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DCF Takes Action to Improve Implementation of State's Community-Based Care Initiatives

at a glance

As recommended in our 2007 report, the Department of Children and Families has taken action to strengthen the state's community-based care system. The department has trained child welfare staff on recent statutory changes affecting child welfare and worked with the community-based care lead agencies to develop and implement strategies to help ensure that appropriate placement options are available for children in out-of-home care. The department has also created reporting mechanisms to oversee lead agencies' use of their increased funding flexibility.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Children and Families in response to a 2007 OPPAGA report.^{1,2} This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

¹ Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

² *CBC Pilot Project Implementation Delayed But Proceeding; Other Initiatives Implemented*, OPPAGA [Report No. 07-03](#), January 2007.

This report also provides a status report on department implementation of several child welfare initiatives authorized in 2006, including statutory changes to permanency and case planning and changes to the method of payment and other financial processes for community-based care lead agencies. Separate reports will address the community-based care pilot project for outsourced fiscal and programmatic monitoring in Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties.^{3,4}

Background

The state's child welfare program provides services to care for and protect abused and neglected children. The Department of Children and Families contracts with community-based care lead agencies for the management and operational responsibilities of providing foster care and related services including family preservation, emergency shelter, and adoption. In Fiscal Year 2007-08, the department held 22 contracts with 19 lead agencies.

³ Chapter 2006-30, *Laws of Florida*, requires OPPAGA and the Auditor General to evaluate the pilot project that outsourced Department of Children and Families' oversight of community-based care lead agencies in Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties and permitted the development of new lead agency performance measures.

⁴ The first report, *Pilot to Outsource CBC Program Oversight Encountered Setbacks; Effectiveness Unknown*, OPPAGA [Report No. 08-09](#) was published in February 2008 and the second report will be available in February 2009.

In 2006, Florida began several child welfare initiatives to improve services for children and increase efficiency and flexibility in the funding of lead agencies.

- **The Legislature changed permanency planning requirements.** The 2006 Legislature made statutory changes to permanency planning requirements for judicial proceedings related to children.⁵ The changes aligned state and federal permanency requirements and mandated concurrent planning for other permanency options while pursuing reunification with a child's family. The changes also modified permanency goals for the child's living arrangements to stress guardianship and adoption, as well as family reunification. Further, the statutory changes strengthened the requirements for case plan development, content, and amendments; and clarified timelines for holding permanency hearings and the circumstances when termination of parental rights should or should not be pursued.
- **The department implemented a federal Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project.** In 2006, the Department of Children and Families applied for and received a waiver for the use of federal Title IV-E funds from the United States Department of Health and Human Services.⁶ Title IV-E funds provide payment for licensed foster care placements, adoption subsidies, administration and training, and the State Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS). The waiver excludes SACWIS and adoption subsidies, and authorizes a five-year demonstration showing that the flexible use of federal funds will result in improved outcomes for children and families. Florida receives a capped allocation of federal funds during the waiver period, with a 3% per year increase over funding for federal Fiscal Year 2004-05.⁷ The IV-E waiver also permitted the

department and lead agencies to develop a simplified eligibility determination process for some Title IV-E funding.

- **The Legislature changed lead agency funding and payment methods.** The 2006 Legislature authorized changes in funding and payment methods for lead agencies. These changes altered the method of payment from cost reimbursement to fixed price and allowed lead agencies to retain unspent general revenue funds for the entire contract period.

The Legislature directed us to examine the department's implementation of the 2006 child welfare initiatives and we issued a report in 2007 that identified some weaknesses and made several recommendations for improvement.

Current Status

The department has made changes consistent with our recommendations to strengthen training on statutory changes affecting child welfare, focus on the availability of placement options for children in out-of-home care, and oversee lead agencies' use of funding flexibility.

The department has strengthened training on statutory changes to permanency planning requirements

Our prior report identified weaknesses in the department's training for caseworkers and protective investigators. Although the department conducted a series of regional teleconferences on the 2006 changes to permanency planning requirements and charged its child welfare attorneys with training lead agency staff who missed the teleconferences or needed community-specific training, some lead agencies did not participate in this training. We recommended that the department offer ongoing training to all lead agencies to ensure that all child welfare staff are aware of current permanency planning requirements.

⁵ Permanency planning refers to expeditiously securing a safe, permanent placement for maltreated children.

⁶ Title IV-E of the Social Security Act.

⁷ This increase in funding totals \$7.3 million per year for five years.

Consistent with this recommendation, department staff conducted specialized statewide trainings and workshops in 2007 and 2008 that included permanency planning requirements. Key training events included the annual statewide Dependency Summit in September 2007 and regional training workshops that the department held around the state in November and December 2007 and June 2008. The department's recent regional training workshops also have included briefings on recent statutory changes from the 2008 legislative session. The department's child welfare attorneys (Children's Legal Services) developed a new training curriculum and in June 2008 offered additional in-depth training around the state for case managers and protective investigators. Department attorneys also report that they regularly provide informal training on permanency planning when attorneys meet with caseworkers and protective investigators at judicial hearings and other situations to discuss cases in the child welfare system.

The department and lead agencies are improving the availability of placement options for children

Our 2007 report noted that changes in permanency planning requirements would increase the need for lead agencies to recruit foster and adoptive homes. These changes were intended to speed up case movement for children. As some foster parents adopt the children in their care, faster case movement would increase the need for lead agency staff and their subcontractors to recruit more foster homes to replace those that exit the program after adopting children. The changes also would increase the need for lead agencies to recruit adoptive homes so that viable adoptive placements are available. We recommended that the lead agencies and department focus on the availability of placement options to help ensure that children are moved quickly to stable living arrangements.

Consistent with our recommendation, the lead agencies and department are using various strategies to recruit more adoptive and foster families. As discussed in a 2008 OPPAGA report, lead agencies are using multiple strategies to recruit adoptive parents, including seeking out relatives willing to adopt a child; raising adoption awareness through print and television media, billboards and flyers, community events, and events that display professional pictures of children available for adoption; participating in speaking engagements at various organizations such as churches and community groups; devoting positions specifically to recruiting adoptive parents; and increasing targeted recruitment for hard-to-place children.⁸

The department has implemented several initiatives to assist the lead agencies in finding adoptive and foster placements for children. During Fiscal Year 2007-08, the department began a pilot project with One Church, One Child, a fee-for-service child placing agency, in which the department would pay all of the costs for One Church, One Child to recruit families willing to adopt older minority children.⁹ One Church, One Child would provide recruitment services and refer families to the applicable lead agency for parenting classes, home studies, and eventual matching with available children.¹⁰

The department also partnered with the Office of Adoption and Child Protection in the Governor's Office to launch a media campaign to promote the benefits of public adoption and increase adoptions of children who are older, have a disability, or are part of a sibling group. In addition, in 2008, the department partnered with the Youth Law Center and the Eckerd

⁸ *Additional Strategies Would Help Address the Barriers to Successful Adoptions*, OPPAGA [Report No. 08-06](#), January 2008.

⁹ For more information, see OPPAGA [Report No. 08-06](#).

¹⁰ When the community-based care system was established, the department redistributed a portion of the funding formerly used to support One Church, One Child to the lead agencies, which resulted in a funding reduction for One Church, One Child. The organization now charges fees for its services to lead agencies. Many lead agencies reported they do not work with One Church, One Child because they have not budgeted for the fees it charges for family recruitment and training, home studies, and adoptive placements.

Family Foundation to develop strategies for targeted recruitment of foster parents willing to take the types of children most represented in the child welfare system, such as minority and older children.

These strategies appear to be meeting with some success; Florida set a new adoption record in Fiscal Year 2007-08 by finalizing 3,674 public adoptions, up from 3,079 in the previous fiscal year.

The department has increased oversight of lead agencies' use of funding flexibility

As authorized by the Legislature, the department initiated the use of fixed price contracts for all lead agencies beginning in October 2006. Lead agencies now receive 12 equal monthly payments each fiscal year.¹¹ The Legislature also authorized lead agencies to retain general revenue across fiscal years throughout the time period covered by their contracts.¹² As payments are no longer based solely on caseload, it is essential for lead agencies to carefully manage their funds throughout the fiscal year to ensure that they retain sufficient funds for the end of the year. Our prior report

recommended that the department and lead agencies closely monitor utilization of general revenue to ensure that lead agencies were not under-using their general revenue funds solely for the purpose of building up reserve funds.

Consistent with our recommendation, the department has created monthly and quarterly fiscal reports for lead agencies. These reports track the lead agencies' use of funds, including general revenue. Department administrators use the reports to monitor the rate of spending for various funding streams to ensure that lead agencies are maximizing their use of funds, while at the same time staying within their budget allocations. The department also requires lead agencies to submit reports that detail the amount of general revenue carried forward across fiscal years in reserve accounts and how these funds are spent. Department managers stated that they believe lead agencies are using their ability to save general revenue in reserve accounts in a responsible manner that takes into consideration immediate service needs, while also providing a financial buffer against increased caseloads or expenses.

¹¹ Two lead agencies, Our Kids and ChildNet (the pilot sites), receive two months of advanced payment at the beginning of the contract year. All other lead agencies receive one month of advanced payment.

¹² Lead agencies are required to return unspent federal funds at the end of each fiscal year.

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