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|  | **2019** |
|  | **Arkansas Department of Human Services**  **Division of Children and Family Services** |

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| **Statewide QSPR Performance Report** |
| **DCFS Service Quality and Practice Improvement Unit** |

**Overview**

The Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) utilizes the Quality Services Peer Review (QSPR) process as a central component of its Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) system. The process is used as a monitoring tool to evaluate Arkansas’s child welfare system; it constitutes DCFS’ qualitative case review process. The review is designed to help individual service areas, and the Division as a whole, improve child welfare services and subsequently outcomes for children and families receiving services.

The standards outlined in the QSPR support the principles promoted in other review tools employed by DCFS as well as the Arkansas Practice Model, including family-centered practice, community-based services, individualizing services that address the unique needs of families and strengthening the capacity of parents to protect and provide for their children. The QSPR is administered by the Service Quality and Practice Improvement Unit, a public-private partnership between the Division and Public Consulting Group, Inc. (PCG), which is comprised of both State and contracted quality assurance reviewers. The team is managed by a PCG manager who is responsible for overseeing the QSPR process.

Arkansas’s QSPR process utilizes the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) onsite review instrument (OSRI), with the Division adopting the OSRI developed for Round 3 of the CFSR for its more recent round of QSPR reviews. The instrument focuses on the three broad goals of child welfare, i.e., child safety, permanency and well-being. Consistent with the current CFSR, the QSPR measures seven specific outcomes within these three broad goals by rating 18 individual items to identify strengths and areas of practice needing improvement. The outcomes include two related to safety, two related to permanency and three related to child and family well-being. Each individual item consists of a series of questions related to one of those outcomes. In completing the instrument, reviewers conduct case file reviews and case-related interviews with children, parents, foster parents, caseworkers, and other professionals involved with the child. Each case is rated in adherence with the specific instructions outlined in the OSRI based on the totality of information collected during the review. Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout the process are used to describe the effectiveness of agency interventions and services.

Quality assurance is an integral component of both the QSPR and CFSR processes. Quality assurance (QA) activities are interwoven throughout the case review process to ensure fidelity to the methodology, integrity of the instrument and information contained therein, and accuracy of the ratings resulting from review of the data collected. The QSPR quality assurance process adheres to the Children’s Bureau’s expectations and safeguards the validity and reliability of the findings. All cases reviewed must undergo two levels of quality assurance. The first level of QA ensures that reviewers are accurately rating cases and properly applying the federal instructions within the OSRI. The second level of QA ensures consistency among all cases reviewed across reviewers and throughout all service areas within the state. Both levels of quality assurance use a collaborative approach and place shared responsibility on both the reviewer and the QA staff. Reviewers gather and reconcile the information needed to answer the relevant questions using the guidance within, and supplemental to, the instrument and the support and guidance of the quality assurance team. QA staff assist in all phases of the review, from preparation of the cases for the review through the completion of the instrument, by answering questions, working with reviewers on clarifying issues and assisting reviewers in evaluating/reconciling information to arrive at appropriate case ratings. Secondary oversight is conducted on all reviewed cases once the first-level QA and OSRI are completed. The second-level QA is conducted by a QA staff person other than the individual assigned to the first-level QA, relying on more than one individual to verify the case review information and ratings are accurate to ensure inter-rater reliability and accurate determinations. The focus of the secondary oversight is to ensure consistency across the review sites and all reviewers.

For State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2019, twenty cases (12 foster care and 8 in-home cases) were selected using a stratified and randomly selected technique for each of DCFS’ ten service areas. A total of 200 cases were reviewed statewide over a twelve-month period. The stratified sample is reflective of Arkansas’ ratio of foster care (60 percent) to in-home cases (40 percent). The SFY 2019 QSPR review began in September 2018 and the reviews in all ten service areas were completed and finalized in November 2019.

To comply with reporting dates for the Program Improvement Plan (PIP) monitoring period, the annual statewide QSPR review does not align with Arkansas’ fiscal year. In addition, the cases reviewed were selected from the same three counties per service area as were reviewed for the Round 3 CFSR. Case reviews will continue to be conducted in the same 30 designated counties for the duration of the PIP monitoring period.

The universe of cases from which the foster care samples was selected included all children for whom the agency had placement and care responsibility and who were considered to be in foster care on the basis of Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System reporting requirements for at least 24 hours during the sampling period. The sampling frame for the in-home services cases, which included Protective Services cases and Differential Response referrals, encompassed all cases opened for service for at least 45 consecutive days during the sampling period and in which no children in the family were in foster care for 24 hours or longer during any portion of the review period.

This report combines the results of the individual service areas’ QSPRs, providing an overall summary of the Division’s performance pertaining to the goals of safety, permanency and well-being for children receiving services. The statewide scores for SFY 2019 are straight averages of the combined scores from the ten service areas in accordance with the approved federal sampling methodology.

As previously stated, the QSPR assesses individual service area and statewide performance with regard to substantial conformity with seven child and family outcomes. Each outcome incorporates one or more of the 18 items included in the OSRI, and each item is rated as a Strength or Area Needing Improvement based on an evaluation of certain child welfare practices and processes in the reviewed cases. An item is assigned an overall rating of Strength if 90 percent[[1]](#footnote-1) or more of the applicable cases were rated as a Strength. To be in substantial conformity with a particular outcome, 95 percent or more of the cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome. Substantial achievement for individual cases is based on the ratings of the individual items within each outcome. The requirements for substantial achievement vary by outcome but generally require that all applicable items be rated as Strengths.

The discussion in this report focuses on the most prominent and significant strengths and areas needing improvement identified during the SFY 2019 reviews. Statewide scores for all items covered in the reviews are presented within each of the safety, permanency and well-being sections and in the Appendix. Comparisons are available for the Round 3 CFSR and the SFY 2018 QSPR. They are presented in Table 5 in the Appendix.

**Safety**

Ensuring the safety of children and protecting them from maltreatment is the paramount responsibility of the child welfare system. DCFS must address initial safety concerns at the onset of the Division’s involvement with families and then assess and address risk and safety concerns throughout the life of the case; the OSRI assesses safety-related practices accordingly. The tool evaluates the timeliness within which child maltreatment investigations are initiated, the provision of services to safely maintain children in the family home and the efforts to assess risk and safety and mitigate identified concerns. As noted earlier, each item is rated with an overall rating of Strength if 90 percent or more of the applicable cases were rated as a Strength. Any measure that does not reach 90 percent will not be deemed a strength in practice.

The SFY 2019 QSPR revealed that, statewide, the Agency’s performance has improved markedly for all safety related items, compared to the results from the SFY 2018 QSPR and from Round 3 of the CFSR. The extent to which children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect (Safety Outcome 1) and children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate (Safety Outcome 2) improved by 11 and 13 percentage points, respectively, from that of last year’s quality service reviews. There was also noticeable improvement over the results from Round 3 of the CFSR. Despite the continued improvement, all safety items, with the exception of the Services to Prevent Removal item (94%), are rated as Areas Needing Improvement.

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| **Table 1: Safety Outcomes 1 and 2** | | | |
|  | ***SFY 2019 QSPR*** | ***SFY 2018***  ***QSPR*** | ***Round 3 CFSR*** |
| **Safety 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect** | **87%** | **76%** | **69%** |
| Item 1: Timeliness of Initiating Investigations (N=105) | 87% | 76% | 69% |
| **Safety 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate** | **83%** | **70%** | **60%** |
| Item 2: Services to Prevent Removal (N=50) | 94% | 74% | 55% |
| Item 3: Risk and Safety Assessment and Management (N=200) | 83% | 71% | 61% |

*Strengths*

* **Services to Prevent Removal –** DCFS provided the services needed to prevent children from removal (Item 2) in 94 percent of the reviewed cases. The State’s performance for this item demonstrates substantial improvement since the SFY 2018 QSPR with an increase of 20 percentage points. More than half of the state’s service areas successfully provided services to prevent removal (Item 2) in 100 percent of the cases reviewed for SFY 2019. Area 2 was the only Area that did not demonstrate improvement since the previous year’s QSPR or Round 3 of the CFSR.

*Areas Needing Improvement*

* **Timeliness of Initiating Investigations –** Reports of abuse and/or neglect were received in 105 of the cases reviewed for the SFY 2019 QSPR. Caseworkers initiated the investigations within the State mandated timeframes in 87 percent of these cases, an 11-percentage point increase from the SFY 2018 QSPR and an 18-percentage point increase from the Round 3 CFSR. While only Area 2 achieved substantial conformity (100%) for this measure during the SFY 2019 QSPR, the State continued the overall trend of improved performance from the SFY 2018 QSPR and Round 3 CFSR with nine of ten service areas demonstrating improved performance on this safety measure. Areas 1, 5, 8, and 10 all substantially improved their timeliness of initiating investigations from SFY 2018 and Round 3 CFSR with all four Areas having a success rate of at least 90 percent. While the four areas were not rated as a strength, as timeliness of initiating investigations (Item 1) requires a 95 percent rate in order to be rated as a strength, all four Areas showed substantial improved performances. Positive practices included thoroughly documenting all attempts to initiate timely investigations.
* **Risk and Safety Assessment and Management –** Regardless of whether children remain in the family home or enter foster care, DCFS is required to assess and address risk and safety concerns for children receiving services. During SFY 2019, sufficient efforts were made to assess and address the risk and safety concerns for children receiving services (Item 3) in the majority of the reviewed cases (83 percent). The deficient ratings once again stemmed from problems in conducting ongoing assessments of risk and safety and with safety management. Despite a 12-percentage point improvement in performance since the SFY 2018 QSPR and a 22-percentage point increase from the Round 3 of the CFSR, continued improvement is warranted. Consistent with prior years’ reviews, identified concerns involved a lack of ongoing, informal assessments due to sparse caseworker visitation with families, typically in service areas with significant staff turnover. In cases involving deficiencies in case practice, caseworkers simply were not in the homes enough and therefore could not adequately assess risk and safety concerns. Such deficiencies were evidenced in both foster care and in-home cases with risk assessments and safety management occurring infrequently, regardless of the children’s placement. Visits occurred only a few times with lengthy periods between visits in some instances.

While Arkansas has continued to demonstrate improved performance on both safety outcomes, the state has yet to achieve substantial conformity for either. Areas 1, 5, 8 and 10 were all nearing strength on timeliness of initiating investigations, with all achieving at least 90 percent conformity. Areas 3 and 6 also showed promise, achieving at least an 85 percent conformity rating for reviewed cases for this item. Area 9 showed a decrease of 5 percentage points from SFY 2018 and also had the lowest conformity rating (78 percent).

Seven out of ten service areas were wholly successful in providing services to prevent removal (3 through 8 and 10). Area 2 struggled the most for this item, dropping by 20 percentage points from SFY 2018, going from being wholly successful to having a success rate of 80 percent.

Areas 4 and 10 exhibited the strongest performance on the risk and safety assessment and management measure, with 18 of the 20 reviewed cases (90 percent) achieving a rating of Strength in each of those service areas. Areas 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8 showed promise in this area of practice with 85 percent of the reviewed cases in each of these areas being in conformity. Area 7 struggled the most with slightly less than two-thirds of the reviewed cases (65 percent) achieving a rating of Strength. Area 9 was the only area to show a decrease in improvement from SFY 2018.

**Permanency**

Children are entitled to permanency, i.e., live with a legally permanent family which can meet their basic needs as well as have relational permanence. When children must be removed from their families to ensure their safety, permanency planning should guide the interventions to enable children to return to their families of origin as soon as is safely possible or to other nurturing, legally permanent families when return home is not possible. While children are in foster care, the child welfare system must work to support and maintain their relationships with family and friends and their connections to their community, faith and culture.

The SFY 2019 QSPR demonstrated strength in practice for one permanency measure, with Arkansas successfully making efforts to place children in care with relatives when appropriate in 94 percent of the reviewed cases. The Division demonstrated a 37-percentage point increase on the continuity of family relationships and connections being preserved for children (Permanency Outcome 2) over the Round 3 CFSR, which represents a 15-percentage point increase from the SFY 2018 QSPR. Despite not achieving substantial conformity on either children have permanency and stability in their living situations (Permanency Outcome 1) or the continuity of family relationships and connections being preserved for children (Permanency Outcome 2) during the SFY 2019 QSPR, the Agency made improvements on all permanency item measures since the Round 3 CFSR and on all but two of the measures since the SFY 2018 QSPR. The Agency struggled the most with promoting parent-child relationships beyond providing visits (Item 11), and had some difficulty with providing children in care with placement stability (Item 4) and preserving their important connections while in care (Item 9); these three items are closely related and often similarly impacted when children are placed away from their home counties.

| **Table 2: Permanency Outcomes 1 and 2** | | | |
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|  | ***SFY 2019***  ***QSPR*** | ***SFY 2018***  ***QSPR*** | ***Round 3***  ***CFSR*** |
| **Permanency 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations** | **48%** | **46%** | **36%** |
| Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement (N=120) | 73% | 75% | 70% |
| Item 5: Permanency Goal for Child (N=120) | 80% | 72% | 64% |
| Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption or APPLA (N=120) | 76% | 69% | 58% |
| **Permanency 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children** | **80%** | **65%** | **43%** |
| Item 7: Placement with Siblings (N=84) | 75% | 76% | 47% |
| Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care (N=93) | 86% | 85% | 64% |
| Item 9: Preserving Connections (N=118) | 73% | 67% | 49% |
| Item 10: Relative Placement (N=118) | 94% | 82% | 70% |
| Item 11: Relationship of Child in Care with Parents (N=81) | 54% | 33% | 48% |

*Strength*

* **Relative Placement** – DCFS made ongoing efforts to identify, locate, inform and evaluate maternal and paternal relatives as potential placements for the children (Item 10) in 94 percent of cases reviewed. This measure includes efforts to identify and evaluate relatives as potential placements, not just place children in a relative home. The states performance for this item has shown a substantial improvement from both SFY 2018 and the Round 3 CFSR by 12 and 24 percentage points, respectively. All but one of the Areas (Area 9) were rated as a strength for this item and four Areas (1, 5, 6, and 10) were wholly successful in identifying and evaluating relatives as potential placements in all cases reviewed. While Area 8 was rated as a strength, with a success rate of 92 percent, the staff’s performance decreased by 8 percentage points from the SFY 2018, where it was wholly successful. The one case found deficient in Area 8 resulted from there being no indication that there were any efforts made to evaluate maternal relatives or follow up with one who submitted paperwork for placement prior to the parent’s termination of parental rights (TPR).

*Near Strength*

* **Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care** – DCFS staff did well with having children visit with their parents and siblings while in foster care (Item 8), effectively ensuring that children visited with parents and siblings in 86 percent of cases reviewed. This rate of success represents a substantial improvement of 22 percentage points of the Round 3 CFSR and a 1 percentage point increase from the SFY 2018. Moreover, 3 Areas (2 through 4) were wholly successful in providing visitation with parents and siblings to children in foster care, with all three service areas improving substantially from both the Round 3 CFSR and SFY 2018 QSPR reviews. However, Areas 4, 8, 9 and 10 showed significant decreases in performance from both the Round 3 CFSR and SFY 2018 QSPR reviews; none of these four service areas were rated as strength for this item.

*Areas Needing Improvement*

* **Stability of Foster Care Placement** – Children in foster care should have stability in their placement (Item 4) that allows them to maintain strong relationships and bonds with their family and community. For purposes of the QSPR/CFSR, children are considered to experience stability if their current placement is stable and any moves during the review period were planned and designed either to achieve their case goals or to better meet the children’s needs. Sufficient efforts to maintain stability in foster care placements were made in less than three quarters of the reviewed cases (73 percent) during SFY 2019. Only Area 4 was rated as a strength on this item (92 percent).

Areas 2, 7 and 10 all substantially decreased their performance on this item in comparison to the SFY 2018 QSPR and Area 2 and 7 also decreased in performance compared to the Round 3 CFSR. All deficient ratings in Area 2 were the result of unplanned placement changes (e.g., foster families requesting children be moved because they were not equipped to deal with the children’s difficult behaviors). Additionally, the target child in each of the five deficient cases had four or more placement changes during the review period. The majority of the deficient ratings in Area 7 stemmed from placement in a temporary setting while awaiting a more appropriate setting.

* **Preserving Important Connections** – Children form important bonds outside of their immediate families. They may have significant connections to their extended family, community, neighborhood, faith, school and/or friends. Sufficient efforts were not made to maintain these important connections in over one-quarter of the reviewed cases (27 percent). Despite the need for continuous improvement in preserving important connections (Item 9), statewide substantial improvement has been evidenced with a 24-percentage point increase from the Round 3 CFSR and a 6-percentage point increase from the SFY 2018 QSPR. Some of the deficiencies resulted from children not being allowed to visit and/or maintain contact with extended family members with whom they had a connection prior to entering foster care. However, most of the deficient cases resulted from children being placed outside of their hometown/county, which is indicative of a lack of available foster homes; this was also a practice issue identified in the SFY 2018 QSPR.

Most service areas continue to struggle with this measure, with none achieving substantial conformity during the SFY 2019 round of QSPRs. Areas 1 and 2 both declined slightly in performance from SFY 2018 but improved substantially from Round 3 CFSR. Area 9 had the most difficulty, making concerted efforts in only about half of the reviewed cases (54 percent).

* **Relationship of Children in Care with their Parents** – DCFS must work to provide efforts beyond visits to promote and support positive relationships between children in foster care and their parents. Parents should be allowed to participate in their child’s life events such as attending school conferences and programs, sports events or medical appointments, or receive family therapy whenever appropriate and possible. DCFS continues to struggle with this measure, and in the 2019 round of reviews sufficient efforts were not demonstrated in almost half of the reviewed cases (46 percent). Despite the state continuing to struggle with maintaining relationships of children in care with their parents (Item 11), significant improvements of 21 and 6 percentage points have been made from the SFY 2018 QSPR and Round 3 CFSR, respectively.

All service areas had significant difficulty with this measure during the SFY 2019 QSPR review period, with none achieving substantial conformity or even receiving a rating over 73 percent. Areas 1, 3 and 6 fared the worst, putting forth sufficient efforts in only 44 percent (Area 1 and 3) and 25 percent (Area 6) of the reviewed cases, with Areas 3 and 6 both decreasing in performance in comparison to both the SFY 2018 QSPR and Round 3 CFSR. As in past reviews, the majority of the deficiencies resulted from the Agency’s lack of contact with and engagement of parents. Staff in Areas 1 and 3 did not invite or encourage parents to attend medical appointments, school events, or PACE evaluations, even when the parents were compliant and consistently attending visitation. Area 6 staff reported that it was not common practice to include parents in activities such as school events or conferences, or medical/therapeutic appointments unless reunification with that parent was imminent. It was also noted local courts do not make it a point to encourage parents’ involvement in settings not directly supervised by Agency staff, regardless of the willingness or ability of a foster parent to supervise.

**Well-Being**

Within the field of child welfare, the broad goal of well-being focuses on the healthy development and functioning of children and adolescents, those conditions that allow children to flourish throughout childhood and into adulthood. Family relationships impact child well-being, including the parenting and home environments, so the parents’ and family’s well-being must also be considered here. The Administration for Children and Families has identified four domains of child well-being: cognitive functioning; physical health and development; emotional/behavioral functioning; and social functioning. The Round 3 OSRI emphasizes these domains in assessing child and family well-being.

DCFS was largely successful at tending to the educational needs of children involved with the Division, achieving a near strength rating (93 percent). Similar to past years, Arkansas struggled the most with families having enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs (Well-Being Outcome 1) during the SFY 2019 QSPR. The Agency often did not properly assess and address the needs of children and families, nor did caseworkers visit with parents as often as is required. Many of DCFS’ problems in these areas of practice stem from the failure to consistently provide clients with sufficiently frequent contact. In addition, children did not receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs (Well-Being Outcome 3) in one-quarter of all cases reviewed (25 percent).

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| **Table 3: Well-Being Outcomes 1, 2 and 3** | | | |
|  | ***SFY 2019 QSPR*** | ***SFY 2018 QSPR*** | ***Round 3 CFSR*** |
| **Well-Being 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs (**N=200) | **60%** | **51%** | **39%** |
| Item 12: Needs and Services of Child, Parents and Foster Parents (N=200) | 63% | 57% | 43% |
| Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning (N=186) | 76% | 69% | 51% |
| Item 14: Caseworker Visits with Child (N=200) | 84% | 67% | 64% |
| Item 15: Caseworker Visits with Parents (N=171) | 59% | 58% | 48% |
| **Well-Being 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs (**N=107) | **93%** | **93%** | **85%** |
| Item 16: Educational Needs of the Child (N=107) | 93% | 93% | 85% |
| **Well-Being 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs (**N=171) | **75%** | **73%** | **66%** |
| Item 17: Physical Health of the Child (N=159) | 81% | 79% | 81% |
| Item 18: Mental/Behavioral Health of the Child (N=93) | 84% | 77% | 68% |

*Near Strength*

* **Educational Needs of Children** – Staff did well in assessing and addressing the educational needs of children (Item 16) involved with the Division, effectively ensuring the provision of appropriate services in 93 percent of the reviewed cases. Arkansas’ performance has continued to improve on this measure from the Round 3 CFSR and the Agency is just two points short of achieving a Strength rating. Areas 3, 4 and 7 were wholly successful in meeting the educational needs of children in the cases reviewed. All service areas, except Areas 5 and 10, continued to show substantial improvement or maintain successful scores nearing a strength rating. Areas 5 and 10, both which were found to be wholly successful in the SFY 2018 QSPR, decreased in performance by 14 and 11 percentage points, respectively, over the last year.

*Areas Needing Improvement*

* **Needs and Services of Child, Parents and Foster Parents** – In order to successfully mitigate the challenges that bring families into contact with the Division, their strengths, needs and resources must be competently assessed. That assessment must then guide the development of the case plan and inform the specific interventions that will be utilized to assist families. DCFS properly assessed the needs of and/or provided appropriate services to children and families (Item 12) in less than two-thirds of the reviewed cases (63 percent) during SFY 2019. While this represents a twenty-percentage point increase over the Round 3 CFSR and a 6-percentage point increase over the SFY 2018 QSPR, DCFS still struggles in providing the necessary needs and services to clients, especially biological parents, where adequate needs and services were provided in only 63 percent of cases reviewed. Efforts to address systemic issues must continue to be made in all service areas.

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| **Table 4: Needs Assessment and Service Provision** | | | | |
|  | | **SFY 201919 QSPR** | **SFY**  **2018 QSPR** | **Round 3 CFSR** |
| Item 12 | Needs and Services of Child, Parents and Foster Parents | 63% | 57% | 43% |
| *Item 12A* | *Needs Assessment and Services to Children* | 93% | 84% | 72% |
| *Item 12B* | *Needs Assessment and Services to Parents* | 63% | 59% | 44% |
| *Item 12C* | *Needs Assessment and Services to Foster Parents* | 92% | 82% | 89% |

While all service areas were found to be successful in meeting the needs of children and foster parents during the SFY 2019 QSPR, the main issue for every Area was in not properly addressing parents’ needs. The primary reason for deficiencies in the assessment and provision of appropriate services to parents was the same in every service area: the lack of ongoing contact with parents which prevented staff from conducting proper ongoing, informal needs assessments. Several staff also noted practice issues involved in the transfer of cases of all types from the investigation unit to the casework unit, often with regard to the status of any referrals made or basis for services recommended during the investigation phase.

No service area attained substantial conformity. Areas 1 and 10 struggled the most with assessing need and providing fitting services by failing to meet standards in 50 and 45 percent of the reviewed cases, respectively, and both decreasing their performance by 5 percentage points from SFY 2018. In one Area 1 foster care case the deficiency was due to a lack of contact with an incarcerated mother; her needs were never assessed. This represents a systemic issue in that the Agency seems to wait for a parent to be released and contact the worker to start services as opposed to the Agency being proactive and discussing needs/services prior to a parent’s release. Deficiencies in service provisions to biological parents (Item 12B) in Area 10 stemmed from insufficient assessments of mothers, failing to ensure parents engaged in the referred services and inaccurate assessment of needs resulting in inappropriate services being provided.

* **Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning** – Engaging families in the case planning process is important to appropriately addressing the needs of parents and children. Children and/or their parents were identified as being excluded from the case planning process (Item 13) in one-quarter of the reviewed cases (24 percent) during SFY 2019 reviews. While this is a 25-percentage point improvement in performance from the Round 3 CFSR (and 7 percentage point increase over the SFY 2018 QSPR), there is room for more improvement. No service area achieved substantial conformity on the case planning measure, and only Area 2 was rated as a strength (90 percent). Areas 1 and 10 struggled the most with this item, albeit both Area’s observed improvement from the SFY 2018 QSPR of 24 and 10 percentage points, respectively. In the review of sampled cases, DCFS staff adequately engaged the child but failed to engage mothers and fathers in discussions of service progression.
* **Caseworker Visits with Children and their Parents** – The Agency must conduct frequent, quality visits with children and their parents in order to engage families in the case process and successfully assess risk, safety, strengths, needs and resources. When these important interactions do not occur, the Agency cannot ensure children’s safety, permanency and well-being or work with families on the achievement of their case goals. During the SFY 2019 QSPR, children did not receive frequent, substantive caseworker visits in 26 percent of the reviewed cases, while caseworkers failed to provide parents with sufficient visits in two-fifths of the reviewed cases (41 percent). While substantial improvement in visits with children (Item 14) was observed since completion of the SFY 2018 QSPR and the Round 3 CFSR, the state only improved one-percentage point in visits with parents compared to the last round of QSPRs.

Areas 2 and 10 were both found to be in substantial conformity in regard to visits with children but no service area was rated as a strength for visits with parents. Furthermore, four Areas (2, 3, 5 and 9) performance decreased from the SFY 2018 QSPR. Both the frequency of contact and substance of discussions with the parents was insufficient to promote achievement of case goals or help parents understand the importance of addressing their issues to ensure their children’s safety. Contact visits were not sufficient and occurred less than the monthly requirement. Many of the contacts that did occur were not sufficiently focused on all of the pertinent issues. Caseworkers also failed to focus on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery and goal achievement during contacts with families in some of the deficient cases. In one Area 5 case the family used the lack of communication between a primary and secondary caseworker and their supervisors as an excuse for their noncompliance, which delayed permanency for the child. This lack of substantive, ongoing communication which was also observed between caseworkers and families about case progression impacts other family engagement items as well and may be a practice or supervisory issue with both foster and in-home services cases.

**Summary & Recommendations**

In accordance with federal standards, an individual item is assigned an overall rating of Strength if 90 percent or more of the applicable cases were rated as a Strength, while substantial conformity with a particular outcome requires that 95 percent or more of the reviewed cases be rated as having substantially achieved the outcome. These are lofty expectations, but high standards are needed considering the critical nature of child welfare practice. When these standards are applied, DCFS’ efforts to provide services to prevent the removal of children from their homes and to place children with relatives when appropriate were identified as strengths in practice during the SFY 2019 QSPR review period. Additionally, improvement was evidenced for many of the other individual items when compared to the results from last year’s review.

DCFS was largely successful at tending to the educational needs of children involved with the Division, but continued progress is needed before it is considered a true Strength by federal standards. Other areas of promising practice include initiating investigations on time and promoting visits of children in care with their parents and siblings.

The 2019 round of reviews underscored similar areas of challenge identified in previous reviews. Infrequent caseworker visitation continued to prevent caseworkers from effectively assessing and addressing risk and safety concerns for children involved with the Division. On the subject of permanency, DCFS struggled to achieve placement stability, preserve children’s important connections and support the relationship between them and their parents through efforts beyond visitation alone. Regarding well-being, infrequent caseworker visits continued to prevent the Agency from properly assessing and addressing the needs of children and families and from involving them in case planning. Many of the problems identified during this year’s reviews are similar to those unearthed in prior years’ reviews and stem from infrequent, inconsequential contact between caseworkers and clients.

There are not many elements of casework practice on which DCFS performs consistently well across all service areas in the state. There are pockets of best practice, and certain service areas perform well in certain areas of practice. However, the agency needs to work towards aligning casework practice throughout the state so that consistent, substantive services are provided to families. The service areas differ in size and client population, but the way the Division serves clients needs to be consistent throughout the state.

The following recommendations are provided to help guide change based on the findings from the SFY 2019 QSPR.

* **Recommendation 1**: *DCFS should continue working to ensure that caseworkers and supervisors are consistently and collaboratively conducting ongoing, accurate assessments for risk and safety in all cases to protect children involved with the Division. These assessments should occur at sufficient frequency to not only meet risk and safety standards but also address evolving case circumstances.*

Marked improvement was observed during this SFY 2019 review from that of last year’s in regard to assessing and managing risk and safety. However, DCFS must continue to focus on managing caseloads to ensure all cases receive regular, ongoing assessments of risk and safety to protect children, and that the frequency of assessments is determined by individual case circumstances rather than minimum compliance.

Supervisors and managers must help family service workers in making important decisions and hold them accountable for their work, including maintaining contact with children and families and assessing and addressing risk and safety concerns utilizing tools and information such as Structured Decision Making, safety consultations and substance abuse discharge and relapse prevention plans, when applicable. The Division’s wealth of revised management reports and supervisory tools should be used to further support and monitor performance. These will also help to reflect improved practice efforts to ensure that those children most at risk are contacted frequently and that any safety concerns and/or changing case circumstances are adequately addressed by the Agency. In addition, relevant trainings and staff and stakeholder expertise should be customized to accommodate changing risk and safety concerns and location-specific systemic issues (judicial customs, service array, etc.).

* **Recommendation 2**: *DCFS should work to further promote and support positive relationships between children in foster care and their parents, and make continued efforts to preserve their important connections while in care.*

While providing children in care with frequent, quality visits with their families was identified as a practice strength in the SFY 2019 QSPR, DCFS continues to struggle to promote children’s relationships with their parents outside of visitation and to preserve important connections, both of which are crucial to successful reunification. Efforts to promote relationships between parents and children in care should be made throughout the life of a case, not just when reunification is imminent or the parents fully compliant. DCFS staff should make efforts to ensure both relative and non-relative foster parents understand parents can and should attend their children’s medical or developmental therapy appointments as well as school meetings/events, when appropriate, and encourage relative foster parents in particular to help by supervising such contact or providing transportation for the parents, again when appropriate. Additional efforts to further support positive parent/child relationships should include efforts to facilitate consistent contact between a child and an incarcerated parent, including phone/video calls or exchanging letters. Collaboration with other systems and resources such as volunteer transporters or community providers may be necessary to provide these additional opportunities, and efforts should be made to educate foster parents about the benefits of supporting these positive relationships beyond weekly visits.

Efforts to preserve connections to community, school and extended family are understandably hindered when children must be placed out of their home counties due to a lack of foster homes. In addition to ongoing foster home recruitment efforts, DCFS should make efforts to preserve important extended family relationships for children in care by inviting grandparents and other close relatives to designated visits, or facilitating phone/video calls when visits are not possible. It was noted in some areas that while staff routinely inquire about relatives as possible placement options, they often forget to ask about close relatives who may want to maintain their bond with a child in care through visits or phone contact. Efforts should include talking with parents early in the case to identify the child’s existing relationships with extended family and contacting identified relatives to discuss visits or regular phone contact. DCFS should also make efforts to ensure children in care are able to maintain friendships with school and church friends when they must be placed out of their home county.

* **Recommendation 3**: *DCFS should work to increase both the frequency and quality of caseworker contact with families.*

Even though caseloads must be prioritized based on safety with the most vulnerable children receiving priority, all children and caretakers involved in Arkansas’s child welfare system should receive frequent communication and engagement from their assigned caseworkers. DCFS continues to struggle with maintaining consistent contact with and providing services to children and families, as evidenced by consistently low performance in Well-Being Outcome 1. If children and families are not seen regularly, then risk, safety, strengths and needs cannot be assessed; families cannot be actively involved in case planning; safety, permanency and well-being cannot be ensured; case goals are not likely to be achieved; and cases are likely to be left open longer than needed.

Supervisors must not only ensure that caseworkers are regularly visiting families, they must also ensure such visits are substantive. During the SFY 2019 QSPR, reviewers frequently found that monthly visits in foster care cases occurred while the entire family was at the office for a familial visit or while parents were called to the office for drug screens. Neither setting is conducive to a quality visit. Workers must visit parents in their homes when possible, or other private, comfortable locations with the intent of spending time discussing relevant case issues. If workers are not having quality interactions with parents in their homes, it is unlikely they can make adequate decisions about when it is safe for children to be reunified. Similarly, workers need to be visiting children in their foster homes or family homes and talking to them privately or interacting with very young children away from caregivers in order to ensure their safety and well-being.

In addition to a focus on quality, there should be a shift toward determining the appropriate frequency of caseworker visits based on case circumstance rather than minimum compliance with policy. More than monthly visits with children and caregivers may be appropriate at critical junctures in a case, not only to ensure safety but to guide case progression and timely permanency; the age and vulnerabilities of participants may call for more frequent caseworker contact as well. This is understandably a challenge given the lack of consistent caseworker contact with families seen in previous reviews but should be a goal of best practice in the development of Arkansas’s casework staff.

Supervisors must regularly model and support caseworker visits and other casework activities in addition to monitoring the Compliance Outcome Reports (COR), the 120-day visitation reports as well as other DCFS management reports to ensure that staff are visiting clients sufficiently often and engaging them in collaborative decision-making. Ongoing supervisory support is especially beneficial to newer caseworkers who may be unsure how to encourage parental engagement in services and promote case progression.

**Appendix**

| **Table 5: Statewide QSPR/CFSR Comparisons (Round 3 CFSR – SFY 2019)** | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***SFY 2019 QSPR*** | ***SFY 2018 QSPR*** | ***Round 3 CFSR*** |
| **Safety 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect** | **87%** | **76%** | **69%** |
| Item 1: Timeliness of Initiating Investigations (N=105) | 87% | 76% | 69% |
| **Safety 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate** | **83%** | **70%** | **60%** |
| Item 2: Services to Prevent Removal (N=50) | 94% | 75% | 55% |
| Item 3: Risk and Safety Assessment and Management (N=200) | 83% | 71% | 61% |
| **Permanency 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations** | **48%** | **46%** | **36%** |
| Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement (N=120) | 73% | 75% | 70% |
| Item 5: Permanency Goal for Child (N=120) | 80% | 72% | 64% |
| Item 6: Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption or APPLA (N=120) | 76% | 69% | 58% |
| **Permanency 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children** | **80%** | **65%** | **43%** |
| Item 7: Placement with Siblings (N=84) | 75% | 68% | 47% |
| Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care (N=93) | 86% | 85% | 64% |
| Item 9: Preserving Connections (N=118) | 73% | 67% | 49% |
| Item 10: Relative Placement (N=118) | 94% | 82% | 70% |
| Item 11: Relationship of Child in Care with Parents (N=81) | 54% | 33% | 48% |
| **Well-Being 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs** | **60%** | **51%** | **39%** |
| Item 12: Needs and Services of Child, Parents and Foster Parents (N=200) | 63% | 57% | 43% |
| Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning (N=190) | 76% | 69% | 51% |
| Item 14: Caseworker Visits with Child (N=200) | 84% | 67% | 64% |
| Item 15: Caseworker Visits with Parents (N=167) | 59% | 58% | 48% |
| **Well-Being 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs** | **93%** | **93%** | **85%** |
| Item 16: Educational Needs of the Child (N=107) | 93% | 93% | 85% |
| **Well-Being 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs** | **75%** | **73%** | **66%** |
| Item 17: Physical Health of the Child (N=159) | 81% | 79% | 81% |
| Item 18: Mental/Behavioral Health of the Child (N=93) | 84% | 77% | 68% |

| **Table 6: SFY 2019 QSPR Performance by Service Area** | | | | | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Area***  ***1*** | ***Area***  ***2*** | ***Area***  ***3*** | ***Area***  ***4*** | ***Area***  ***5*** | ***Area***  ***6*** | ***Area***  ***7*** | ***Area***  ***8*** | ***Area***  ***9*** | ***Area***  ***10*** |
| **Safety 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect** | **92%** | **100%** | **89%** | **80%** | **91%** | **85%** | **79%** | **90%** | **78%** | **90%** |
| Item 1: Timeliness of Initiating Investigations | 92% | 100% | 89% | 80% | 91% | 85% | 79% | 90% | 78% | 90% |
| **Safety 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate** | **80%** | **85%** | **85%** | **90%** | **85%** | **85%** | **65%** | **85%** | **80%** | **90%** |
| Item 2: Services to Prevent Removal | 88% | 80% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 86% | 100% |
| Item 3: Risk and Safety Assessment and Management | 80% | 85% | 85% | 90% | 85% | 85% | 65% | 85% | 80% | 90% |
| **Permanency 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations** | **58%** | **42%** | **58%** | **67%** | **42%** | **50%** | **50%** | **58%** | **33%** | **17%** |
| Item 4: Stability of Foster Care Placement | 75% | 58% | 75% | 92% | 75% | 83% | 67% | 83% | 67% | 58% |
| Item 5: Permanency Goal for Child | 83% | 100% | 83% | 83% | 58% | 92% | 83% | 92% | 83% | 42% |
| Item 6: Achieving Reunif., Guard., Adoption or APPLA | 92% | 75% | 92% | 75% | 83% | 75% | 83% | 67% | 75% | 42% |
| **Permanency 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children** | **67%** | **92%** | **83%** | **83%** | **92%** | **92%** | **83%** | **67%** | **67%** | **75%** |
| Item 7: Placement with Siblings | 90% | 100% | 71% | 63% | 80% | 82% | 70% | 33% | 60% | 75% |
| Item 8: Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care | 82% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 80% | 88% | 83% | 82% | 75% | 78% |
| Item 9: Preserving Connections | 67% | 58% | 67% | 75% | 75% | 83% | 83% | 82% | 54% | 83% |
| Item 10: Relative Placement | 100% | 92% | 92% | 92% | 100% | 100% | 92% | 92% | 82% | 100% |
| Item 11: Relationship of Child in Care with Parents | 44% | 67% | 44% | 50% | 73% | 25% | 50% | 43% | 63% | 67% |
| **Well-Being 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs** | **50%** | **75%** | **70%** | **65%** | **55%** | **60%** | **50%** | **60%** | **70%** | **45%** |
| Item 12: Needs/Services of Child, Parents & Foster Parents | 50% | 75% | 70% | 70% | 65% | 65% | 60% | 60% | 70% | 45% |
| Item 13: Child and Family Involvement in Case Planning | 68% | 90% | 79% | 74% | 84% | 72% | 70% | 75% | 83% | 63% |
| Item 14: Caseworker Visits with Child | 80% | 95% | 85% | 100% | 80% | 80% | 70% | 85% | 75% | 85% |
| Item 15: Caseworker Visits with Parents | 50% | 71% | 53% | 50% | 58% | 54% | 65% | 65% | 69% | 59% |
| **Well-Being 2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs** | **90%** | **92%** | **100%** | **100%** | **86%** | **92%** | **100%** | **92%** | **92%** | **89%** |
| Item 16: Educational Needs of the Child | 90% | 92% | 100% | 100% | 86% | 92% | 100% | 92% | 92% | 89% |
| **Well-Being 3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs** | **80%** | **81%** | **67%** | **94%** | **65%** | **78%** | **78%** | **81%** | **47%** | **83%** |
| Item 17: Physical Health of the Child | 86% | 88% | 69% | 100% | 67% | 82% | 82% | 87% | 56% | 88% |
| Item 18: Mental/Behavioral Health of the Child | 92% | 91% | 71% | 91% | 88% | 89% | 86% | 82% | 56% | 89% |

TABLE 7A – SFY 2019 QSPR PERFORMANCE BY COUNTY, AREAS 1 - 4



TABLE 7B – SFY 2019 QSPR PERFORMANCE BY COUNTY, AREAS 5 - 8



TABLE 7C – SFY 2019 QSPR PERFORMANCE BY COUNTY, AREAS 9 – 10



1. Because Item 1 is the only item for Safety Outcome 1 and Item 16 is the only item for Well-Being Outcome 2, the requirement of a 95 percent Strength rating applies to those items. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)