

WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES, IF ANY, THAT STATES ACROSS THE NATION EMPLOY WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE FAMILY COURTS TO WORK COLLABORATIVELY ON BEHALF OF CHILDREN IN CARE?

STATE SUMMARY: ARIZONA

State CFSR

Judges, attorneys, court administrators, and other court related stakeholders were consulted with during the statewide assessment. The State's Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) drafted content for the Statewide Assessment section on Case Review System, and provided data regarding timeliness of hearings, participation of family and caregivers on Foster Care Review Boards (FCRB), and other such indicators. Representatives from the AOC, Juvenile Court Judges, and management from the Office of the Attorney General (AG) attended agency (DCYF) Statewide Advisory Council meetings, which were used as a focus group during the Statewide Assessment phase. Surveys were sent to all Juvenile Court Judges, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and AGs, statewide, and to 123 attorneys and guardians ad litem (GALs) representing children and parents in dependency cases.

The on-site review took place in September 2001. An official from the Arizona AOC was interviewed, as were the Program Manager of the State FCRB, the State Chair FCRB, and some FCRB volunteers.

At the three local sites, the presiding juvenile court judge, and sometimes an additional judge, were interviewed, as were FCRB volunteers, GALs representing children and parents, the local Assistant AG (representing the Department in dependency matters), and the CASA coordinator in one county.

After the feds returned their report to the state in February 2002, the courts and agency collaborated on the PIP. The surveys and focus groups used to identify strengths and needs during the Statewide Assessment process also generated suggestions for improvement that were subsequently included in the PIP.

The PIP was approved in December 2002. There is agency and court collaboration on a variety of activities, although such activities were not addressed in the PIP.

Collaboration Following the Release of the PIP

Areas directly under the courts' responsibility were found to be in substantial conformity (i.e. Case Review System). However, the agency and the courts have discussed other outcome areas through various committees and other methods. The CFSR process has encouraged the agency and the Courts to organize improvement toward the same outcomes and performance indicators (taken from the CFSR) whenever possible and coordinate with each other on program improvement efforts.

For example, the State's CFSR lead and the CIP administrator discussed ways to collaborate toward achievement of the CFSR outcomes. The agency was given the opportunity to provide input into the CIP, approved in 2002. This plan includes objectives that support achievement of CFSR outcomes, such as:

- Improve the recording and tracking of dependency case proceedings and data.
- Expedite the court process to assure early permanency for children.
- Improve the quality of legal representation for children and parents in dependency case proceedings.

In addition, the AOC conducts a biannual statewide audit of each juvenile court. The AOC has included the CFSR lead in revising this evaluation process. The workgroup has discussed how CFSR related outcomes and indicators might be included in the evaluation process.

Ongoing Collaboration

Permanency Mediation Pilot Project. This project was initiated by the Office of the AG to mediate permanency planning, using a mediator at the court. Agency and court representatives formed the workgroup that wrote the procedures for this project. A pilot was started in Maricopa County (greater Phoenix area), but the program was not implemented due to budget issues, and the number of staff hours required to mediate a case.

Meetings. The agency's policy unit meets regularly with training and policy staff from the Office of the AG. These ongoing meetings provide an avenue to discuss strengths and needs within court proceedings, which can then be addressed through meetings with judges, changes in Office of the AG policies, or other methods affecting court processes.

Furthermore, the Department continually collaborates with the AOC to provide training on Child Protective Services to FCRB and CASA volunteers.

Open Court Pilot Project. The agency and courts are collaborating on an Open Court Pilot in Maricopa County, which may soon expand to other counties. This pilot is a mechanism to ensure public accountability and promote due process, while safeguarding privacy rights.

Conclusion

For the most part, implementation of the state PIP and CIP has been successful. This is, in part, due to the successful collaboration between the courts and agency on many projects.