

Promising Practices Found During Onsite AFCARS Reviews - #1

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 (CSFR) and have developed a CSFR-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 promising practices found during the AFCARS assessment review process. State AFCARS reviews conducted to this point, with the exception of Vermont's, have been in states with Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) systems. As a part of the mandatory requirements for the implementation of a SACWIS, states are required to report AFCARS data. This information is intended to assist all states in improving the quantity and quality of the information that they report via AFCARS regardless of whether they have a SACWIS or not. It is hoped, however, that this information can assist those states that are currently planning or developing their SACWIS applications to ensure they will be able to correctly gather and report AFCARS data.

To improve the quality and quantity of the required AFCARS information, states have incorporated a number of functions and features into their automated child welfare applications. As quality assurance tools, these features supplement the AFCARS utilities provided by the Children's Bureau and should not be considered as a replacement for them.

Automated System Features

Some of the initial efforts to improve data quality and quantity incorporated into automated child welfare applications include using distinctive colors to highlight and identify required AFCARS data fields that cannot be made mandatory. For example,

termination of parental rights information is typically not available at beginning of a case. If this information is included on the same screen with other information about birthparents, making it mandatory may not be an option. Another example is the addition of AFCARS summary screens, in which all foster care or adoption data elements for a

particular client are available for review by the worker and their supervisor. In addition, if appropriate, definitions and instructions for specific AFCARS data elements have been included. For instance, on the screen where racial information is recorded, the instruction to “select all that apply” encourages workers to select multiple races if a client indicates that they consider themselves to be of more than one race. Another example is to clearly define within the automated application (using the AFCARS definition) when it is appropriate to use the selection “unable to determine.”

In addition to the examples cited above, another promising practice is to identify AFCARS elements that require the client to answer specific questions and encourage workers to ask these questions of the client. The automated application should never attempt to derive an answer that should be asked of and answered only by the client.

Specialized Reports

Many states have found it extremely helpful to their staff to produce and distribute detail reports and exception reports that list by worker, case, and client the information contained in the case record and the information that is missing from the case record for specific AFCARS data elements. These reports are typically produced and distributed on a monthly basis. Many states use intranet technology to make information from these reports readily available to their field staff and casework supervisors.

Missing AFCARS Information

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.

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.