

LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

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TO: Legislative Audit Committee Members

CC: Joan Miles, Director, Department of Public Health and Human Services
Shirley Brown, Administrator, Child and Family Services Division, Department of Public Health and Human Services

FROM: Angie Grove, Deputy Legislative Auditor, Performance Audits

DATE: January 2007

RE: Follow-up to Performance Audit 07SP-008: Foster Parent Program, Child and Family Services Division, Department of Public Health and Human Services (04P-03)

ATTACHMENT: Foster Parent Program Performance Audit Summary

INTRODUCTION

The Legislative Audit Committee prioritized a performance audit of the recruitment and retention of foster parents. The performance audit contained six recommendations, including two two-part recommendations, for a total of eight recommended actions. This memorandum summarizes information on the implementation status of each audit recommendation.

Overview

The Child and Family Services Division implemented five recommended actions related to developing a statewide recruiting strategy, improving the training evaluation process, and developing a structured curriculum development process. Three recommended actions related to improving foster family pre-service training and improving foster family retention strategies are being implemented.

BACKGROUND

The Child and Family Services Division (division) within the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) is responsible for providing care and services to children when a district court orders a child to be removed from its home because the child has been or is at risk for abuse, neglect, or both. Foster care is an essential component of the division's mission, providing care for children until a child can be returned home, until an adoptive is found if a child cannot be returned home, or some other suitable option is identified. In 2004 the department had approximately 700 licensed foster care families. This performance audit examined the department's program activities for recruiting, licensing, and retaining foster parents.

While this audit focused on foster parent recruiting, the division coordinates both foster and adoptive parent recruiting efforts. Since foster parents commonly become adoptive parents, coordinating recruitment and retention efforts appears reasonable and an efficient use of division resources.

FOLLOW-UP AUDIT FINDINGS

The following sections summarize the report's recommendations, and our assessment of the agency's actions to implement the recommendations.

THE DIVISION SHOULD DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT STATEWIDE RECRUITING STRATEGIES

Audit work indicated the division provided minimal program contact information for prospective foster parents. Generally, contact information was made available at recruiting events, from Family Resource Specialists (FRS), and limited advertising. The division did not have statewide recruiting and retention strategies. Local FRS were generally responsible for recruiting and retention efforts in their area. Consequently, local offices developed their own recruiting themes and promotions that commonly were not coordinated with efforts among and within regions.

Recommendation #1

We recommend the Child and Family Services Division develop and implement a statewide plan and strategies for improving division recruitment activities by:

- A. Improving the public's ability to contact FRS personnel and access foster parent program information.**
- B. Developing and implementing a coordinated statewide recruitment effort that includes processes to ensure regional and local recruitment efforts are coordinated with statewide efforts.**

Implementation Status – Implemented

The division has implemented both parts of the recommendation. Although the division did not have a "formal" written plan, division activities have achieved the intent of our recommendation to have a coordinated recruitment effort. Division efforts included:

- Establishing a statewide recruitment and retention committee to focus division recruiting and retention efforts throughout the state.
- An updated website to provide better information to prospective foster parents in a user-friendly format, which includes a toll-free number to obtain FRS contact information. Interested individuals can also easily send an email to a program officer requesting additional program or contact information.
- A statewide recruitment and retention theme, "Foster the Future."
- Development of public service announcements (PSAs) for broadcast throughout the state. PSAs include telephone and internet contact information.
- Purchasing promotional "doodads," such as pens, magnets, and balls for distribution at public events. These items include the state's recruitment theme and contact information.
- Increased funding for recruitment and retention. The division diverted \$25,000 from a canceled adoption program contract for recruiting foster and adoptive parents. Each region receives \$2,500 for local efforts. The remaining \$12,500 is used for statewide recruiting efforts. For example, during FY2006 the division spent \$7,500 for airing PSAs on a Montana cable television network.

IMPROVING ORIENTATION AND PRE-SERVICE TRAINING

The division requires all prospective foster and adoptive parents to complete an orientation and pre-service training program called Keeping Children Safe and Families Strong (KCS). In the absence of state standards for presenting KCS training, local offices had established their own informal standards, which in some instances limited KCS class offerings. Additionally, training opportunities in some rural areas were limited because of time and distance.

Recommendation #2

We recommend the division increase KCS training opportunities by:

- A. Establishing minimum standards for the number of classes division staff are expected to teach and for minimum class sizes.**
- B. Develop and implement strategies and practices to increase KCS training accessibility in rural areas.**

Implementation Status – Being Implemented

Both parts of this recommendation are being implemented. The division conducted a time study of FRS activities and is still reviewing the information to determine the number of classes FRS should be presenting. Audit and follow-up audit interviews with regional management indicated FRS should be able to teach three to four classes annually.

The division is also developing a KCS training video that will be available for prospective foster parents in rural areas. While watching a video is not the preferred training method, it is a viable alternative for persons living in rural areas who otherwise might be unable to attend training. Division management stated FRS will have intermittent contact with persons watching the video training to answer questions and provide additional information.

IMPROVING THE KCS EVALUATION FORM

The division requested KCS training participants complete an evaluation of the training received. However, the evaluation form asked only general questions about the training, with no questions specific to the different training modules, exercises, or presentation of materials. We also documented different evaluation forms used throughout the state.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the Child and Family Services Division modify its training evaluation form to obtain information necessary to comprehensively evaluate training operations and the effectiveness of the program relative to training goals and objectives.

Implementation Status - Implemented

This recommendation is implemented. The division completed revision of the evaluation form in January 2005.

IMPROVING TRACKING AND MONITORING OF KCS EVALUATIONS

The division did not have an effective system for tracking KCS participants' course training evaluations. Collected forms were sent to the central office where staff had to manually compile information, which was time-consuming and labor intensive.

Recommendation #4

We recommend the Child and Family Services Division work with the department to develop and implement a management information system that provides timely, economical access to evaluation data.

Implementation Status - Implemented

This recommendation is implemented. Division personnel developed a system for tracking evaluation information using a desk-top management information system.

DEVELOPING A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Although the division had a structured KCS training curriculum, some FRS had modified the training curriculum or used other materials not approved by central office. In some instances, FRS preferred materials presented in previous training curriculums. The division had less assurance all prospective foster parents received the approved training information.

Recommendation #5

We recommend the Child and Family Services Division establish a structured process for reviewing and modifying the approved training curriculum to assure compliance with state and federal training standards.

Implementation Status - Implemented

This recommendation is implemented. The division restructured and updated the KCS training curriculum to address FRS training concerns and presentation preferences. The division also implemented a work group to review recommendations suggested by participants, FRS, and others.

IMPROVING FOSTER FAMILY RETENTION STRATEGIES

The division did not have a strategic plan for retaining foster parents. According to our survey of foster parents, 53 percent of licensed foster parents were considering discontinuing foster care. While FRS have primary responsibilities for recruiting and training foster parents, retention requires division-wide efforts to support and to retain foster parents. For example, foster parents generally responded positively about division activities, but also indicated the division could improve its communication and coordination with foster parents.

Recommendation #6

We recommend the Child and Family Services Division develop and implement a comprehensive plan with specific strategies for improving foster family retention activities.

Implementation Status – Being Implemented

This recommendation is being implemented. The division's statewide recruitment and retention workgroup has met and is going to develop foster parent entrance and exit surveys that will be part of developing retention strategies. However, the division has not formally developed retention strategies yet.