

Mr. John R. Nicholas
Commissioner
Department of Health & Human Services
221 State Street
Augusta, Maine 04333

Dear Mr. Nicholas:

From September 12 - 16, 2005, staff of the Children's Bureau, ACF Region I, and the Office of Information Services (OIS) conducted an Assessment Review of Maine's Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). The AFCARS data used for the review was from the report period October 1, 2004 - March 31, 2005 (2005A). I have summarized the major findings from the AFCARS review in this letter. Enclosed please find the full report.

The AFCARS assessment review evaluates two areas: the AFCARS general requirements (reporting populations and technical standards) and the data elements. Information collected on these areas is combined and a rating factor is assigned to the general requirements and each data element. A scale of one (does not meet AFCARS standards) to four (fully meets AFCARS standards) is used to assign a factor to each element.

The State was found to be in full compliance with the adoption population requirements and there were two errors in the foster care reporting population. The State correctly includes children in the AFCARS reporting population that are placed back home while still in the agency's responsibility for care and placement. However, the State must modify the collection and reporting of this information to ensure that if the child is returned home for a specified period of time, regardless of the length of time, these children continue to be included in AFCARS for the entire specified period of time. If there is not a specified period of time noted, and if the child is still at home and the agency has care and placement responsibility after six months, the child is to be reported in AFCARS as "discharged."

The second issue with the State's foster care population relates to the reporting of youth who have reached the age of majority. The State provides services to youth through a voluntary arrangement after the age of 18, regardless of eligibility for title IV-E funds. For youth 18 or older that are not receiving title IV-E funds, the State must report these individuals as discharged. The reason for discharge would be "emancipation," unless there is another appropriate outcome reason.

In regard to the technical standards, the most significant issue relates to the State's ability to create a "subsequent" data file. The State staff noted that if they do a resubmission of a prior report period, some of the data may be "overwritten." This means that instead of reporting data reflecting the case during the prior report period, only data from the present timeframe would be submitted. While this is primarily a database design issue, it results in incorrect data being reported for prior report periods. The State's statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS) should be designed as the State's electronic case file and, as such, contain the full history of events that occur for each involvement with the child welfare system.

In regard to the data elements, the most significant area requiring technical corrections is in the area of case plan goal (foster care element #43). The State acknowledged issues with the case plan module of its information system and with issues related to practice. The staff indicated that as part of the Child and Family Services Program (CFSR) Improvement Plan they have been working on improving the definitions for case plan goals. The Federal team provided suggestions, in addition to the required changes needed, for improving the design of the screens collecting this information.

Additionally, the State needs to address its collection and reporting of whether a child is diagnosed with a disability. According to the frequency report, 76% of the records reflect that the child has not been seen by a medical professional. This contradicts the findings in the State's CFSR final report, in which the "physical health of the child" was rated a strength. It appears, based on the case file review that the children are being seen by a medical professional, but the data are not being entered in the information system.

Many of the other technical corrections needed for the foster care elements relate to correcting the mapping of a State value to the correct AFCARS value. In other instances, the State is including values that are no longer used and should be removed from the program code and the screen selection list.

You should note that as a result of the technical corrections that are to be made to the system, the State's semi-annual data submission may fail to meet the "missing data" standard. In order to ensure that the data are complete and accurate, the agency must require workers to enter the data and assess its validity prior to submitting it to ACF. To do so, the State may utilize the management reports created by the agency, as well as the Data Quality Utility and the Frequency Utility posted on the Children's Bureau's website.

The enclosed documents include the final report of the on-site review, the final findings of the general requirements and data elements, and the AFCARS Improvement Plan for the data elements. Within 30 calendar days after the receipt of this report and the attached AFCARS Improvement Plan, the State staff must submit the Improvement Plan electronically to the ACF Regional Office and the Children's Bureau with estimated due dates for completing the tasks identified in the Improvement Plan. An electronic copy of the final matrices will be e-mailed to

your staff. The State should provide electronic quarterly updates of its progress to the ACF Regional Office.

Once ACF and the State agree that the quality of the data is acceptable, the AFCARS Improvement Plan will be considered finished, and a letter will be sent to the State from the Children's Bureau confirming this fact. The letter will include a summary of the actions taken by the State and the completed AFCARS Improvement Plan.

Additionally, the State's plan for implementing the changes to the system and for caseworker training must be included in the State's title IV-B Annual Progress and Services Report as part of the information required in 45 CFR 1357.15(t) and 45 CFR 1357.16(a)(5).

The ACF Regional Office will work with the State to determine if technical assistance is needed, and available, to implement the AFCARS Improvement Plan. The State may obtain technical assistance from the Children's Bureau's National Resource Center-Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT). If you wish to request on-site technical assistance from the NRC-CWDT, please contact your ACF Regional Office.

In closing, I would like to thank the staff who participated in the review for their hard work and commitment to collecting accurate and reliable AFCARS data. If you have any questions regarding the report, please contact Angelina Palmiero at (202) 205-7240.

Sincerely,

Susan Orr, Ph.D.
Associate Commissioner
Children's Bureau

Enclosures

cc: James Beougher, Director, Bureau of Child & Family Services
Hugh Galligan, Regional Administrator, ACF Region I
Paul Hasz, ACF Office of Information Services
Angelina M. Palmiero, M.S.W., AFCARS
Terry Watt, Director, Division of State Systems
Jerry Milner, National Child and Family Services Review Team