

Child Diagnosed with Disabilities: Foster Care Elements 10-15

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.

Errors Identified During AFCARS Assessment Reviews

The AFCARS foster care element asks if a child has been clinically diagnosed with a disability. If the response is yes, then the worker must select one or all of the applicable disability categories (medical condition; mental, physical, emotional disability; or other medically diagnosed condition). The AFCARS Assessment Reviews conducted so far have found instances in which the system logic derives the response to these questions by checking whether the caseworker has selected any of the categories. If none of the categories are selected, then the system selects "not yet determined" as the response to whether a child has been diagnosed with a disability.

This method may result in underreporting of the number of children determined not to have a disability. The AFCARS definitions for "not yet determined" and "no" are:

- **No:** Indicates that a qualified professional has conducted a clinical assessment of the child and has determined that the child has no disabilities.
- **Not Yet Determined:** Indicates that a qualified professional has not yet conducted a clinical assessment of the child.

In a number of cases, the option of "not yet determined" is not available for the caseworker to select on the screen. Using such defaults for vital AFCARS information is not acceptable. The automated system should not default to a response of "not yet determined."

Defaulting missing data to “not yet determined” is misleading and may mask the possibility that caseworkers are not properly filling out the screen that lists the types of client disabilities.

It is also probable that underreporting of disability information is due to not all disability information being mapped to valid AFCARS values. AFCARS Tab D of the *State Guide to an AFCARS Assessment Review* contains a list of medical conditions and the appropriate mapping to AFCARS values.

Recommended Solution

The first issue to be resolved for this element is that a qualified professional must diagnose the child’s disability. Once the disability is diagnosed, the worker should enter this information into the state’s automated information system and report it via AFCARS. Missing data must be defaulted to blanks. The best approach to collecting these data is to have a question on a screen in the automated information system and have the worker select “yes,” “no,” or “not yet determined.” In addition, the selections should not be preset. Instead, each selection should be blank, and the worker should select the appropriate answer. The screen may also need to be made mandatory to force the worker to enter this information.

Disability information (Foster Care Elements 10–15 and 33 and Adoption Elements 10–15) is collected so that the system can differentiate between those disabilities that are clinically diagnosed and those that are not.

For AFCARS extraction and submission purposes, information not collected or not available for a particular client record (for whatever reason) is mapped as all blanks (not all zeros, all 9s, etc.). Information that is missing or not collected should never be mapped to any valid AFCARS value. In the eight official and three of the pilot AFCARS Assessment Reviews conducted to this point, this foster care element was one of the most problematic. The average rating for this element on the four-point AFCARS rating scale was 2, with all 11 states receiving this rating.

The AFCARS ratings are based on the standard AFCARS 1–4 rating scale (1, *AFCARS requirement has not been implemented*; 2, *technical system requirements for AFCARS reporting do not fully meet the standards*; 3, *technical system requirements for AFCARS reporting are in place, but there are data entry problems affecting the quality of the data*; and 4, *all of the AFCARS requirements have been met*).

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.