



National Association of Public  
Child Welfare Administrators

an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association

## How States are Implementing the Fostering Connections Act

### Illinois' At-risk Children

In June 2009, Illinois had 18,042 children in substitute care.<sup>1</sup> From July 1, 2008 until June 30, 2009 Illinois had approximately 4,334 children enter foster care and 4,740 exit foster care. Of those who exited care, approximately 1,342 were adopted, 424 entered subsidized guardianship, 903 aged out of the system and 2,071 reunified. In June 2007, Illinois had approximately 16,100 children in substitute care<sup>2</sup>, a significant reduction in caseload from 1997 when there were more than 51,000 in state custody<sup>3</sup>. Also in 1997, 59 percent of Illinois' child welfare population was African American<sup>4</sup>. That number was reduced to 55.3 % in June 2009. In 2006, a little more than 5,000 children entered foster care and approximately 5,500 exited Illinois' system. Illinois has led the nation in permanent placements with relatives. In 2005, about 99,768 Illinois grandparents had primary responsibility caring for their grandchildren. Of the 19,431 children in out-of-home care in 2005, 35 percent were living with relatives while in care<sup>5</sup>. Eighty percent of Illinois' foster children are under the supervision of private agencies<sup>6</sup>.

### Illinois' Budget Landscape

The state has a budget deficit of \$4 billion for SFY 2009 and this increased to approximately \$9.2 billion for 2010. The state's revenue streams are much lower than expected<sup>7</sup>. The state relies on revenue from three major areas: sales taxes; income taxes; and fee for service. Tourism also serves as a revenue stream for the State of Illinois; however travel to Chicago, the main tourist destination, decreased this past year. The budget deficit threatens the delivery of critical services throughout the human services continuum by eliminating or reducing the funding stream to operate programs.

### P.L. 110-351 State Options

Illinois is a leader in the relative guardianship field because it is one of the first states to utilize a Title IV-E waiver to create a subsidized guardianship program. The waiver demonstration program, approved in 1996, will expire in October 2009. The waiver demonstration program is for children who have been in state custody for one year and have lived with a prospective guardianship for at least one year. Reunification and adoption must be ruled out as permanency options<sup>8</sup>. Currently, the program supports mainly relatives; but children 12 years of age or older who are living with non-relatives are able to take advantage of the program. Children living with non-related caregivers who are under the age of 12 can participate in the program with special permission from the Guardian of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Children in guardianship arrangements under the waiver are supported until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. If a child is still in high school the subsidy will continue until they graduate or turn 19, whichever happens first. A subsidy can also continue until 21 in the event that a child has severe special needs that are documented prior to the transfer of guardianship. The subsidy policy under the waiver mirrors Illinois adoption subsidy policy so that there was no financial incentive to choose one option over the other. Illinois plans on implementing the new Kin Gap option on November 1, 2009. When the federal guardianship assistance program is implemented some of the eligibility criteria will be different from that of the waiver in order to comply with the federal guidelines. For example, the program will only be available to children living in the homes of licensed relative caregivers and to children living with non-relatives who are 14 years of age or older.

Illinois currently support youth to 21 and plans to implement the new option under the Fostering Connections to Success Act once it becomes available in FY 2011. In 2008, there were approximately 1,520 youth ages 18 to 21 in state custody<sup>9</sup>. Illinois is one of the three states in which Chapin Hall has studied older foster youth and found that better outcomes occur when these youth stay in care longer instead of aging out at 18. Currently, foster youth may stay in care until age 19, regardless of their educational status. Some youth may continue to 21, but most decide to leave at 19. Illinois supports youth with state funds and the average subsidy payment for those caring for them is \$458. The court holds six-month reviews and annual review hearings<sup>10</sup>.

Illinois' full intention is to support both foster care and adoptive children to age 21 as allowed under the Fostering Connections legislation effective 10/1/10.

## **Illinois Tribes**

The state has no federally recognized tribes, although they are surrounded by states that do have tribes. There are occasions where tribal children's relatives are in Illinois.

## **P.L. 110-351 Mandatory Provisions**

A comprehensive diligent search procedure supports Illinois' dedication to placing children with relatives. Within 48 hours of taking protective custody of a child or screening a child into care through the state's attorney's office, the worker must look for parents as well as relatives or other significant persons of a child in Department custody for the purposes of finding the best and earliest placement for a child that will result in permanency or support for the family, or for day care and other assistance to intact families.

Caseworkers continue to seek relative placements if this option was not available at the time of removal. The Department is looking toward utilizing the New Family Connection Grants from the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act that will connect children in or at risk of entering foster care to family members, including expanding Kinship Navigator programs that help link relative caregivers, both those caring for children in and out of foster care, to a broad range of services and supports for their children and themselves.

Illinois has a geographic information systems (GIS) application called "SchoolMinder" which is used for kids being placed into foster care. SchoolMinder helps children stay in their community and supports: education stability; continuity of services (received from their school); and parental and family visitation. GIS technology helps identify available foster homes that are near both the child's current educational setting and the home from which he or she was removed. The state has been successful in keeping children in their schools of origin. However, the challenge for the state is that these homes become quickly occupied. The unintended benefit is that the state can now use GIS to focus its scarce foster parent recruitment and development efforts on just those communities that are most quickly exhausting their available foster parent resources. The current GIS-based recruiting effort, begun in January, 2009, is now seeing results. After a long decline, foster parent resources are now increasing and are currently at March, 2009 levels after a continual decline in resources that began when SchoolMinder was first implemented.

Illinois has a HealthWorks initiative. The HealthWorks of Illinois Program nurses work with foster parents of wards under the age of 6, offering services to ensure that the child is receiving adequate health care and services while in placement. Nurses also work with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) caseworkers and private agencies, keeping them aware of the child's healthcare needs and of services the child may be receiving or need.

Like many other states, sibling connections are a priority for Illinois. The state is under a consent decree *Aristotle v. Samuels* that requires sibling visits and sibling placements when it is not possible to maintain them in the same home.

The state requires that each youth leaving care has a transition plan. Illinois policy requires that, six months prior to the youth's discharge date, the department must discuss the following with the child: employment, educational opportunities, job resume, housing, health care, counseling, health and life insurance, community resources, reference letters, and emergency contacts. Illinois has a grant from the National Quality Improvement Center regarding performance measures in transition plans. In Cook County, the court system has benchmark hearings where the youth and the judge are sitting at the table. Illinois is trying to take this program statewide.

Illinois has a foster care workgroup that serves as an advisory committee continues to look at both the options and mandatory provisions. The state anticipates only a small fiscal impact around the mandatory provisions.

## **Family Connections Grants**

Illinois has applied for the Family Connections Grant and plans to use it for a Kinship Navigator program entailing a two-prong approach. If funded the grant money will support a "Central Call Center" where trained staff members will supportively work with relatives who call into the Center expressing a service need or support or both. In addition, through the Family Advocacy Centers, community based groups that provide support for parents to meet their goals, will provide a supportive staff member who will work with families and relative caregivers to help strengthen the family while protecting children.

At this time Illinois provides extended family support. The Extended Family Support Program is a statewide program that supports caregivers who are caring for related children outside the formal child welfare system. This intensive short-term

program allows children to live with family members without becoming involved with the child welfare system and offers caregivers support and services when they unexpectedly assume responsibility for related children. The services include: assistance in obtaining guardianship through probate court and in applying for a public aid grant; school advocacy; limited financial assistance per family for bedding, food, uniforms, or other appropriate services to stabilize the home; and help to access community resources and services as needed per family.

As a part of the Department's Lifetime Approach in providing services, the Department has a major initiative to improve the quality of life of children and youth in the Department's care by streamlining decision-making processes, delivering services earlier, shortening lengths of stay in residential and stabilizing out-of-home placements. The state operates a Child and Youth Invest Team (CAYIT) which is a team decision making model where multidisciplinary teams are full-time and regionally based that are responsible for assessing a child or youth's service needs, identifying the resources required to meet them and assisting the worker in accessing these services. The CAYIT staffings are convened whenever a child or youth's health or well-being is compromised or a less restrictive placement setting is required. The events that require a CAYIT staffing is often evidence that the child or youth's needs are changing or are not being met.

Illinois, in collaboration with the Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center, will develop a Life Skills Coaching Program that will prepare children and youths between the ages of six and twenty for successful transition into adult self-sufficiency. The focus of this program will shift the paradigm of only training youth in care beginning at age 14 to additionally targeting caregivers (i.e., foster parents, relatives, group home staff) to learn how to provide developmentally appropriate life skills to children in their care within their home environment beginning at age 5.

### **Opportunities & Challenges**

While the legislation creates opportunities to maximize federal dollars through Title IV-E claiming in areas that previously were unallowable, the commencement of these provisions occur either incrementally or at a later date, prohibiting the Department to access critical funds. One example is the state would like to take advantage of the claiming that will be allowable for the Department's programs that support older foster youth to age 21; however, the Department needs to wait until the claiming becomes allowable in FY 2011. Another example creates the opportunity to claim for training private sector employees; however this provision allows for claiming at rates that increase yearly where the claiming starts at a lower rate and then each year increases until it reaches the 75 percent rate. The private sector works with 80 percent of Illinois DCFS cases.

### **Conclusion**

Illinois wants to take full advantage of the Fostering Connections Legislation, and was one of the first states who participated in the Subsidized Guardianship Waiver Demonstration program evaluating the impact of relative care. The state fully utilizes relative caregivers and this has a positive impact on reducing Illinois's caseload. Illinois's focus is on "Protecting Children while Supporting and Strengthening Families". In Illinois more than 70 percent of indicated cases occur based on neglect. Illinois plans to redesign the front end and focus on immediate early intervention services for families through the development of a Differential Response model to prevent children from coming into care and to work with families from a strength-based approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Report: All Wards by Current Living Arrangement Category – Data as of 07/03/2009

<sup>2</sup> Illinois Department of Children and Families Services website.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Children and Family Research Center: Disproportionality in Illinois Child Welfare, October 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Child Welfare League of America state data website.

<sup>6</sup> Conference call with Erwin McEwin on March 19, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) website.

<sup>8</sup> Cornerstone Consulting Group: Child Welfare Waivers: Promising Directions, Missed Opportunities.

<sup>9</sup> Congressional Research Service (CRS): Youth Transitioning from Foster Care: Issue for Congress. February 12, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.