



## CHILD WELFARE IMPROVEMENTS IN CALIFORNIA

# Frequently Asked Questions

## General

### **What is the status of efforts to improve California's child welfare system?**

California is undertaking a number of efforts to improve the state's child welfare system.

First, state and county officials are implementing the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), which went into effect on January 1, 2004. This new system holds the state and counties accountable for improving outcomes for children through the establishment of improvement goals, public reporting of outcomes and county-specific improvement plans that must be approved by county boards of supervisors and submitted to the state by September 30, 2004.

Second, state and county officials are developing and implementing in 11 pilot counties program and practice changes that will improve the ways in which child welfare services are administered. Key changes include 1) development of a statewide safety assessment system to ensure the consistent assessment of risk in reported cases of child abuse and neglect; 2) improvements to child abuse hotline response systems to better enable social workers to refer cases that do not meet state standards for intervention to community partners; and 3) promotion of permanent connections for youth and improved transitions to adulthood.

## State Level Activities

### IMPROVING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

#### **What is AB 636 and why was it necessary?**

In 2001, the California State Legislature enacted Assembly Bill 636 (AB 636), the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, to replace the state's process-driven county compliance review system with a new system that focused on results. AB 636 provides the legal framework for the California Child and Family Services Reviews - a new system for measuring and monitoring the performance of each county child welfare system.

This new system was implemented in January 2004 and operates on the philosophy of continuous improvement, interagency partnerships, community involvement and public reporting of outcomes. It will allow the state to gauge its performance against national standards while measuring the performance of counties on other critical outcomes and tracking improvement over time.

#### **What are the key components of California's new Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636)?**

The four primary components are:

- *Quantitative Data: Quarterly Reports*

Each quarter, the state provides county child welfare agencies with county-specific data on outcome measures related to safety, permanency and well-being. These quarterly reports provide counties with quantitative data and will serve as a management tool to track performance over time.



- *Qualitative Data: Peer Quality Case Reviews*

These reviews are a way to obtain qualitative information not measured through data (i.e., How involved are families in case planning?, Are families getting the services they need?) Social workers within the agency and from other counties examine a group of cases to thoroughly review how they were handled. The case reviews reflect the agency's best practices, as well as practices that need the most improvement.

- *Self-Assessment*

Every three years, counties submit to the state a comprehensive analysis of how they are performing based on the information gathered through the quarterly data reports and Peer Quality Case Reviews. The self-assessment, developed in collaboration with community stakeholders, provides analysis and understanding of a county's current performance.

- *System Improvement Plan*

Based on the self-assessment, counties are required to submit a system improvement plan to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). This document is a strategic plan to achieve measurable outcome improvements within a certain time period and is updated annually by counties.

### **What does AB 636 mean to counties, which have responsibility for administering California's child welfare system?**

AB 636 shifts the focus from process-measured compliance to an outcome-based review system. Specifically, it supports state and county partnerships; requires counties to develop county-specific System Improvement Plans and track outcomes, which are posted by the state on the Internet; and encourages interagency coordination and shared responsibility for outcomes. In requiring counties to collaborate with community partners, the state is signaling an end to the isolation of child welfare agencies from the community, and many readily see a new area of openness and shared responsibility for the safety and well-being of children.

### **How do the recommendations of the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group and the proposed redesign of California's system relate to the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636)?**

Per its legislative mandate, the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group produced a comprehensive vision for how California could fundamentally improve its child welfare system, including a greater focus on outcomes. In its final report, known as the Child Welfare Services Redesign, recommended program, practice and policy changes are detailed and explained. As counties develop their System Improvement Plans, they can look to these recommendations to implement changes that will improve their outcomes.

The Stakeholders Group solidified a vision of working in communities with a variety of partners to create a comprehensive early identification and response system for at risk families. This early intervention and partnering model is being implemented in 11 pilot counties throughout California (referred to as Cohort 1 counties) and currently focuses on developing a standardized system to evaluating child safety and improving county child abuse hotline response systems. As these 11 counties develop and refine targeted program and practice changes, they are integrating those efforts with the data and accountability measures now made possible through the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636).



### **What are Cohort I counties?**

Eleven counties applied for and have received state grants to become pilots or “learning labs” for targeted child welfare improvements. The 11 counties include: Contra Costa, Glenn, Humboldt, Los Angeles, Placer, Sacramento, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Stanislaus, Tehama and Trinity.

## **Funding**

### **How does current funding of child welfare services impact California's ability to improve results for children?**

The current federal financing structure does not support new approaches being taken in California. Unfortunately, the largest federal funding source for child welfare focuses on out-of-home placement (foster care). Funding is severely limited for services to prevent child abuse, to reunite abused and neglected children with their families, or to provide follow-up support for families. Furthermore, federal requirements pertaining to other funding streams make collaboration across programs more difficult. These obsolete federal funding mechanisms work against the goals of safety, permanence and well-being for children and their families.

A pivotal element in providing adequate services to children in foster care is the ability to fund appropriate social worker caseloads. A recent study revealed that caseloads are, on average, double what they need to be to provide the minimum required services. If California were to employ best practices when serving these children and families, it would need to reduce social workers' individual caseloads by two-thirds. Clearly, increased funding is needed to improve caseload ratios and management.

### **What is the status of California's Title IV-E waiver request to the federal government, which would permit the state and selected counties to use federal foster care dollars for prevention and early intervention services?**

The California Department of Social Services has submitted a proposal to the federal government for a Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project, which addresses two critical problems confronting California's child welfare system: inflexible federal funding and restrictive eligibility criteria. Title IV-E funds provide approximately half of total funding for the state's child welfare system. Federal restrictions on the use of these funds and eligibility criteria that limit who can receive services have greatly limited California's ability to improve the child welfare system and respond more effectively to the evolving needs of vulnerable children and overburdened families.

If approved, the waiver will allow up to 20 counties, including Los Angeles, to test a new funding strategy that will enable local child welfare agencies to create a more responsive array of services and supports for families, based on anticipated program savings. It is expected that these savings will be generated as a result of a reduction in the number of children placed in out-of-home care, more timely reunifications, reduced dependence on expensive out-of-home care options and performance-based contracts.



## **Federal Level Activities**

### **What is the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and how is it different from the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR)?**

The CFSR is a formal review of state child welfare programs conducted every three years by the federal government using specific benchmarks designed to assess achievement of child safety, permanency and well-being outcomes and to identify the state's strengths, needs and requirements for technical assistance. The C-CFSR is the state review of these same outcomes and goals with some expanded measures included, reflecting California's concern that the federal benchmarks are insufficient to paint a complete picture of the critical results we are working to achieve for children and families.

### **What is the Program Improvement Plan (PIP)?**

The Program Improvement Plan is a comprehensive plan and agreement between the California Department of Social Services and the federal government for how the state will improve its child welfare performance. The PIP is based on the findings of the federal Child and Family Services Review, conducted in 2002, and details strategies and benchmarks for upgrading performance in all areas of nonconformity. California may be fined up to \$18.2 million in penalties if it fails to substantially comply with federal standards.