LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

REPORT SUMMARY

FOSTER PARENT PROGRAM
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Performance Audit
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INTRODUCTION The Child and Family Services Division (division) within the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) is the agency responsible for protecting Montana children who are abandoned, neglected, or abused. To meet this mandate, the division must place these children in out-of-home placements until children can be reunited with their family or placed in an adoptive home or other permanent placement. Youth foster homes are an essential component of the child protection system. This performance audit examined division activities for recruiting, training, and retaining foster families.

FOSTER CARE LICENSING REQUIREMENTS To be a licensed foster parent, a person must be at least 18 years old, be of good moral character, be physically, mentally, and emotionally competent to care for children in care, have no substantiated allegations of abuse or neglect, and not be convicted of certain violent or drug offenses. Prospective foster parents must also complete the division's foster parent training program called Keeping Children Safe and Families Strong (KCS).

TYPES OF FOSTER CARE The division issues four primary types of foster care licenses:

- Regular Foster Care License.
- Specialized Foster Care License for licensees who have received additional training to care for children with higher care needs.
- Licensed Kinship Providers, who meet the same standards for a regular license, but are limited to caring for specific children. Kinship homes include family members, other adults with close ties to the child needing a foster home, or members of the family's or child's tribe.
- Provisional Foster Care License, which is commonly issued to persons who completed some, but not all, licensure requirements.

THE DIVISION HAS WORKED TO ENHANCE THE FOSTER PARENT PROGRAM The division has worked to improve the effectiveness of program activities, including:

- Implementing a compliance unit that has improved the consistency of the foster care licensing process.

- Developing a foster parent training program specific to Montana needs.
- Coordinating with the Montana State Foster/Adoptive Parents Association to implement a formal dispute resolution process for foster parents and the division.
- Contracting with a private organization to develop a statewide campaign to promote and increase awareness of the need for foster and adoptive parents.

Background Checks for Foster Parents are Completed Statute and administrative rules require the division conduct a child protective services and criminal history checks of persons providing out-of-home care to children. Our review indicated the division has controls in place to assure compliance with these requirements. Additionally, our review found licensee files contained documentation of background checks.

FOSTER PARENTS GENERALLY VIEW DIVISION PERSONNEL POSITIVELY We surveyed current and former foster parents about division program activities. Overall, foster parents indicated division personnel are professional, place children that meet age and gender preferences, and help them through the licensing process. Former foster parents most frequently cited personal or family reasons for leaving the program.

THE DIVISION IS NOT MEETING ITS OBJECTIVES FOR THE NUMBER OF LICENSED FOSTER FAMILIES The division has experienced an overall decline in the number of foster parents between fiscal years 2001 and 2004. This affects the division's ability to meet its objectives for placing children in the most appropriate placement and increasing the stability of child placements. Additionally, limited availability of foster care placements can increase demands on existing foster parents and potentially impact retention.

THE DIVISION NEEDS A COMPREHENSIVE RECRUITMENT PLAN Historically, the division has delegated foster parent recruitment, training, and retention to family resource specialist (FRS) located in regional or local offices, but has not had comprehensive statewide plans for monitoring and evaluating these activities.

The division has not established an effective statewide plan for recruiting foster parents. While recruiting activities among offices are similar, the timing and extent of recruiting efforts varies. Audit work indicated access to and availability of program and contact information in some areas is limited. Some division offices have limited their recruitment efforts primarily to larger communities, with little effort made in rural areas or smaller communities.

We recommend the division improve public access to foster parent program information and develop and implement a comprehensive statewide recruitment plan.

INCREASING AVAILABILITY OF KCS TRAINING Some regions or offices have established practices that limit the availability KCS training for prospective foster parents. For example, some offices offered training only two or three times a year, offered training only in larger communities, or required minimum class sizes before offering training. Ensuring training is available is essential to maximizing recruiting efforts. We identified some options used in one or more regions to increase training accessibility.

We recommend the division establish minimum standards for offering KCS training and develop strategies and practices to increase training accessibility in rural areas.

IMPROVING KCS EVALUATION FORMS When foster parents complete KCS training, the division requests they evaluate the training. The evaluation form is designed to obtain general information about overall course content and presentation, but is not designed to obtain more specific participant feedback about individual training modules, individual trainers, or other critical training components. An improved evaluation form would increase the division's ability to monitor and evaluate KCS training activities.

We recommend the 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.

IMPROVING TRACKING OF EVALUATION FORMS The division does not have an effective or efficient system for tracking and monitoring KCS evaluation forms. While FRS supervisors and program officers review evaluations, the division does not enter the information into a system that allows regular and timely access to the information. Consequently, the division has not compiled statewide evaluation data since 2002. The division could also increase efficiency by implementing a "desk-top" management information system.

THE DIVISION SHOULD ESTABLISH A STRUCTURED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS Some FRS have modified the KCS training curriculum without approval from the central office, resulting in variations around the state. This increases risks that foster parents may not receive training the division determines essential for licensure and can adversely impact the effectiveness of the program. We recommend the division establish a structured process for reviewing and modifying the approved training curriculum.

IMPROVING FOSTER FAMILY RETENTION While FRS have primary responsibility for recruitment and training activities, retaining foster parents requires division-wide efforts to support foster parents, including social workers, supervisors, and managers. While the majority of foster parents responded positively about division communication and coordination efforts, responses also indicated areas for improvement. Areas for improvement included keeping foster parents informed about a child's case status and more timely responses to requests for assistance from social workers.

The division has relied primarily on field and supervisory personnel to evaluate retention efforts, but does not have an effective system for regular monitoring and evaluation of retention efforts. The report provides a list of options for improving communication and coordination. We recommend the division establish develop and implement a comprehensive plan with specific strategies for improving foster family retention activities.