



The Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data (*State Data Center*) Frequently Asked Questions

What is involved in the process of becoming a Center member?

The process of becoming a member starts when a state receives a copy of the Center data sharing and services agreement. Upon receipt, state officials review the agreements carefully and submit the agreements to legal and contracting staff. Upon receipt of the signed agreements and subscription fee, Chapin Hall staff will begin the process of auditing your data and creating your database.

Benefits of Membership to the Center

What are the main benefits of joining CSFCAD?

The Center's unique longitudinal database and associated web tool gives state administrators a powerful new capacity to:

- Analyze key child welfare outcomes: time to reunification, time to adoption, placement stability, and re-entry to care;
- Compare outcomes for different administrative offices within their state or with other states;
- Trace outcomes from the aggregate to the individual child level;
- More accurately project future service patterns based on historical trends;
- Test the impact of service and policy innovations;
- Set performance goals and monitor progress;
- Link financial decision-making to outcome measures; and
- Tell their story to media and make their case to legislators.

Membership also allows state administrators to work with other state members in a unique national community to:

- Enhance the database model to maximize the above capacities and to track other child welfare outcomes while minimizing additional IT development costs.
- Participate in a forum in which states can work together to recognize and analyze national patterns and trends in a timely manner.
- Determine and guide a research agenda that will benefit not only individual states, the field of public child welfare in general.

What exactly does my state receive as a member of CSFCAD?

Subscribing to the Center provides:

- Two powerful data tools that can be used to establish and maintain an accurate and sophisticated understanding of agency performance in your own state and across states:
 - 1) A sophisticated longitudinal database for your state to analyze child welfare outcomes and performance.
 - 2) Access to your state's longitudinal database as well as a multi-state longitudinal database through a sophisticated end-user web tool.
- Five hours of technical assistance on installation and use of database and/or web tool.
- Biannual updates of your database

What information is available through the end-user web tool?

1. Through the end-user web tool, you have access to the Foster Care Data Archive application, a web-based decision-support system that lets you query your state's data. You structure your queries by making simple selections that do not require programming experience. Output from these queries can be viewed on-line or may be printed and saved to a file. The output is self-documenting, that is, the parameters you specified (dates, demographics, etc.) are listed on the output so that you will know later which data you are looking at.
2. You can opt to see a summary report of the data or you can look at the records that underlie the data. Getting case-specific data can be especially helpful if you've identified groups of cases that need special attention or follow-up,
3. You may request the option to download the records that meet your query specifications. That data is downloaded into a file that you can import into a

spreadsheet or into a data analysis package for further analysis or for linking with other data of interest.

How easy is it to get answers through the web tool?

The web tool is easy to use, and it is pretty simple to get data out of it. However, the ease of use of the application belies the power of the tool. While it is simple to get data out, it requires careful thought and a willingness to be very systematic in order to get the right data to answer the question of interest that you have. Technical assistance is available, and a users' group is being formed to cross-pollinate thinking across jurisdictions. Questions related to policies, programs, planning and linking outcomes to costs have all been posed and answered using Center data.

If the data come from my own system, can't my IT staff do the same thing?

Some IT staff within jurisdictions resist joining the CSFCAD, believing they can provide the same functionality. While this may be technically feasible, there are very few states or counties whose staff have been able to invest the time and effort to build and maintain this kind of application. The unique structure of the data files result from careful programming, based on many years of development work by Chapin Hall. So, while many IT departments may well be able to produce this kind of data, rarely can it be done for such a low cost. In addition, locally developed applications, while useful in-jurisdiction, have little comparability to other States. The ability to talk readily with an analyst or a program person in another state about what they've done can save time and sharpen your in-house analysis.

Can membership in the Center help me with my CFSR?

Yes. Several of the current CFSR measures do not reflect best practices in using longitudinal data and may reflect changes in outcomes that did not actually occur during your state's PIP period. Reports from your state's longitudinal database could help officials in your state more accurately describe your state's performance. In addition, recent federal regulations reflect the Children's Bureau's intention to change the AFCARS submission to one that is longitudinal. Membership in the CSFCAD will give you a head start on preparing for this change in the way the federal government will be tracking and measuring outcomes.

How much does it cost to become a center member?

An annual subscription to the Center costs \$25,000.

What do you anticipate in terms of increases in the annual subscription fee in the future? Do you receive any grant or other funding from outside sources?

Core funding comes from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Center's database supports the outcome measurement required for states participating in the AECF's Family to Family Initiative.

We are hoping to get more states to join so that we can keep subscription fees as low as possible. We currently receive a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to help cover development and maintenance costs of running the Center. The membership fee covers a small portion of the costs of developing each state database and assisting with the required installation and training.

We will continue to seek outside funding to supplement the Center and to enhance the database model and tools.

Are there outside funding sources that states could contact directly to cover the cost of a subscription?

Currently, the Annie E. Casey Foundation will allow Family-to-Family sites receiving AECF money to use a portion of the funds to pay the state subscription fee. Casey Family Programs has also provided support to cover the subscription fee as part of its engagement with some states.

Process of Developing Your Longitudinal Database

How do we send you our SACWIS and/or other child welfare information system data? How much IT time will it take and what will it cost?

You can send the data drop a number of ways— via SFTP transfer to Chapin Hall's secure server, on a tape, CD, or DVD—but not via e-mail due to confidentiality issues. Costs involve only your staff time to send.

Will agency program and IT staff be required to develop a mapping document for Chapin Hall in order to ensure that the data needed to create the longitudinal data files is extracted from the agency's information system?

No. Chapin Hall receives a data drop of the entire SACWIS/Information System. They organize the data into the longitudinal data files (database). They ask that a program and IT staff contact be assigned to answer any questions that arise. The agency then receives a copy of the database along with the software for analysis.

How long will the process take?

Chapin Hall typically allocates three months from the time of data receipt for the initial development of a state's longitudinal files. That timeframe is, in part, contingent on

timely access to technical staff who can respond to questions related to data interpretation and/or make decisions about how we should address any data integrity issues that may be encountered. Initial development typically occurs as follows:

- Development of programs to create FCDA longitudinal files.
- Discussion with state staff regarding data integrity issues, data interpretation, and decisions related to event type mapping and final longitudinal files.
- State review of draft processing documentation, case records showing file development and counts of children in care and entering. At this point, adjustments to processing can be made to address any concerns/requests from the state regarding processing decisions.
- Finalization of files after state review is complete. At this point, files are loaded onto the website and text files are sent to the state along with documentation.

To maximize the value of the Center’s database, how frequently should it be updated and who performs the updates?

Because the Center’s database and software are designed to be used as a decision support tool, and not a case management system, Chapin Hall suggests that the data be updated only twice a year.

The Center will update your database on a semi-annual basis. To update the database, the agency simply provides another data drop of the entire information system, just as they did to create the initial database. As soon as Chapin Hall updates the agency’s database, the updated data are accessible using the Center’s database software.

More frequent updates are possible but would not be included in the Center’s subscription fee. If your agency staff were, in time, to assume the manipulation of the data into the file used by the application, then your database could be updated as frequently as you would like. Most members have found that bi-annual updates are more than sufficient to provide decision makers with the information needed.

Using Your Longitudinal Data Base

System Requirements and Software Licenses

To fully access all of the functionality available in the end-user web tool, what is the correct minimum browser configuration (types and setting) necessary?

The application works with most basic browsers-there is no java script in our application. We have encountered some problems with IT not wanting to publish results to a new browser window. We aren’t sure why this occurs. It is highly idiosyncratic and it doesn’t happen on our machines.

To take advantage of the data contained in our longitudinal database, will we need to purchase licenses for Oracle, SAS, or SPSS?

You will need statistical software of some kind to take full advantage of your longitudinal database, though the database could be used in Excel or ACCESS if it is not too large.

As Center members develop SPSS, SAS or other applications for manipulating the longitudinal database, they will be encouraged to share those applications with Center members as one way to minimize cost for all Center members.

If we want to use the Center's programs to run our own versions of the longitudinal database, is SAS required?

Yes. The programming that maps your state's administrative data to the longitudinal file is written in SAS.

Can we continue to provide cohort data from our current SPSS-based system (we are concerned about losing the history already developed through SPSS)?

You won't lose any data. You can continue to produce your SPSS data or we could coordinate the effort so that the work isn't being duplicated.

We generally think that it is best to have a single database of record and we would work with you to resolve any differences to your satisfaction. Also the data file that we produce can be used with SPSS, for statistical analysis.

Training and End-User Costs

Some states have to pay a fee to their SACWIS system contractor in order for regions to look at the charts and graphs. Is this true for this product?

No.

Will training be at our site or do we need to budget travel funds in order to be trained on the system?

No travel is involved. We have developed an online help tool that meets this need. The tool is available to all Center members at no additional cost.

For more information on the State Data Center, please contact Christina Crayton, Program Analyst, at 202-682-0100 x 257 or christina.crayton@aphsa.org.