

Ohio Citizen Review Panel

Annual Report

Executive Summary

May 15, 2024
Work Year 2023—2024



About this Report

Ohio Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) are tasked with submitting an annual report to the Ohio Department Children and Youth (DCY) with recommendations for the improvement of the child protective services (CPS) system in Ohio. The CRPs conduct an annual review and evaluation of an identified issue or concern raised about the CPS system and make actionable and measurable recommendations to the state on how to improve this issue. The CRP program is prescribed by federal statute detailed in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). This report is the product of the Ohio CRPs' annual evaluation for the 2024 state fiscal year (SFY). The report details each panel's topic, process for review, and development of the recommendations submitted to DCY on May 15, 2024.

Report 1: Northwest Ohio CRP Report



The Northwest Ohio CRP focused their work on understanding how Ohio supports the well-being of youth involved with Ohio's child welfare system. For the 2023-2024 work year, the Northwest CRP undertook a primary data collection project to follow up on their introductory work from the last work year. One of the three main objectives of the child welfare system is well-being. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 makes well-being a top priority of the child welfare system in addition to safety and permanence (Barth et al., 2008). The aim of the project was to define and examine child well-being in the context of child welfare by conducting regional focus groups with key stakeholders throughout the state of Ohio. In collaboration with the Northeast Ohio CRP, the panel conducted a series of focus groups with kinship caregivers, foster parents, primary parents, and child welfare caseworkers. As a result of the project, the panel developed recommendations for improvement in Ohio's ability to address child well-being needs.

Recommendations:

1. Broaden the measurement framework for child well-being in the child welfare database to include holistic indicators such as emotional well-being, comfort in the home environment, attachment, and communication with caregivers, incorporating perspectives from parents, young people, caregivers, and caseworkers to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

The data strongly suggest well-being for children involved with child welfare expands beyond the narrow measurement of physical, mental, and educational health. Expanding the measurement framework for well-being to encompass holistic indicators, including emotional well-being, comfort in the home environment, and attachment and communication with caregivers, is essential for capturing the multidimensional nature of child well-being. Incorporating perspectives from various stakeholders such as parents, young people, caregivers, and caseworkers ensures a comprehensive understanding and enables more targeted interventions to support the well-being of children involved in the child welfare system.

Recommendations (continued):

2. Consider changes in eligibility criteria for social service supports to allow greater access to benefits for kinship caregivers.

The data suggest the number one challenge for kinship families is financial hardship. Particularly, kinship caregivers may struggle to meet basic needs such as housing, legal services, childcare, and food. The panel recommends DCY consider advocacy, whether through state or federal legislative partners or waiver applications, to consider options for changes to childcare subsidies, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and legal assistance programs eligibility criteria to consider child-only income for kinship caregivers.

3. Conduct a comprehensive study of the services and programs currently provided by local PCSAs that enhance child well-being or meet a child's well-being needs.

The data collected provides very little insight into the services and programs available to address child well-being. Undertaking a comprehensive study of the services and programs offered by local PCSAs that contribute to child well-being would allow DCY to identify effective practices, address gaps in service provision, and optimize resources to better meet the diverse needs of children under the agency's care.

Report 2: Northeast Ohio CRP Report

The Northeast Ohio CRP focused their evaluation for the past two years on Ohio's support to families and monitoring of children after permanency is achieved. For the purposes of this report, the panel defined permanency as the closing of an ongoing case and reunification with biological family or kinship family. The panel has been particularly interested in understanding to which services families are referred or linked at the time of reunification and case closure to encourage family stabilization. To supplement the data from the 2022-2023 report, the Northeast Ohio CRP collaborated with the Northwest Ohio CRP to gather more data. Together, the panels conducted a series of focus groups with stakeholders across Ohio to better understand their perspective on the process of exiting from child welfare services.



Recommendations:

1. Conduct an analysis of existing programs in Ohio to support family stabilization following reunification. DCY should then use this information to develop best practices and share resources across PCSAs.

Anecdotally, the panel is aware of several local efforts to bring together community partners to support families once reunification is achieved. It is important to document these efforts and understand the logistics of this kind of supportive service and how to implement these statewide. DCY should be involved in finding and sharing this information and providing guidance as needed.

2. Encourage the use of evidence-based programs that bring foster and kinship families together with primary families during and immediately after reunification. Explore ways to incentivize foster and kinship families for this work.

Research suggests building relationships between foster families and biological families can strengthen reunification efforts. While some PCSAs are engaged in programming that bridges these relationships, DCY should place an effort on educating and encouraging these kinds of practices, including evidence-based programs, for all PCSAs across the state. DCY should help with the implementation of such practices as needed or requested.

Recommendations (continued):

3. Develop consistent case closure practice and increase funding and support for kinship families after case closure across all PCSAs.

Establishing consistent case closure practices and bolstering funding and support for kinship families post-case closure across all PCSAs is vital for ensuring continuity of care, promoting stability for children, and providing ongoing support for kinship caregivers who play a crucial role in the child welfare system.

4. Undergo evaluation to understand barriers to clear and consistent communication between child welfare workers and families at the case closure.

The data suggests there is a disconnect between child welfare workers and caregiver stakeholders around the experiences of the case closure process. Conducting an evaluation to understand barriers to clear and consistent communication between child welfare workers and families at case closure would be beneficial for improving family engagement, fostering trust, and ensuring successful transitions out of the child welfare system, ultimately promoting positive outcomes for children and families involved.



Report 3: Central Ohio CRP Report

The Central Ohio CRP focused their evaluation on the retention of foster families in Ohio for the 2023–2024 work year. The panel pointed out that, the retention of foster families, despite the issue being a pervasive problem in the state of Ohio, often receives less attention, compared to recruitment of new families. Members discussed their personal experiences with the lack of attention to foster home retention and expressed interest in examining the ways which DCY and PCSAs have invested resources to address this issue. The panel sought to understand the current retention practices utilized by the state and provide suggestions for innovative approaches to improvement.

Recommendations:

1. Engage in research effort to identify retention efforts and strategies that are effective

Researching the retention of foster families using qualitative and quantitative data is essential for learning effective retention strategies. Advanced research methods are needed to best understand the facilitators and barriers to retention. DCY might revisit the idea of collaborating with the National Council for Adoption (NCFA) on the potential for a cross-comparative research project to determine differences in recruitment and retention practices.

2. Provide grant awardees with support to track successes of retention using consistent cross-site measures/methods

Grant awardees of funding through the 2022-2023 state budget were required to track their recruitment and retention efforts. DCY should consider providing some consistent measures to carry out these evaluation efforts. This would allow DCY to compare the successes of recruitment and retention strategies across the state.

3. Complete exit interviews when foster parents decide to stop and record reasons for exit

Conducting exit interviews with departing foster parents and recording their reasons for leaving is crucial for identifying recurring issues, improving support structures, and enhancing retention efforts within the foster care system.

4. Revise statewide recruitment and retention materials to include recommendations on improving communication and collaboration between child welfare agencies and foster parents

Strained communication and collaboration between child welfare agencies and foster parents is a highly cited reason for foster parents' exit from fostering. Best practices in foster parent retention as reflected in the statewide recruitment and retention materials should be edited to address strategies to improve communication and collaboration between these partners.

Report 4: Southwest Ohio CRP Report



For the past three years, the Southwest Ohio CRP has focused on Ohio's ability to provide uninterrupted, stable, and high-quality education for children placed in residential care facilities. Over the period 2021-2023, the panel conducted an academic literature review to better understand the educational needs of youth placed in out-of-home care and conducted a survey to residential facilities in Ohio to learn about their educational settings and barriers to providing these services. The 2022-2023 annual CRP report provides an overview of the data collected on this topic and recommendations for improvement.

In the 2023-2024 work year, the Southwest Ohio CRP followed up their survey findings to examine the current guidance available to school districts and PCSAs to facilitate consistent educational services for children in care. Specifically, the panel was interested in how Ohio child welfare agencies and stakeholders use state guidance to carry out their obligations to children and families through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Recommendations:

1. Creating a new ESSA guidance should include versions for front-line staff like caseworkers and teachers that are user-friendly and address the specific duties of each party.

Including user-friendly versions of ESSA guidance tailored to front-line staff such as child welfare caseworkers and teachers is imperative for ensuring the effective implementation of ESSA policies. These versions should comprehensively address the specific duties and responsibilities of each group, enhancing clarity and facilitating the seamless application of ESSA policies in diverse educational settings.

2. Dedicate more staff resources to support the work of key individuals bridging work on educational needs between DCY and the Ohio Department of Education (ODE).

Dedicating additional staff resources to support key individuals bridging the gap between the DCY and ODE is essential for fostering collaboration. These individuals serve as crucial liaisons between departments, ensuring alignment of strategies, efficient communication, and coordinated efforts to address educational needs comprehensively. Increasing support for them will enhance interdepartmental cohesion, leading to more effective solutions and better outcomes for PCSAs and students in need of support.

Recommendations (continued):

3. Create a database to gather information about the educational programming of all Children's Residential Centers (CRCs), group homes, and Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTFs) in Ohio.

Creating a database to catalog the educational programming of all CRCs, group homes, and PRTFs will enable DCY and policymakers to identify gaps and areas for improvement. It can facilitate coordination and collaboration among stakeholders by providing a platform for sharing best practices and resources. This catalog can ensure transparency and accountability in educational programming, allowing for better monitoring and evaluation of the educational outcomes of the children served by these facilities.

Report 5: Southeast Ohio CRP Report

The Southeast Ohio CRP focused their evaluation on the recruitment of foster families in Ohio for the 2023–2024. The panel identified the recruitment of foster families as a pressing issue throughout the state of Ohio, but also as a problem greatly affecting the Southeastern parts of Ohio in which this panel is located. Members were able to discuss their personal experiences with the lack of foster homes available in their region of the state and were interested in how DCY and PCSAs have invested resources to address this issue. The panel examined the effectiveness of the current recruitment practices utilized by the state and provide suggestions for innovative approaches to improvement.



Recommendations:

1. Engage in research efforts, using qualitative and quantitative data, to better understand the nuanced and complex nature of the recruitment of foster families.

Researching the recruitment of foster families using qualitative and quantitative data is essential for developing targeted strategies for recruitment and improving the effectiveness of those strategies. An advanced research approach is needed to best understand the barriers to recruitment. DCY might resume their exploration of collaboration with the National Council for Adoption (NCFA) on the potential for a cross-comparative research project to determine differences in recruitment and retention practices.

Recommendations (continued):

2. Provide grant awardees of the recruitment and retention funding from the 2022-2023 fiscal years with technical assistance to track successes of recruitment in a consistent manner.

Grant awardees of funding through the 2022-2023 state budget were required to track their recruitment and retention efforts. DCY should consider providing some consistent measures to carry out these evaluation efforts. This would allow DCY to compare the successes of recruitment and retention strategies across the state.

3. Empower foster parent associations to help engage in recruitment and incentivize their work.

Word of mouth continues to be one of the strongest strategies for foster parent recruitment. DCY should consider ways to enhance this strategy by incentivizing foster parent associations to engage in referral recruitment.

4. Complete exit interviews when foster parents decide to stop and systematically record reasons for exit.

Conducting exit interviews with departing foster parents and recording their reasons for leaving is crucial for identifying recurring issues, improving support structures, and enhancing recruitment efforts within the foster care system.

5. Develop innovative strategies to recruit foster families of color, including Black foster families.

Developing innovative strategies to recruit foster families of color, including Black foster families, is essential for promoting diversity within the foster care system, addressing disparities, and ensuring culturally responsive care for children from minoritized and marginalized communities.

Moving Forward

All five Ohio CRPs met virtually via Zoom conference for their annual strategic planning session on Wednesday, May 29, 2024. During this meeting, members chose topics for the new work year and created a strategic plan to reach their goals for 2024–2025. They brainstormed the types of data they will need for their evaluation. The data request will be submitted to DCY by September 30, 2024, to allow the state time to gather the information. The annual meeting also served as a wrap up of the 2023–2024 work year. All five panels will have the opportunity to choose new topics for the 2024-2025 work year. The annual meeting provides the panels with the opportunity to discuss the successes and challenges from this year’s evaluation with panel members from other parts of the state.

