

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS PERFORMANCE AUDIT

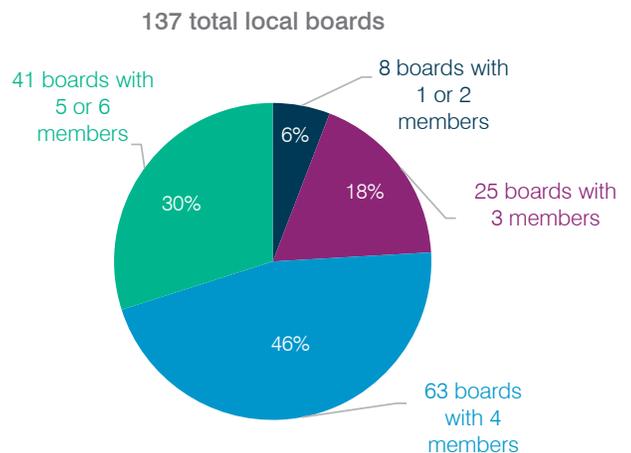
FCRB should evaluate and enhance strategies for board member recruitment

Our Conclusion

The Arizona Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) reviews and coordinates the activities of local foster care review boards (local boards) that advise the juvenile court regarding the permanent placement of children who have been placed in out-of-home care by the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS). Because 70 percent of local boards have fewer than the statutorily prescribed five members, the FCRB should evaluate and enhance its strategies for board member recruitment. Further, although 90 percent of the local boards' reports were submitted to the juvenile court in a timely manner for the cases reviewed, the FCRB should ensure that all reports are submitted in a timely manner so as not to negatively impact court hearings. Additionally, the FCRB should continue working with the DCS to increase DCS caseworker attendance at local board hearings. Finally, the FCRB should resume providing recommendations to help improve the child welfare system and reporting key program metrics to stakeholders.

Local board structure and review requirements—There are 137 local boards statewide, and each board is established by the presiding juvenile court judge in each county for every 100 children in out-of-home placements. Statute prescribes that each board have five members. Boards generally meet once a month to receive information from DCS caseworkers and foster and biological parents regarding ten standard areas relating to child safety, necessity and appropriateness of the placement, case plans, the progress toward mitigating the need for foster care, and the potential permanent placement of the child. Statute requires that each case be reviewed at least once every 6 months and that the FCRB submit the local board's findings and recommendations to the juvenile court within 30 days following the review.

Local boards by number of appointed members As of March 2015 (Unaudited)



Majority of local boards lack required number of board members—As of March 2015, 96 of the FCRB's 137 local boards, or 70 percent, had fewer than five appointed board members. Twenty-five of these boards had three appointed members, the minimum number required for a quorum unless an exception has been approved, and eight boards had fewer than three appointed members. This board member shortage could lead to delays in case reviews if at least two board members are not present, although FCRB management reported that this has not happened to its knowledge. Rescheduled case reviews would not delay juvenile court hearings, but the local board's assessment might not be available for the next hearing, which would deprive the court of an independent review of a child's progress toward a permanent placement. Continued growth in the number of children placed in out-of-home care has required the creation of additional local boards and increased the need for board members.

Recommendation

The FCRB should evaluate the adequacy of its recruitment strategies; identify and implement new strategies, as needed; and provide more administrative support for recruitment efforts.



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FCRB should ensure that all reports are submitted to the juvenile court in a timely manner

The FCRB generally complies with case review time frames but does not always submit reports to the juvenile court in a timely manner. Our analysis of 261 reviews conducted by local boards between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2014, found that 97 percent were conducted within the 6-month statutory time frame. However, for 10 percent of the reports from these reviews, FCRB staff did not comply with the 30-day statutory time frame for distributing the reports to the juvenile court. Untimely report distribution can negatively impact court hearings. The FCRB's Tucson office has established a method to monitor its report distribution timeliness, and we found no instances of untimely reporting from that office. The FCRB's Phoenix office was responsible for all of the late reports.

Recommendation

To improve report distribution timeliness, the FCRB's Phoenix office should develop and implement a method for tracking its report distribution timeliness, as is done in the Tucson office.

FCRB should continue working with DCS to improve caseworker attendance at board reviews

FCRB reports provide valuable information to juvenile court judges but are less useful when DCS caseworkers do not attend local board reviews. Although DCS policy requires caseworkers to attend board reviews, either in person or by phone, caseworkers attended only about 65 percent of board reviews from November 2014 through May 2015. In January 2015, the FCRB and the DCS established a workgroup to improve caseworker attendance at board reviews but has not yet implemented any strategies to do so.

Recommendation

The FCRB should continue to collaborate with the DCS to improve caseworker attendance at board reviews and, if ineffective, should consider whether to pursue legislation requiring caseworker attendance at board reviews.

FCRB should resume providing child welfare system recommendations and program metrics to stakeholders

The FCRB is in a unique position to provide recommendations to improve Arizona's child welfare system. As an independent reviewer of all cases of children in out-of-home care, the FCRB can provide recommendations and report key program metrics to stakeholders. The FCRB has provided such information in the past, but has not done so since 2003. However, providing recommendations for improving the child welfare system and reporting key program metrics would provide stakeholders with a broad and independent review on the DCS' permanency efforts that is not otherwise available.

Recommendation

The FCRB should develop and implement a process for making recommendations for improving Arizona's child welfare system and reporting key program metrics to stakeholders.