

## Arizona Department of Child Safety Permanency Practices

**CONCLUSION:** The Arizona Department of Child Safety (Department) is responsible for helping to ensure that children who have been removed from the home achieve a safe and stable permanent home. Permanency can include safely placing a child back with his/her parents, in the care of a relative, and adoption. Although the majority of Arizona children exiting out-of-home care achieve permanency in a family setting, we found that the Department can improve its permanency efforts. Specifically, the Department has not consistently submitted timely and detailed reports about the status of a child's case to the juvenile courts, and caseworkers are frequently absent from Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) reviews. We also found that although the Department places more children with kin than the national average, staff have not always adequately documented their kin-search efforts. Further, previous reviews found that the Department has needed to improve other permanency practices and outcomes, including ensuring that children achieve permanency in a timely manner; filing petitions in a timely manner to terminate parental rights so that a child can be adopted; recruiting and retaining foster homes, which can become permanent placements; and preserving a child's connections to his/her family and community.

### Department should improve provision of information to courts and FCRB

**Department has not consistently provided timely and detailed court reports**—Juvenile court judges are responsible for making permanent placement decisions for children in out-of-home care during court hearings. To assist the juvenile courts in making these decisions, the Department is required to provide written court reports and in-person information at court hearings regarding case plan goals that must be achieved before the child can be reunified with his/her parents. However, we found that the Department has not always provided required court reports to juvenile court judges in a timely manner, consistently included sufficient detail in its court reports, or clearly presented progress toward goals in updated court reports. Without timely and adequate case information, court hearing decisions may be postponed.

**Department caseworkers have not always attended required FCRB reviews**—The Department also provides case information to the FCRB, which comprises independent review boards that review individual children's cases and provide recommendations to the juvenile courts about these cases. Department policy requires caseworkers to attend FCRB reviews either in person or through teleconference to answer questions and provide updated information. However, according to a 2015 Auditor General's report, between November 2014 and May 2015, caseworkers attended about 65 percent of FCRB reviews each month, either in person or by telephone. More recent analysis performed during this audit found that caseworker attendance at FCRB reviews had not improved. The Department has collaborated with the FCRB to address caseworker attendance, but reported that staff are not able to consistently attend these reviews because of high caseloads.

#### Recommendations

The Department should:

- Track court report submission timeliness, and using this information, identify and address causes of late submissions;
- Develop and implement guidance directing the supervisory review of court reports; and
- Formalize its process for reviewing caseworker FCRB review attendance reports and using report information to improve attendance.

### Department should improve kin-search documentation and timeliness

Kin placement refers to the placement of a child in out-of-home care with blood relatives, or those related to the child by marriage, adoption, or through another form of significant relationship and is generally preferred to other non-kin placements. Although the Department placed more children with kin than the national average for federal fiscal years 2010 through 2014, the Department has not always adequately documented kin searches, which could lead to inefficiencies in performing these searches. In May 2016, the Department directed all staff to begin documenting all kin-search efforts

in a “Locate Efforts” case note within its CHILDS case management system. However, the Department reported that it does not have a formal process for ensuring that staff comply with this directive. Additionally, the Department’s family locate unit, a specialized unit tasked with finding specific kin, has not been able to complete all caseworker-referred kin searches in a timely manner. Specifically, as of September 2016, the family locate unit had 452 caseworker requests to locate kin that had not been completed within the expected 45-business day time frame.

## Recommendations

The Department should:

- Establish a monitoring process to ensure all staff involved in kin searches are documenting these searches in the newly established “Locate Efforts” case note; and
- Identify and implement methods to ensure caseworker kin-search requests are processed in a timely manner.

## Reviews have found deficiencies in Department’s permanency practices

Several reviews of the Department have identified various deficiencies in the Department’s permanency practices. Specifically, auditors reviewed multiple Auditor General reports, an independent review conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children (Chapin Hall) in 2015, and multiple Arizona Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), which are periodic reviews of state child welfare agencies administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Department has taken steps to address the deficiencies noted in these previous reviews and should implement its plans to further improve its permanency practices and outcomes in the following areas:

**Permanency timeliness**—Previous reports have found that the Department has performed well at achieving permanency for children who have been in out-of-home care longer than 12 months, but has not always achieved timely permanency for all children in out-of-home care. For example, the 2015 CFRS found that the Department did not meet the national standard of achieving permanency for children within 12 months of entering foster care. Specifically, of all children who entered out-of-home care in a 12-month period in Arizona, 28.5 percent achieved permanency within 12 months, which was below the national standard of 40.5 percent. Earlier CFRSs and Chapin Hall’s independent review found similar problems with the timeliness of achieving permanency.

In addition, the 2015 CFRS identified deficiencies with aspects of the Department’s case-planning process, finding that the Department did not always establish permanency goals in a timely manner, involve all parents and children in the case-planning process, and ensure that children and families received frequent and quality visits with caseworkers.

**Timeliness of termination of parental rights (TPR)**—In order for a child to be adopted, a TPR petition has to be filed and approved. Federal law requires that the Department file a TPR petition or document a compelling reason why it will not file a petition when a child has been in out-of-home care for 15 of the last 22 months. However, the CFRS reviews found that the Department did not consistently meet this requirement.

**Foster home recruitment**—Although placement in a foster home is generally not considered permanent, many foster homes become permanent placements. However, multiple reports have noted that the Department needs to improve its recruitment and retention of foster homes. For example, a 2013 Auditor General special report found that the Department needed to improve how it contracts with child-placing agencies for the recruitment of foster homes.

**Foster children’s connections to their family and community**—Preserving a child’s connection to family and community can help promote permanency because it helps children maintain important bonds that may have been disrupted by their removal from home. However, the 2015 CFRS found that the Department did not always preserve a child’s connections to his/her community, make concerted efforts to place siblings together, ensure the appropriate frequency and quality of visits with the child and his/her family, and ensure that the relationship between parents and children in out-of-home care is maintained through means other than visitation.

## Recommendations

The Department should continue to implement its:

- Plans to address the 2015 CFRS findings, including implementing case review processes to facilitate the timely achievement of permanency and training staff on new family engagement practice guidelines; and
- 2016 strategic plan to improve foster home recruitment and retention.