



Media Release

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DCFS Meets Federal Goals, Continues Work to Improve Services and Prevent Abuse

The Department of Human Services (DHS) Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) announced today that it had reached a major milestone in its efforts to fundamentally transform Arkansas's child welfare system. After four years of effort, the Division has been informed by the federal government that it now meets or exceeds each goal outlined in its federal Program Improvement Plan.

“As a result of a lot of hard work, we have a child welfare system today that is more focused on preventing abuse and strengthening struggling families than it ever was before,” DHS Director John Selig said. “I am proud of our staff and the DCFS leadership for the commitment they made to improve the system.”

Federal authorities noted in a letter about the achievements that the progress DCFS has made is significant, especially when it comes to supporting Arkansas families.

“A notable aspect of the Arkansas PIP was the implementation of a practice model, which combines the casework process with an approach that values and supports families at every encounter within the system ... Arkansas is congratulated on program enhancement efforts and the many achievements over the last three years,” wrote Bryan Samuels, the commissioner for the federal Administration for Children and Families.

A 2008 Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), the federal government's report card for child welfare agencies, showed that Arkansas was not in substantial compliance in any of the seven key program areas it examined. Those areas focus on the safety, permanency and well-being of children in contact with DCFS. As a result of the problems noted in the federal review, DCFS began immediately working to overhaul the child welfare system and later worked with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families to create and implement the division's Program Improvement Plan. The plan included over 40 action items DCFS had to complete and 300 benchmarks the division had to meet. By completing the plan, DCFS avoided nearly \$1.2 million in federal penalties that would have been assessed.

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Among other things, the plan included goals and strategies to ensure that the well-being of children was the top priority for both caseworkers and biological families. A recent review of DCFS's progress shows that the division has made significant strides in this area, increasing the percentage of cases in which families are actively involved from 31 percent of those reviewed in 2008 to 61 percent this year. The plan also included strategies to help biological parents maintain positive relationship with their children, even when the children are in foster care. Since 2008, the percentage of cases in which the division made suitable efforts to sustain relationships between children in care and their parents increased from 48 percent to 70 percent.

In addition, the plan emphasized the need for more permanent living situations for children in foster care so they will have a stable home and fewer foster care placements. For those children who will not be returned to their parents, the division worked to bolster adoptions or permanent placement with relatives. According to the most recent review, the percentage of cases in which DCFS made concerted efforts to achieve timely adoptions rose from 33 percent of cases reviewed to 68 percent today.

These improvements and others were made by division leaders through restructuring the management team, retraining caseworkers and supervisors, reducing caseloads, implementing a robust casework review and mentoring process, placing a greater emphasis on strengthening families, assessing the quality of all foster homes, and creating a system focused on removing obstacles to providing children with permanent homes.

“As we worked through the improvement plan, we as a staff didn't just want to meet the minimum compliance standards, said DCFS Director Cecile Blucker. “We wanted to improve the quality of our casework because that equates to better outcomes for our children.”

Blucker said DCFS is committed to continuing to make improvements, such as addressing gaps in services that will make families stronger, streamlining the foster and adoption process, increasing the number of children who have permanent homes and encouraging more families to be engaged in the process. Still, she said, meeting the goals of the Program Improvement Plan is a significant accomplishment that her division will build upon.

“This is just the beginning for the child welfare system in Arkansas,” Blucker said. “From here, we will put an even sharper focus on prevention so that families are better able to handle challenges without the involvement of the child welfare system. Families will be at the center of everything we do.”

In any given month, DCFS serves approximately 12,000 children. In State Fiscal Year 2012, the State's child welfare system investigated 35,743 reports of child maltreatment and cared for 7,739 children in foster care. The division also managed 11,825 protective services cases (involving 27,671 children) and 673 supportive services cases (involving 1,611 children) during that same time.