

## WHAT IS...THE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICE REVIEW

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While many program fads have come and gone, one program evaluation approach that may have some sticking power is the federal government's Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). The states depend heavily on the Department of Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for funding of state services for children and families. The Amendments to the Social Security Act (1994) empowered program reviewers charged with assuring state compliance with the titles IV-B and IV-E: If states do not "pass" their review and subsequently fail to make substantial improvements, federal funds can be withheld.

The CFSR thus has some force both to motivate and to enforce system improvement. However, unlike many past approaches to oversight, the CFSR is rooted in many of the same principles as the program practices examined. For instance, the assessment of both strengths and needs grounds the case-study-oriented CFSR in practice in order to help states improve child welfare practices and outcomes. After the assessment or review, areas in need of technical assistance are identified and a remediation effort, or Program Improvement Plan (PIP), is crafted. Then, another review is conducted to reassess the situation and monitor PIP progress.

ACF describes several key concepts built into the CFSR. The reviews emphasize accountability, but are conducted in collaboration with both state and federal governments. Consequently, the team that conducts the review consists of both the host state and federal staff. The team considers information from multiple sources, including statewide statistics, on-site reviews of a sample of children and families, and interviews with key agency and community representatives. Both outcomes and systemic factors that impact agencies helping children and families are considered as the reviews seek to promote promising and/or valued practices, such as family-centered practice, community-based services, building parenting capacity and individualizing services.

Table 1 lists the main outcomes and system performance factors examined in the CFSR. For instance, threshold criteria are set for specific Safety outcomes which include: (1) children are protected from abuse and neglect; and (2) children are maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate. Similarly, criteria for compliance are defined for each of the two Permanency and three Well-being outcomes.

The actual process begins with a statewide statistical assessment completed prior to the on-site review. First, a team of agency and independent staff examines aggregate data focusing on a set of indicators that address safety, permanency and child well-being. Next, a structured, intensive case study protocol is applied to 30-50 cases. The reviewers review case records and interview a variety of parties connected with the cases.

This may sound similar to the Quality Service Review (QSR) that we have used to examine several Casey programs. The QSR approach, pioneered by Ray Foster and associates at Human Systems and Outcomes Inc. of Tallahassee, Florida, involves a multiple case study with intensive expert on-site case reviews as well. However, in the QSR the parties being reviewed play an instrumental role in defining the focus of

the review, creating the criteria for which system performance and service outcomes are to be evaluated.

Despite the majority of states' strong showing on the Systems factors, the results of the CFSR highlight an array of Outcomes areas in need of improvement. Figure 1 summarizes the 32 states, reviewed during the first two years of the CFSR. Almost all of the states had statewide information systems, a Quality Assurance System, and adequate provisions for parent licensing, recruitment and retention. Yet, more than one in three states did not have an adequate Case Review System in place. On closer examination of the full results (Zirps, 2003), states appear to fall short most often of the criteria to develop case plans jointly with parents.

Yet, on any given Outcome, the vast majority of states are considered "not in substantial conformity." For instance, only five states (16 percent) met the criteria for protecting children from abuse and neglect. None of the states reviewed satisfied the permanency outcome of providing children with permanency and stability in their living situations. In fact, 27 states (84 percent) were identified as needing to improve their foster placement stability, identification of permanency goals, and adoption rates.

The development of PIPs in reviewed states is stimulating a great deal of energy and activity, but the CFSR process has critics too. Although a variety of strengths are highlighted in discussions of the CFSR (e.g., interagency collaboration and standards for foster and adoptive homes), much of the attention is drawn to the low scores on outcomes. Many other concerns highlight problems in the aggregate data and the use of inconsistent definitions and procedures across states. Similarly, the extrapolation of statewide performance from a small sample of cases has also elicited cautionary feedback. Other critics protest the meaningfulness use of "passing criteria" that lead to so many "failing grades."

ACF officials are looking to refine the system in light of this critique. A variety of refinements are being planned to improve both the quality of aggregate data available and the conduct of the CFSR. Nonetheless, the process is stimulating a concentrated effort to address the possibility that so many of our systems may be inadequate to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and families.

*References:*

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Zirps, F. (2003). *Summary of Child and Family Service Review Data*. Downloaded from:

[www.childrensrights.org/policy/summary\\_of\\_child\\_and\\_family\\_service\\_data.htm](http://www.childrensrights.org/policy/summary_of_child_and_family_service_data.htm).

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**Figure 1. Percentage of states in Substantial Compliance with Reviewed Systems Performance Indicators and Outcomes.**

