents. Additional local support resources can also be provided to foster families through their foster home agencies.

The Division continues efforts in improving the accuracy of foster care data. The Division is using a quarterly Peer Record Review process to thoroughly review case-specific data from a randomly-selected sample of child protective service cases. Foster placement stability is one of the areas examined during the Peer Record Review process.

Recommendation 2:

The Division should revise its policy to clarify that substitutes be allowed to replace case managers in the required monthly face-to-face visits with foster children only under rare circumstances.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

The Division will modify policies and procedures regarding case manager's face-to-face contact with foster children to clarify the rare circumstances in which face-to-face contact between the child and another child welfare professional is permissible.

The Division will use the Peer Review Process to monitor compliance with the revised policy.

Recommendation 3

The Division should use its peer review process to ensure that policy changes are having the desired effect of increasing placement stability.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

As previously stated, the Division is pleased to report that the use of the Peer Review Process is fully operational on a statewide basis. The Division will continue to enhance the Peer Review Process to ensure that policy and practices related to stable foster care placements are effective.

Recommendation 4:

As Arizona considers the future of child protective services, the Division should evaluate the benefits of adopting innovative practices other states used to increase placement stability, such as single family-group placements and a decreased use of shelter care.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

The Division will consider the options in the Report as methods for improving placement stability. The Division will explore innovative practice options, such as foster homes that provide care for only one sibling group at a time and increased use of “emergency receiving” foster care services in family foster homes. Since these options impact both licensing procedures and contract agency tasks, coordination with the Department’s Office of Licensing, Certification and Regulation (OLCR) and the private foster home agencies is required when considering these options.

FINDING 2: FOSTER PARENTS REPORT GOOD COMMUNICATION, BUT IMPROVEMENTS CAN BE MADE.

Recommendation 1:

The Division should ensure that case managers provide all known medical and behavioral information about the child to the foster parents. To do so, the Division should form a work group, including foster parents, to review the type of information that should be contained in the placement packet and how best to ensure the information is provided in a timely manner and updated regularly.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

The Division has started a review of the methods used by case managers for providing children’s medical and behavioral health information to foster caregivers. A workgroup of case managers has been formed to make recommendations regarding improving the “Child Placement Packet” process. The Division will also use the Peer Review Process to monitor compliance with the Placement Packet process. In addition, the Division will actively request the input of foster parents in the development of recommendations for improving the Child Placement Packet process. It is essential that the most efficient and effective methods for sharing information about foster children with caretakers be expeditiously implemented.

Recommendation 2:

The Division should ensure that foster parents are aware of their right to attend court hearings by informing them during case manager visits and ensuring this information is covered in foster parent training.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

The Division will implement this recommendation through basic and advanced foster parent training. The Division will also explore ways to expeditiously update information, such as changes in foster parent's addresses, in applicable forms. This will improve the Court's ability to send official notice of court hearings to foster parents.

Recommendation 3:

The Division should ensure that foster parents receiving adequate information about its complaint/grievance processes including the Family Advocacy Office, the client complaint/grievance process, and the foster child removal appeal process through means such as foster parent training or information provided on the Division's Web site.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

The Division will include information about the complaint/grievance process, including the Family Advocacy Office and the foster child removal "appeal" process, on the Department's Web site. This will better assure that foster parents will have access to this information. In addition, the Division will consider other opportunities to provide this information to foster parents, such as including the information in foster parent training and the Arizona Foster Home Handbook. The information will also be made available in alternate formats and languages, upon request.

Recommendation 4:

The Division should continue its plans to improve foster parent training. When improving the training, the Division should continue to seek input from foster parents about what their training needs are and how these needs can best be met.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

As previously stated, the Division is currently pursuing the use of a standardized, nationally-recognized foster and adoptive parent training curricula for statewide use. Within the next thirty days, the Division anticipates reviewing two nationally-recognized training packages. With foster parent input, a workgroup will be formed to incorporate Arizona-specific licensing requirements, Arizona-specific policy and procedures, and training requests from foster parents into the curricula purchased.

Recommendation 5:

The Division should enhance an existing survey mechanism or implement a new one to solicit more comprehensive input from foster parents.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

The Division is currently reviewing the results of a “recruitment-focused” survey. The input provided from 126 surveys is being reviewed, and additional responses will be reviewed and analyzed as completed surveys are received. The Division will also begin receiving copies of foster parent surveys that are now required by the home recruitment, study, and supervision contacts. Since the survey questions are not standardized for all contract agencies, a wide variety of information can be obtained from these semi-annual surveys.

The Division will also explore other methods of receiving input from foster parents and other caregivers, including the possible use of a Web site-based feedback tool.

Recommendation 6:

The Division should ensure that all foster parents in Arizona have an opportunity to participate in support groups, mentoring, and respite care systems by organizing foster homes into clusters, or developing another method.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

The Division will explore methods of offering these services to foster parents through existing resources and future modifications to foster home agency contracts.

In addition, foster parents, contract agencies, and the Division are discussing the feasibility of having a statewide foster and adoptive parent association. An association of this type will provide a new forum and voice for foster and adoptive parents to elevate their needs, concerns, issues, complaints, questions, and wishes. As previously stated, an initial organization meeting of the foster parent community is scheduled for late August 2003. The primary purpose of this meeting is to discuss options for creating a statewide foster and adoptive parent association. Contact information for foster and adoptive parents who have expressed an interest in becoming more actively involved in recruitment, retention, and training activities will be shared with the leaders of this effort.

Recommendation 7:

The Division should update its Web site to include information that would be useful to Arizona foster parents such as links to pertinent portions of the Division's policy manual, state statutes, administrative rules, and information about foster parent support groups and training classes.

DES Response:

The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the recommendation will be implemented.

The Division will actively work with the Department's Public Information Office in an effort to fully utilize the Web site as an effective way for disseminating information to the community. The Division will also discuss the use of automated links to existing resources through the Web site.

The Division will report progress on the implementation of the recommendations at six month intervals.