CHILD WELFARE IMPROVEMENTS

Statewide Priorities 2004-2005

Important work to improve California's child welfare system is underway in 2004-2005. Informed by years of planning and supported with both public and private funds, targeted efforts are focusing on improving the lives of children and families served by the state's child welfare system. Priority efforts include implementation of California's new oversight and accountability system, targeted improvements to child welfare programs and practices, interagency collaboration and a strategic communications program.

Oversight and Accountability

The cornerstone of California's efforts to improve oversight and accountability for the state's child welfare system is its implementation of the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act (AB 636), which went into effect on January 1, 2004. A comprehensive approach to oversight and accountability, California's new system measures and monitors the performance of each of the state's county child welfare systems. It operates on the philosophy of continuous improvement, interagency partnerships, community involvement and public reporting of outcomes. The new system will allow the state to gauge its performance against national standards while also measuring the performance of counties on other critical outcomes and tracking improvement over time.

Highlights include:

- Quarterly data reports that are now sent to each county providing data on outcome measures related to child safety, permanency and well-being.
- County peer reviews that utilize qualitative information not measured through data to identify both best practices and areas for improvement.
- County self-assessments, undertaken with community partners, that provide analysis and understanding of a county's current performance.
- County system improvement plans that detail the steps a county will take to improve its child welfare performance and guide implementation and monitoring efforts.

Program and Practice Improvements

A number of targeted program and practice improvements are priorities in 2004-2005. The following include areas of collaboration between the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA), the Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth and 11 counties that serve as pilots for developing, testing and refining these specific improvements:

1. **Development of a statewide safety assessment system**
   State and county officials are developing a standardized safety assessment system to ensure that all counties use consistent assessment and evaluation procedures to determine if a child is being abused or neglected. This improvement addresses one of California's chief shortcomings and is a key requirement of the state's federal Program Improvement Plan.

2. **Improvements to child abuse hotline response systems**
   By implementing new screening procedures at child abuse hotlines and fundamentally changing the ability of social workers to refer families for community services, counties will be able to better ensure that children and families get the help they need. This important practice change will enable

community organizations to better assist families who need support, but whose child neglect reports do not meet government standards for intervention. The majority of cases reported to child protection services do not qualify for county office intervention, yet many of these children and families clearly need support. Approximately one-third of hotline referrals are re-referrals of the same families from the previous year.

3. **Promotion of permanent connections for youth and improved transitions to adulthood**
   To promote stable and permanent connections for children and youth who are in the child welfare system, state and county officials are working to improve the involvement of both young people and their families in planning for the supports that are needed. Part of the focus is to determine whether family members or others that a young person knows are able to play a permanent and responsible role in his or her life. Another focus is to ensure that multi-disciplinary teams help make plans and offer a wide range of support. The overall aim is to better support youth while they are under county-supervised care as well as better prepare them for transition to adulthood. Experience shows that without these permanent connections, youth face even more overwhelming odds for a successful adulthood than is already the case when they exit foster care.

Interagency Coordination

The California Department of Social Services chairs an Interagency Child Welfare Team comprised of deputy directors from the myriad state agencies and departments that have responsibility for meeting various needs of children and families who are in the child welfare system. This group provides leadership and guidance to facilitate county implementation of child welfare improvements. Specifically, it focuses on maximizing funding for services that support children and families served by multiple government agencies; removing systemic and regulatory barriers; ensuring that policies, accountability systems and planning are outcome-based; and sharing information and data. Priorities for the Interagency Team in 2004-05 include implementation of regional Fiscal Academies that will offer training to county administrative and budget officers and creation of a statewide body that will address interagency program and fiscal issues as they arise.

Strategic Communications Program

CDSS, CWDA and the Foundation Consortium are leading a strategic communications program to improve understanding of child welfare issues, especially child safety, permanency and well-being. This targeted education and outreach effort is highly collaborative and includes related communications initiatives of other partner organizations, all of which support the child welfare improvement efforts that are underway in California. Through this strategic communications program, accurate and consistent messages are conveyed through a variety of efforts, including public education, media relations, support for county offices and outreach to stakeholders.