

**State Advisory Council
Citizen Review Panel Report
May 2007**

The State Advisory Council (SAC) is mandated by Connecticut Statute, Sec. 17a-4, and is a fifteen member Committee appointed by the governor. The primary duties of the Council are as follows: to review policies; recommend programs, legislation or other matters that will improve services for children, youth and families; review and advise the commissioner on the proposed Agency budget; perform public outreach to educate the community regarding policies, duties and programs of the department and issue any reports it deems necessary to the governor and the commissioner.

In addition to their statutory mandates, the SAC also serves as one of the Citizen Review Panels for CAPTA purposes. Last year, the SAC focused its CRP report on issues related to foster care services.

During the past year, the SAC chose to focus its work as a Citizen Review Panel on two issues:

- The experiences and needs of children and youth in the child welfare system;
- The Department's collaboration with not-for-profit providers and constituent groups providing services to youth in the child welfare system.

YOUTH SERVICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Early on in the process of developing this CRP report, the SAC members decided to focus some of their attention to making recommendations about improving the child welfare system from the perspective of the children and youth. Based on their initial review of the current services and practice in Connecticut, the SAC has identified the following areas of concern and recommendations:

Foster Care & Children's Legal Rights

The Department should develop quality improvement processes to ensure that children in foster care are informed of their legal rights. While the Department's current practice includes mechanisms for informing children of their legal rights, an audit of this process or qualitative review would ensure that all children are consistently being provided with this information.

Specific questions to consider during this kind of qualitative review include:

- Are children informed of their legal rights? How is this accomplished?
- How is access to legal counsel being guaranteed for every child in foster care?
- Is the "Child's Report to the Court" given to every child?
- Do children understand the process of bring in care?
- Do children have a checklist of what they have access to or have been informed of by their social worker?

Connections & Consistency

The Department should focus on connections and consistency as overarching principles for children in its care. In particular, DCF should ensure that children have connections and consistency with their siblings, social workers and foster parents / placements. The Department should regularly report on these three factors of consistency to determine which children are not stable in their placements. If it is not clinically appropriate that siblings are placed together, the Department should document this and report on it regularly.

Service Availability & Development

The SAC Citizen Review Panel spent considerable time discussing the availability of services for children, particularly adolescents, in DCF care and how the lack of a full service continuum may be impacting children's experiences. In particular, the State Advisory Council recommends the Department report out regularly on what services children and youth are receiving and how many young people are not able to access a service that is clinically necessary.

Service development continues to be a concern for the State Advisory Council. In particular, the standardization and quality improvement work regarding service delivery and model development should be clearly communicated to the provider community. The process the Department uses for development and redevelopment of services used by children in the child welfare bureau should be standardized so that, no matter what bureau is developing the service, the process is clear and consistent. In particular, the Department should regularly report out on the following kinds of data:

- How are service types developed and standardized?
- What are the expectations of providers in each service type?
- Do all children have access the specific services they need?
- Are services re-bid often enough to allow for expansion and quality improvement of the service system?
- What is the decision-making process for moving kids from Safe Homes, group homes and out-of-state settings?
- How are children being prepared to transition to DMHAS and DMR?
- What is the system for applying for SSI, if children are eligible?
- How are independent living plans developed for children?

Access to Psychiatric Care

It is clear that many of the young people that come into DCF care through the child protective services door are also in need of behavioral health services. For children whose needs include psychiatric care, there appears to be a shortage of available psychiatrists to meet the children's needs. The Department should work with the existing organizations of child psychiatrists such as the Connecticut Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists, but needs to reach out more to those child psychiatrists who work as consultants to contracted providers of DCF programs. For about four years a group of APRN's, pediatricians, and child and adolescent psychiatrists have been meeting the first Friday of the month to develop an approved drug formulary for use with DCF children. With the formulary in the final stages of completion, it is timely to broaden the mandate of this well qualified group of medical personnel who are committed to excellence in the care of DCF children. The meetings are always chaired by the Director of Psychiatry of DCF, currently Janet Williams, MD. Presenting this group with the challenge of developing better ways to increase the availability of psychiatric care for DCF children would be a good start.

There would need to be an administrative liaison with DCF central office to insure that proposals and suggestions developed would have a real voice within the Department.

Education

Since 2003, there has been a steady increase in the number of adolescent cases in DCF's overall caseload. Since this may imply greater numbers of children "aging out" of the system without achieving permanency, a special focus needs to be applied to their educational and transitional needs. The SAC's specific questions in this area are:

- Are kids going to college or other post-secondary education?
- How are their independent living skills developed while they are in care to prepare them for this transition?
- Does DCF have staff to help youth with their college and scholarship applications? What is the role of the social worker in this process?

The SAC recommends that the Department develop a promulgate policy or a framework for how it expects its social work staff to help young people graduate from high school and transition into some form of appropriate post-secondary education or training.

Youth Input

With the increase in the adolescent population in DCF care, the Department should be developing and expanding formal ways for young people to give input about their experiences in care. A formal process for gathering broad-based child and youth input about their experiences should be developed. There should also be a quality assurance system set up to track the implementation of youth recommendations over time.

Access to enrichment and empowerment activities

Because adolescents' developmental needs are unique, the Department should closely focus on providing every youth in care with access to enrichment and empowerment activities. While there are a variety of conferences and programs currently available, such as the True Colors, Escuchenos and African-American youth conferences, little data exists on the extent of participation in these initiatives. The Department should track overall participation in these and other activities and ensure all of its youth are actively engaged in pro-social youth development activities. The Department should also develop a mechanism for getting information about these opportunities directly to the young people and not rely on social workers and other staff to be the only vehicle for communication with children in DCF care.

COLLABORATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The second overarching area the SAC discussed in preparation for preparing this report is the state of the Department's collaborations with not-for-profit service providers and constituent groups in providing services to the children and youth in the child welfare system. Overall, the SAC found the Department's collaborative efforts to be fragmented and inconsistent. While some examples exist of good collaboration between the Department and external partners, overall the Department's efforts to partner with external providers need to be improved in order to better serve children. The SAC recommends the following:

- An overall partnership and procurement strategy should be developed and published, so all the bureaus and offices in the Department are approaching their partnerships in the same way.
- The Departments service procurement processes should be revised to ensure maximum stakeholder and provider input into service development and redevelopment.
- The Department should develop a mechanism, such as an annual conference and communication strategy, to coordinate the various activities and recommendations being made by the multiple advisory councils that exist to advise the Department.