

**Department of Children and Families  
State Advisory Council  
Citizen Review Panel Report  
May, 2006**

**Introduction**

The State Advisory Council is a seventeen member advisory council to the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families. By law the Council should consist of five persons who are child care professionals one child psychiatrist, and at least one attorney. The remaining members should represent young persons, parents and others interested in the delivery of services to children and youth. The Council is responsible for:

- Recommending to the commissioner programs, legislation or other matters which will improve services for children and youth
- Providing an annual review and advise the commissioner regarding the proposed budget of the department
- Interpreting to the community at large the policies duties and programs of the department
- Issuing reports the Council deems necessary to the Governor and Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families

Additionally, The SAC is a designated Citizen Review Panel for the State of Connecticut. Under federal CAPTA legislation (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act) each state must establish Citizen Review Panels. Each panel must evaluate the extent to which the State is fulfilling its child protection responsibilities in accordance with its CAPTA state plan. This includes (1) examining the policies, procedures and practices of state and local child protection agencies, and (2) reviewing specific cases, where appropriate. In addition, consistent with sections 106© (4) (a) (iii) of CAPTA, a panel may examine other criteria that it considers important to ensure the protection of children, including the extent to which the state and local CPS system is coordinated with the title IV-E foster care and adoption assistance programs of the Social Security Act. (Section 106©(4)(A) and (ii)).

The Council met quarterly in the fall, increasing the frequency of the meetings in the winter and spring in order to fulfill its requirements. The SAC also met quarterly with the other two CT Citizen Review Panels at their combined meetings in order to coordinate information and process in the submission of annual reports.

## **Citizen Review Panel Subcommittee**

The SAC created a subcommittee of members interested in fulfilling the Citizen Review Panel mandate. The entire SAC determined in September, 2005 that they would focus on Foster Care issues for this report. Specifically, the subcommittee chose to focus on how the Department and its partners can better support foster families. This committee consisted of two psychiatrists, several parents and several community providers. The subcommittee membership and attendance at meetings was varied.

## **Methodology and Scope of Work**

This report was developed by the Citizen Review Panel subcommittee. This subcommittee was informed by the following processes and data:

- Presentations by various DCF staff on foster care issues
- Review of contracts to CAFAP (CT Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents)
- Review of the training academy curriculum
- CAFAP quarterly reporting including recruitment and retention data
- Buddy Program quarterly report
- CAFAP surveys
- Report on CT facilitated dialogues
- Kid Hero annual report
- Foster and adoptive parent exit interviews
- Relative caregiver exit interviews
- Adopt USKids quarterly report
- Written informal feedback on CAFAP liaisons
- Met with the Director of CAFAP
- Attended Area Advisory Council meetings

The Subcommittee also designed and administered a brief survey to foster /adoptive families and relative caregivers who attended the 2006 annual CAFAP conference. This instrument is in Appendix A.

## **Specific findings**

1. Foster families are not provided with adequate information about the children placed in their care. This was revealed through the surveys and the facilitated dialogues and direct interviews with foster and adoptive families at the statewide conference. This lack of information has several negative consequences. First, the foster families are not able to meet the unique needs of children placed in their care. Second, this leads to frustration and ultimately a number of foster parents exit the system (giving up their foster family roles) within the critical first two

years of service. Of equal importance is that this also leads to disruption in the lives of the children who were placed in their care.

2. While the surveys indicated a neutral response to interaction with DCF case workers (neither supportive nor unsupportive to foster families) the comments indicated that there are several areas in which the case workers/departmental policies are deficient.

These include:

- Continuity of workers to support the families
- Provision of information about DCF, support services and process issues
- Provision of information about the children placed in their care
- Provision of assistance in accessing community supports and supports specific to foster/adoptive families and relative caregivers during placement and following adoption
- Provision of assistance from DCF during abuse allegations
- Provision of assistance with advocacy and legal issues
- Improve communication with families. Communication with case workers is often challenging. They are unavailable and do not return phone calls
- Families are excluded from ACR's and treatment planning meetings
- TPR process is very slow. Once TPR is determined, the move toward permanency is not pursued in a timely manner.

## **Recommendations**

The subcommittee believes that many of the issues identified could be addressed through training, improved linkage with the CAFAP family liaisons and improved data collection to address accountability. Specifically these recommendations are:

1. **Develop quality improvement strategies.** The CAFAP Family Liaisons are employees of the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAP) who are stationed at DCF area offices with the purpose of providing support to foster parents. In some instances, however, the Family Liaisons are underutilized in supporting families. The DCF internal protocol for processing referrals significantly delays the time frame in which the referral is given to the CAFAP Liaison. Referrals to the liaisons often occur months after a placement has been made. Since the critical timeframe to support foster families is during the first two years of placement, the liaisons should be contacted immediately by DCF workers, and should work in partnership with DC F during the initial placement meetings. This could occur by requiring a referral to the liaison as soon as a placement is made and an initial meeting is scheduled. Additionally this could be addressed through the development of practice standards for family liaisons that would include:
  - Timeliness of response

- The relationship with the DCF worker
- Development of a plan to support the families
- Documentation including home visit reports and data on services and supports needed but unavailable
- Appropriate oversight to ensure the development of strategies to address family needs.
- Participation in community events and organizations including local community collaboratives so that they can better assist families in accessing local resources.

These practices standards could mirror the practice standards currently utilized by the Care Coordinators from the System of Care and FAVOR Family Advocates. The subcommittee recommends the development of goals at intake, and evaluation of goals every six months for the critical first two years. Visits should be made monthly with families during the first year and every other month during the second year, and at least annually thereafter. The role of the liaison is different from the role of the case worker. They can provide a level of understanding and support, advocacy and community linkage that the case worker is unable to provide. Additionally the liaisons can serve a preventive role by minimizing crises that could arise in between case worker visits. By improving the partnership between the liaisons, the families and the case workers, DCF would be well-positioned to reduce the loss of foster parents during the first two years and improve stability for the children in their care. This wraparound model has been effective in other domains including children's behavioral health.

Additionally the committee recommends that DCF and CAFAP develop a simple brochure that can serve as a quick reference guide for foster parents on available services and supports.

2. **Improve data collection and documentation.** The subcommittee determined that there was a lack of data on the liaison activities, outcomes, services provided, services needed. They recommend that the liaisons develop an intake and discharge form that captures:
  - Basic demographics
  - Child specific information including numbers of children in their care, ages of children
  - Diagnoses
  - Services needed but not available
  - Reasons for discharge.

This data should be supplemented with monthly encounter data that details specific encounters with each family, community activities, services provided, outreach, home visits and other information that would inform the Department of the vital support role that a family liaison can make. The committee further recommends that exit interviews for all foster families exiting the program should be conducted by an

independent agent (neither CAFAP nor DCF) to avoid any potential reluctance on the part of the parents to answer the interview questions in an open and honest manner.

3. **Improve case worker training.** The subcommittee believes that there is a need for improved training for DCF case workers regarding foster families and the role of DCF workers as partners with the family liaisons. The training academy module on foster/adoptive care was reduced from half a day to one hour. A full half day module should be developed that addresses the issues and support needs of foster families and the critical role of family liaisons in supporting these families, and should include foster and biological parents as faculty.
4. **Improve supports to foster families who are accused of abuse.** Foster families reported that once they are accused of abuse, they no longer have contact or support from the DCF workers and the family liaisons, and are left on their own to address the issue;. This lack of support is a contributing factor in the turnover among foster families, even when the reports are later unsubstantiated. The Department needs to develop a protocol for providing support to these families, apart from the investigation unit during this process.
5. **Improve CAFAP staff training.** The CAFAP staff should utilize the training academy curriculum offerings through DCF for relevant training to ensure their safety and the quality of services delivered.
6. **Address the barrier of confidentiality.** Confidentiality was voiced as a major concern throughout this process. The subcommittee found that the DCF workers use confidentiality as a reason for not involving foster families in meetings and for withholding information from the families. The foster families all sign a confidentiality agreement. The DCF workers should be encouraged and supported in involving foster families in all areas of planning and treatment for children placed in their care so that they can access appropriate information to be successful as foster parents. These families need access to information at the initial placement and throughout the duration of the placement. Confidentiality is NOT a reason to exclude them from the process.
7. **Improve services available for foster children.** Foster children need increased opportunities for participation in community activities so that foster families can feel the children they care for are fully integrated into the communities in which they live. The support could include tutoring, after school programs, music, art, dance lessons and camp experiences.
8. **Improve the statewide process for the identification of issues and concerns that can be addressed through the State Advisory Council.** The committee recognizes the important community work done by the Area Advisory Councils. They further believe that this valuable information needs to be regularly collected by the SAC in order to streamline the process of program improvement. The committee recommends that each area advisory council submit a one page report

to the chairs of the SAC monthly. This report could be a simple one page report format that includes:

- What's working/not working
- Challenges to the specific area
- Solutions attempted for each area of concern

The committee believes that this collaboration with local activities will not only streamline the planning process and minimize duplication of effort by the SAC /CRP, but could also make members of the local councils feel that their work is valued and utilized in a statewide planning process.

## **Summary**

The Committee believes that the CT Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents is an integral part of the process of recruitment, support and retention of foster and adoptive families. The partnership between this organization and DCF is critical to the permanency and well being of children in our state. We believe that by implementing the recommendations in this report, the Department can continue to improve the lives of the children in their care.

# **Appendix A**

## **Foster/Adoptive Parent Survey**

## State Advisory Council – Citizen Review Panel Foster/Adoptive Parent Survey

*Please circle your answer to each statement.*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I have been supported by the Dept. Of Children and Families In fulfilling my role as a Foster/adoptive parent.	5	4	3	2	1
2. I have been supported by my social worker From the Dept. of Children and Families In fulfilling my role as a Foster/adoptive parent.	5	4	3	2	1
3. I have been supported by the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAP) In fulfilling my role as a Foster/adoptive parent.	5	4	3	2	1
4. I have been supported in my Role as a Foster/Adoptive parent By the CAFAP liaison.	5	4	3	2	1

Please state any needs that were or continue to be unmet.

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Please share anything else about your experience as a Foster/Adoptive parent that you would like us to know.

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**Send additional comments to:**  
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