

AFCARS – Errors Associated with Data Conversion

Since 1994, federal law and regulation have required states to collect case-level information on all children for whom the state child welfare agency has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and on children adopted under the auspices of the state's public child welfare agency. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) includes information on foster and adoptive parents. The information required by AFCARS is what a social worker would normally collect during the course of assessment, planning, and service provision, so workers do not need to collect additional information solely for the purpose of meeting AFCARS requirements. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) uses the data for many purposes, such as responding to requests from Congress and the public for current data on children in foster care or those who have been adopted; policy decisions; budget decisions and state allocations; monitoring; and technical assistance for states.

The information collected and reported via AFCARS is critical to the federal government. The government uses it to determine a state's level of compliance with the national standards on child safety, permanence, and well being. In connection with these standards, all states have undergone a Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and have developed a CFSR-related Program Improvement Plan. The government either has reviewed or will review the automated information systems of states with an operational Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System, and at some point, expects all states to have an AFCARS Assessment Review.

The following discusses errors identified during the AFCARS Assessment Review process. This information is intended to assist reporting agencies in improving the quantity and quality of the information that they report via AFCARS.

Recommended Solutions:

If a State has not as yet implemented a SACWIS, or other case management information system, and will convert data from a legacy system, careful planning of the data conversion process can prevent a number of AFCARS data reporting problems. The plan developed by the State of West Virginia is a good example of how to prepare for converting data from an existing "legacy" system as part of the implementation of a new statewide information system. Some States have elected to implement "Historical Removal" and/or "Historical Placement" screens to capture the original client removal and placement information.

The information can be entered as time permits by staff for open cases and cases reopened when a child reenters care. A second option is to capture required dates and the total number of removals or placements prior to the first removal or placement recorded in the new SACWIS and simply add to that total based on the removals and placements recorded for the client in the new child welfare automated application. Regardless of how the state chooses to deal with this issue, they must include required previous client removal and placement information in the AFCARS reports that they submit.

Missing AFCARS Information:

For AFCARS extraction and submission purposes, information not collected or not available for a particular client record (for whatever reason) is always mapped as all blanks (not all zeros, all 9's, etc.). Missing information should never be mapped or defaulted to a valid AFCARS value.

Technical Assistance: Readers may obtain technical assistance from the Children's Bureau's National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT). The resource center can be contacted at 877/672-4892, or at its Web page: <http://nrccwdt.org>. If you wish to request onsite technical assistance from the NRC-CWDT, contact your ACF Regional Office.