IMPROVING CALIFORNIA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Background Information

Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group and Redesign

- In 2000, the California Legislature created a statewide Child Welfare Stakeholders Group to review the state's child welfare system and make recommendations for improvement and change. Over a three-year period, the stakeholders group forged a blueprint for overhauling the system, concluding its work in 2003. Its final report is referred to as the Child Welfare Services Redesign, and state and county efforts have shifted to implementing key elements. Principal efforts are focused on developing a statewide safety assessment system to ensure that all counties use consistent procedures to determine if a child is being abused or neglected, improving the child abuse hotline response system to better enable social workers to screen and refer families for community services, and promoting permanent connections for youth and improved transitions to adulthood.

Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636)

- In 2001, the California Legislature passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636) to improve outcomes for children in the child welfare system while holding county and state agencies accountable for the outcomes achieved. This statewide accountability system (known formally as the California Child and Family Review System) is an enhanced version of the federal oversight system mandated by Congress and used to monitor states' performance.

  This improved system for California focuses on the following goals:

  - Children are protected from abuse and neglect.
  - Children are safely maintained in their own homes whenever possible and appropriate.
  - Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
  - The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.
  - Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.
  - Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
  - Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.
  - Youth emancipating from foster care are prepared to transition to adulthood.

  To measure progress towards these goals, 14 performance indicators are currently used. Examples include measuring the number of children who are in foster care, the rate of recurrence of maltreatment of children in foster care, the number of placements of a foster child, length of time to reunification with birth parents and the rate of adoption. Other indicators will be added over time.

- Previously, the California Department of Social Services relied on a system of process measurements focused on determining whether or not a child received a particular service to monitor the performance of county child welfare departments. This process-oriented system fell short of determining if a child actually benefited from the service.

- Under California's new accountability system, which went into effect on January 1, 2004, all 58 counties now receive quarterly data reports on their outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency and well-being of children and families who come into contact with the child welfare system. The foundation for this new oversight system comes from data obtained from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System, the statewide information system for child welfare. Baseline performance data was gathered for each county, released to the counties in January and also made available to the public.

- Under California's new accountability system, each county has conducted a self-assessment using community-based groups to facilitate public input into the process. The intent of these self-assessments was for counties to examine all program areas to determine the basis for their current level of performance and to help them identify and remove barriers to improving performance.

- Following the self-assessments, counties are required to collaborate with other local partners to develop a county System Improvement Plan (SIP). The purpose of the SIP is to establish program priorities, define specific action steps to achieve improvement and establish goals for improvement. As mandated by AB 636, a county's System Improvement Plan must be approved by its board of supervisors and is due to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) by September 30, 2004.

- After counties have submitted their System Improvement Plans to CDSS, the state will review each plan and work with counties to identify areas for further support and to ensure coordination in improving results for children and families. Counties will continue to receive quarterly data reports and use the data to further target their efforts and make needed improvements. Counties also will continue to collaborate with community partners and stakeholders who are now engaged (or engaged more fully) in local efforts to improve child welfare services for children and families in need. As progress continues, the state will report California's progress to the federal government as required by its Program Improvement Plan and to the state legislature.

- Through the state's new accountability system, data is now being made available to the counties, and counties are collaborating with increased numbers of community partners. Simultaneously, key program and practice improvements recommended by the Child Welfare Stakeholders Group Redesign are underway which target attention in critical areas. Collectively, these efforts are intended to improve results for children and youth, and enable California ultimately to reduce the number of children and youth who are abused and/or neglected in the state and also meet federal targets for improved performance.

Federal Child and Family Service Reviews

- In September 2002, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families examined California's delivery of child welfare services. The review (known formally as the Children and Family Services Review) focused on outcomes for the children and families served by the state's child protective services, foster care, adoption and other child welfare-related programs. The federal review was conducted in all 50 states and collectively the reviews provide a snapshot of states' performance in child welfare. In California, the review consisted of visits to three counties, including 49 case reviews, and a series of interviews at the state level.

- The federal Child and Family Services Review found California to be in compliance in a number of areas such as:

  - Timeliness of initiating investigations in response to reports of maltreatment
  - Providing services to families to prevent children's removal from the home
  - Placing children in close proximity to their parents or close relatives
  - Locating and assessing relatives as potential placement resources
  - Conducting caseworker visits with children
  - Meeting children's needs for physical health services and other areas

- The federal review also identified several areas of non-conformity with federal requirements, representing challenges the state must address:

  - The rate of recurrence of substantiated child maltreatment within 6 months of a prior occurrence of substantiated maltreatment
  - The incidence of maltreatment of children in foster care
  - The rate of foster care re-entries within 12 months of discharge from a previous foster care episode
  - The percentage of reunifications occurring within 12 months of a child's entry in foster care
  - The percentage of finalized adoptions occurring within 24 months of a child's entry into foster care
  - The percentage of children experiencing no more than two placements during the first 12 months in foster care

- Like every other state (none of which was found to be in conformity on all measures), California is required to improve its outcomes in the areas identified above as challenges in order to avoid accruing fiscal penalties. The state submitted a required Program Improvement Plan (PIP) detailing the specific action steps it will take to come into substantial compliance with federal standards. California's new oversight and accountability system functions as a type of monitoring and continuous improvement system for the PIP, providing the state with essential outcome-based data required by the federal government and holding agencies accountable for their results.