



National Association of Public
Child Welfare Administrators

an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association

How States are Implementing the Fostering Connections Act

Arkansas' At-risk Children

In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2008, Arkansas had more than 3,700 children and youth in foster care, a 10 percent decrease over the previous year (4,174). Of these, 54 percent, or 2,004, lived with non-relative foster parents, and 125 lived with relatives that served as foster parents. Seven percent, or 274, lived in therapeutic foster homes and 188 were in non-finalized adoptive homes. Though a small number, it is important to note that twenty-four foster youth were incarcerated. The age distribution of children in foster care for SFY 2008 was 550 (0 to 1), 819 (2 to 5), 870 (6 to 11), 701 (12 to 15), 576 (16 to 18) and 155 (over 19).

Of the children who entered foster care in 2008, 79 percent were returned home within 18 months, and 76 percent within 15 months. There were 326 children with the goal of adoption and 81 percent were placed with adoptive families within 12 months of the termination of the birth parents' rights. Moreover, Arkansas decreased the percentage of those pre-placements that disrupted by six percent over the previous year.

That same year, 620 young people lived permanently with a relative, with 57 percent Caucasian and 32 percent African-American. Relative custody is the second most prevalent reason that children exit the foster care system in Arkansas with more than 1,300 or 36 percent.¹

Arkansas' Budget Landscape

For SFY 2009 Arkansas is in relatively good shape, as there is no budget gap. The state was conservative as it used rainy day funds to help maintain the budget and Arkansas' Division of Children and Family Services has not had to reduce staff or freeze hires as it did in the 2001 economic downturn. However, the good news is short lived as all indications are a \$149 million deficit for SFY 2010 which started the first of July.²

P.L. 110-351 State Options

The state plans to implement the Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP) option in the future and currently places children with relatives whenever possible. However, it is unclear specifically when this will happen due to the fiscal climate. The state is conducting a cost benefit analysis and is looking at the number of children who will be eligible for this program under the new law. The state currently trains and licenses relatives and gives them subsidy payments as foster parents. Additionally, relatives can receive resources through the county prior to becoming licensed.³

Arkansas is considering supporting eligible older ages 19, 20, or 21. The state assists older youth in a variety of ways and is working with the Department of Medicaid Services to extend youth's state health insurance to 21. Similar to the GAP option, the state is doing a cost benefit analysis on both options. Arkansas also plans to use part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds for these services. Additionally, the state passed a law in March that would allow courts to maintain jurisdiction over youth after the age of 18 (HR6893).⁴

Support eligible youth who exit care to guardianship or adoption after age 16

Arkansas is looking at enhancing the services that are offered to youth who leave care for guardianship and adoption.

Arkansas Tribes

The state has no federally recognized tribes.

P.L. 110-351 Mandatory Provisions

Arkansas did not request any delays and has passed legislation that incorporates all the mandatory provisions effective July 23, 2009.

Relative notification

The state has recently passed legislation that sets specific notification timeframes for relatives (HB 2013). The state will provide notice to grandparents and all adult relatives suggested by the birth parent within 30 days when a child comes into custody.⁵

Educational stability

The state hopes to improve current practices in this area. The state is working with the Department of Education to get all educational records of youth as they leave from one school to another. Also, the state is not failing children due to scheduled visits such as therapy.

Health oversight and coordination

The state is already complying with this provision. Eighty-nine percent of children entering foster care receive health screening within 24 hours. The state hopes to increase that outcome to 95 percent. Eighty-seven percent of children who entered foster care between May 2007 and April 2008 and remained in care for at least 60 days receive comprehensive health assessments within required timeframe. This is an increase of 29 percent over the previous year. The state is developing electronic health records for foster children through the Medicaid system.⁶ Finally, the state has organized a workgroup to provide oversight of children's medication.⁷

Sibling connections

In SFY 2008, more than 1,700 foster children had siblings also in foster care. Sixty-six percent or 1,156 were placed with at least one of their brothers or sisters and 46 percent or 793 were placed all together.⁸ When siblings are not placed together, there must be a visitation plan and a plan on options to reunify them.⁹

Transition plans for children

Arkansas starts transition planning at age 14.¹⁰ The state assists youth with activities, including completing applications for Medicaid or other health insurance, referrals to transitional or other housing, obtaining employment or other financial support, applying for admission and aid for college or vocational training programs. Arkansas also provides notice to the youth and his/her attorney before a hearing. The youth and his/her attorney shall fully participate in the development of the transitional plan.¹¹ Furthermore, Arkansas is starting to run credit checks for young people before they leave care.¹²

Family Connections Grants

Arkansas will be applying for the Family Connections Grant, particularly around the intensive family finding efforts and the kinship navigator opportunities. The state plans to collaborate with other community-based organizations to initiate a kinship navigator program as the state does not currently operate one. The state is also collaborating with the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program to help improve their intensive family finding efforts.

The state has a family team meeting initiative in place, but is not sure if they will apply for a grant to fund this effort. Additionally, the state is considering collaborating with the Division of Behavioral Health Services, which handles substance abuse issues to review the comprehensive substance abuse treatment grants. In 2005, state data indicated that methamphetamine was the primary drug abused in several of the state's counties.¹³

Opportunities & Challenges

Workforce issues have challenged Arkansas for several years, particularly with family service workers. According to a 2006 report from the Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, the Human Services umbrella agency began experiencing a staffing crisis in 2004 and this has led to a decline in performance outcomes. In 2005, the vacancy rate for family service workers was at a high of 23 percent. Arkansas has made great strides in social worker recruitment and as of March 2006, the vacancy rate had reduced to 16 percent. With the increase in staff, performance indicators should also improve.¹⁴

Conclusion

Although caseloads declined in SFY 2008, more recently this trend has changed. Overall, the caseloads have increased and this is attributed to staff turnover, hiring freezes, and an increase in drug activity. Moreover, caseloads often increase when school is out for summer vacation.¹⁵

Arkansas Program Improvement Plan, linked to work with the National Governors Association (NGA), was approved on July 1, 2009. The state is trying to transform its practice and ensure staff understands the practice principles.¹⁶

¹ SFY 2008 Annual Report Card. Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc.

² National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) website.

³ SFY 2008 Annual Report Card. Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc.

⁴ Conference call with Cecil Blucker, John Zalenski, Mona Davis, Greg Crawford, Chris Price, Cherylon Reid, Anne Well and Christin Harper on June 19, 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ SFY 2008 Annual Report Card. Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc.

⁷ Conference call with Cecil Blucker, John Zalenski, Mona Davis, Greg Crawford, Chris Price, Cherylon Reid, Anne Well and Christin Harper on June 19, 2009.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Conference call with Cecil Blucker, John Zalenski, Mona Davis, Greg Crawford, Chris Price, Cherylon Reid, Anne Well and Christin Harper on June 19, 2009.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Extending Support for Foster Youth Beyond Age 18: State Bills Introduced in the Wake of the Fostering Connections Act Prepared by Kate Egbert under the supervision of Professor Miriam Aroni Krinsky

¹² Conference call with Cecil Blucker, John Zalenski, Mona Davis, Greg Crawford, Chris Price, Cherylon Reid, Anne Well and Christin Harper on June 19, 2009.

¹³ Poison, Program, and Perspective: The Impact of Methamphetamine on the Arkansas Child Welfare System. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. January 2007.

¹⁴ A long Road Ahead: An Update on Arkansas Child Welfare System. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. July 2006.

¹⁵ Conference call with Cecil Blucker, John Zalenski, Mona Davis, Greg Crawford, Chris Price, Cherylon Reid, Anne Well and Christin Harper on June 19, 2009.

¹⁶ Ibid.