

**LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**ANNUAL CITIZENS REVIEW PANEL REPORT**

**CALENDAR YEAR 2008**



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## **Introduction**

### **Citizens Review Panel (CRP)**

**Service Description:** The Panels examine the policies, procedures, and where appropriate, specific cases handled by the State and local agencies providing child protective services. In particular, the panels must evaluate 1) The State CAPTA plan and specific areas of the child protective system which are addressed therein, 2) The State's compliance with federal child protection standards and assurances set forth in the CAPTA legislation and 3) Any other criteria, which the panels consider important to ensure the protection of children, including the coordination of child protection with foster care and adoption services and the State's review process for child fatalities and near fatalities.

The federal statute indicates that the purpose of the panels is to "evaluate the extent to which the agencies (state and local) are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities." Although the statute provides general guidelines for the panels, the functions of the CRPs are generally and broadly defined. This best suits the ability to address the issues of the local communities in which they are located. The CRP's are composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the community in which they operate and are experienced in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

**Services Provided:** Panels meet at least every 3 months to examine policies and procedures and, where applicable, specific cases of both state and local agencies and prepare an annual report.

**Population Served:** Louisiana, in the past, has had, five (5) Citizen Review Panels located in various areas of the State. Two of the panels were parish based; Beauregard (located in the south eastern quadrant of the State within the Lake Charles Region) and Rapides (located in the center of the State within the Alexandria Region). The additional three (3) panels were regionally based and made up of a number of parishes. Currently, there are three active Citizen Review Panels in Louisiana, Beauregard, Lafayette, and Monroe. The Covington Region and Shreveport Region CRPs are no longer meeting.

**Goals and Objectives:** The goal of the panel is to provide new opportunities for citizens to play an integral role in ensuring that states are meeting their goals of protecting children from abuse and neglect.

**Updates on Specific Accomplishments/Progress in 2008-2009 SFY:** The Beauregard CRP continues to struggle with membership and attendance issues. The Lafayette CRP is a newly established panel during the SFY 2008-2009. The Lafayette and Monroe are the

only panels that met during the 2008-2009 SFY. In attempts to rejuvenate and support the development of past panels and new panels, OCS is engaging the services of Dr. Blake Jones, of the University of Kentucky and the facilitator of the National Citizen Review Panel Virtual Community.

**Methods to Measure/Outcome Measurements:** The CRP's provide annual reports and the state must respond to panel's recommendations no later than six months after recommendations are submitted.

**Activities Planned for FY 2009:** The agency is in the process of restructuring the CRP and providing technical assistance on recruitment. The agency will continue to evaluate how the state and local agency adhere to their responsibility of the protection of children from abuse and/or neglect through the CRP process.

## **2008 Annual Citizens Review Panel Report**

Louisiana has previously had five Citizen Review Panels (CRP) located in various areas of the State. Two of the panels were parish based; Beauregard (located in the southwestern corner of the State within the Lake Charles Region) and Rapides (located in central Louisiana within the Alexandria Region). The additional panels in Covington Region, Shreveport Region and Monroe Region were regionally based and were made up of a number of parishes. Beauregard, Lafayette and Monroe Region are the only panels that have continued functioning in SFY 2008-2009.

### **Beauregard Parish CRP**

#### **Membership**

**Gayle Hodnett, (Chairperson)**  
**Jerry DeWitt**  
**Mitchell Evans**  
**Natha Gantt**  
**Sherri Hogg**

**Robyn Kelley**  
**Donna McCullough**  
**Terry Smith**  
**Dena Stewart**  
**Carol Williams**

#### **2008 Activities:**

The panel has not met for the last two years.

### **Lafayette Region CRP**

#### **Membership**

**\*Linda Boudreaux, (Chairperson)**  
**Lee Armelin**  
**Katherine Boudreaux**  
**Karen Dodd**  
**Albert Glaude**

**Carleen Jones**  
**Rex Leblanc**  
**Pat McGhee**  
**Louisa Redell**  
**Brad Richard**

**Phillip Thevenet**  
**Melissa Thompson**  
**Michael Turnage**  
**Jim Wright**

#### **2008 Activities:**

During 2008, a Citizens Review Panel was established in Region 5 for a neutral committee to identify needs and offer suggestions to improve delivery of services for children and families in the region. Increasing community awareness of abused and neglected children and offering transparency of the agency to the community were the impetus for the development of the CRP in Lafayette.

In preparation for the establishment of the CRP, the Regional Program Specialist attended a CRP meeting in Monroe on October 16, 2007. The purpose was to view the structure of the CRP in that region, as Monroe was an active and successful CRP within

the state of Louisiana. The Regional Program Specialist was able to network with the members of the committee and determine the structure and procedures for the meetings. Ideas were shared regarding topics discussed, successes and challenges in reference to implementing and maintaining a successful CRP. Also, ideas were shared regarding projects that were completed by the CRP committee in Monroe. Information was gathered from other active and non-active CRPs within the state of Louisiana as a guide to structure the committee in development in Lafayette. At the state level, the Office of Community Services sponsored training on August 24, 2008, conducted by the national CRP expert, Blake Jones, Ph.d. Since Lafayette Region OCS was in the process of developing the CRP, the Executive Manager, Bradley Richard, the Regional Program Specialist, Melissa Thompson, and an active community partner, Director of the Family Resource Center, Linda Boudreaux, attended the training.

### **2008 Recommendations/Respon**s:

The Lafayette CRP has recommended that meetings will be held more frequently than quarterly to address permanency issues for foster children in the Lafayette Region during the upcoming year. They have determined that forming subcommittees, as necessary, and meeting bi-monthly will be beneficial for this committee to develop cohesion as a group and address areas of concern relative to finalizing adoptions within a twenty-four month period. The members are excited and are committed to addressing issues that will positively impact the children and families served by the Lafayette Region.

**OCS Response:** No response is needed.

### **Monroe RegionCRP**

#### **Membership:**

<b>Melody Breland, (Chairperson)</b>	<b>Marsha Linam</b>	<b>Jackie Perkins</b>
<b>Kathleen Bubin</b>	<b>Cindy Murphy</b>	<b>Chris Ramsey</b>
<b>Mike Cappel</b>	<b>Patricia Newman</b>	<b>Tammie Slausson</b>
<b>Gerri Green</b>	<b>Susan Nolan</b>	<b>Tamara Thompson</b>
<b>Ashton Hines</b>	<b>Ray Owens</b>	<b>Michael Wilkes</b>
<b>Peggy Kirby</b>	<b>Belinda Palm</b>	<b>Jacquiela Wright</b>

### **2008 Activities:**

During 2008, the Region 9 Office of Community Services (OCS) Citizens Review Panel met four times as a complete group. These meetings were held on February 20<sup>th</sup>, June 18<sup>th</sup>, October 08<sup>th</sup>, and December 03<sup>rd</sup>. Several representatives from the panel also met separately as a part of a focus group with foster children on April 28<sup>th</sup>.

Our Citizens Review Panel (CRP) began 2008 with a general overview of the OCS policies and practices which define Child Protection Investigations, Family Services,

Foster Care, and Adoptions. The panel was briefed by OCS personnel about new policies regarding drug/alcohol-affected newborns and also about the new Alternative Response Program. We discussed the usual concerns over the shortage of foster parents and over the need for a statewide telephone number for reporting incidents of child abuse. As discussion arose concerning the issues that affect the agency and children alike, a recurrent theme began to surface from our panel. This theme revolved around the obvious lack of preparation for independent living that our children demonstrate as they transition out of foster care. Some of the concerns voiced over this young adult population included the low percentage of college graduates among their ranks; the high percentage of homeless citizens in those aged out of foster care; the lack of parenting skills in pregnant teens who will soon transition out of foster care; and the lack of adequate vocational/educational training or goals which often leads to pervasive unemployment and a lifestyle of dependency. Because these transitioning teens suddenly lose the supports and services from which they have benefited while in state custody and because the youth are not likely to return home to positive family support, they are often left without clear direction or the skills and resources with which to live successful adult lives. Early on it became evident to us that the focus for our 2008 Citizens Review Panel would revolve around the issues that affect youth as they transition from foster care to independent living.

To help identify common concerns among transitioning teens, a focus group for adolescents in foster care was conducted. This group of 17 foster children between the ages of 15 and 18 met with 3 facilitators from the CRP who asked each of them the same 6 questions. The last 2 questions opened the floor for the youth to express themselves regarding both their experiences with OCS and their concerns about transition. Their responses were reviewed by the panel during the following CRP meeting. By reviewing their concerns, we learned that the children often feel disrespected by the agency. They also expressed a preference that OYD youth not be included in their group settings, believing this implies that they are offenders themselves instead of the victims of abuse/neglect. The youth stated that they found comfort in knowing that the Transitional and Independent Living programs were available to them although not all had taken advantage of the programs. Desiring to closely consider and respond to the points the children made, our panel began to work together to help draw up an action plan with steps, goals, and assignments to committee members for future actions in order to help OCS address the children's concerns. From these brainstorming sessions the recommendations listed below would begin to form.

In addition to the focus group, the panel also gleaned insight into transition practices and pitfalls by hearing reports from OCS personnel who have worked in the Young Adult Program. Included in the information was one case study about a young woman who had successfully utilized the benefits of the Transitional Living Program to make a smooth transition from foster care to independent living. Another highlight of our panel experience was an enthusiastic report from Angie Thomas, the director of the Independent Living Program at the Methodist Children's Home (MCH.) OCS contracts with MCH to provide transition services for some of our foster children. She was able to give a clear picture of the resources and benefits which are available to participants in the program. She also spoke candidly about the dangers that await this group as they experience new-found freedoms combined with peer pressure and poor social skills. She

shared with our panel several first-hand accounts of transition successes and failures. From the lively discussion which followed her report, the idea of an intensive training targeting both life skills and vocational/educational guidance in a summer camp setting began to evolve in our midst. Our panel believes that the intensity of providing independent living classes in a 3-4 day camp experience will have a greater impact and promote greater retention of skills than the less focused bi-monthly meetings which are provided currently through the agency. This camp would not be intended to replace, but rather to supplement the transitional services which exist now. The Monroe panel is continuing to explore curriculum elements, available community resources, and possible funding sources so that we may help the idea of such an event become a reality.

The Monroe Region Citizen Review Panel plans to continue our focus on Transition to Independent Living among foster children during the coming year. Early in 2009 another focus group is planned to interview young adults who have been living independently for several years in order to gain insight into their life experiences since leaving foster care and to gather information from their perceptions of needs during transition they now have in retrospect. In addition, the panel will be forming a committee to help make plans for a Life Skills Intensive Camp, exploring existing curriculum elements, available community resources, and funding sources so that we may help facilitate a prototype as a model.

The panel was pleased to learn about the “Transitioning Adolescents and Adults Task Force” that was recently initiated at the state level. The panel report being energized as groups to know that their own recommendations are closely aligned with this new effort to better prepare our foster children for their future as adults.

### **2008 Recommendations/Responds:**

1. The panel continues to support the funding and implementation of a statewide, toll free telephone number to report all suspected abuse. The panel recommends that this number be tracked back during business hours to the local parish office based upon the origin of the call. This number should be well-publicized and listed in the phone book in a separate listing which makes a clear distinction between reports of child abuse and other services of the agency.

**OCS Response:** The Department of Social Services is currently working on a state-wide centralized intake.

2. Related to the above item, the panel further recommends the funding and implementation of a separate well-publicized telephone number to be established for the purpose of obtaining automated information about becoming a foster or adoptive parent.

**OCS Response:** The agency currently has a statewide number for persons interested in fostering or adopting. The number was established during the statewide media campaign and is still in operation. The number is 866-249-0559. The number routes the caller to the appropriate region based on the number they are

calling from. For example, if a caller makes the call from a land line in Lafayette, the call will be routed to the Lafayette Region Home Development (HD) intake number. The number only connects the caller to the intake worker during regular business hours; a message can be left after hours.

The agency has been considering having an automated option to give the criteria for foster parenting, but this was determined not to be an effective option based on the information that is needed. When people inquire about fostering or adopting, there is more to the conversation than just relaying the criteria.

Also, we currently have detailed information about foster parenting on the DSS website. The website has been instrumental in referrals.

3. The panel continues to be concerned about the shortage of certified foster parents. We are hopeful that OCS will continue to find innovative ways to recruit, train, and retain qualified foster parents. Incentives and other supports should be considered to increase retention of certified foster homes.

**OCS Response:** The agency is working to find innovative ways to recruit and retain foster parents. At the present time, the Monroe Region is without a full time recruiter as the recruiter promoted to another position. We have been unable to fill this position due to the hiring freeze. We are hopeful that this position will be filled at the beginning of the new fiscal year for 2009-2010.

Currently, one of the things we are doing to retain foster parents is providing more support visits to the homes of certified families. The HD worker, who is the primary worker for the home, currently visits two times per year (and more as needed during moves or during the time of a crisis) and has required phone contact with each home four times per year. We have received positive feedback about this change in practice. We are also working to involve foster parents in recruitment efforts.

4. The panel is concerned about the effectiveness of the current OCS Young Adult Program in providing transitioning youth the life skills and resources needed to begin their lives as independent adults. We wholeheartedly support the newly formed "Transitioning Adolescents and Adults Task Force" and recommend continued participation in this effort. We strongly advocate that open and frequent communication regarding the focus of this task force exist between the OCS task force representative and the Citizens Review Panel so that we may assist in supporting the process, aligning our own efforts with theirs in order to achieve more positive outcomes. We further recommend that this task force be consumer driven and that representatives from foster/adoptive parents and transitioning youth be included in the ongoing dialogue in this endeavor to facilitate changes in policy and service delivery.

**OCS Response:** Our foster youth are currently being given the opportunity to participate in almost all policy decisions and along with decision making opportunities.

The Louisiana Youth Leadership Advisory Council (LYLAC) is a state-wide youth group that deals with issues concerning all foster youth. They meet quarterly and focus on areas of concern within the foster care system. Hopefully, within the next year there will be youth advisory boards in all ten regions of the state.

5. In keeping with the above theme, this CRP supports additional funding and implementation of new services to improve outcomes for youth in transition from foster care to independent living. We wish to submit that the following recommendations be considered in restructuring policy and programs. We believe that the addition of these components will greatly enhance the current efforts to successfully transition children from foster care.
  - The panel recommends the addition of a separate OCS staff position to serve as Transition Coordinator. We believe that one person's oversight of this program will greatly enhance its continuity and efficacy. The proposed staff person would also serve as liaison with contracted services through Methodist Children's Home's Independent Living Program and oversee efforts to incorporate transition-related topics into meaningful training opportunities for foster parents.

**OCS Response:** This issue is impacted by our current budget deficit and will have to be addressed after the SFY 2009-2010 budget goes in to effect July 1<sup>st</sup>.

- The panel recommends that additional training for foster parents concerning the unique needs of children at the time of their exit from foster care be a part of initial MAPP training as well as ongoing certification requirements. We further recommend that foster parents of 15-18 year olds be required each year to complete at least three hours of their annual in-service training requirements for continued certification in a topic pertaining specifically to independent living skills.

**OCS Response:** The HD program will be revising the in-service training curriculum in the future. We will be requiring more specialized training on the part of foster parenting. We will include work to implement a training specialized for foster parents who parent older youth.

- The panel recommends additional funding for implementation of new Transition services, including stipends for foster children who successfully complete Independent Living Classes.

**OCS Response:** We concur that additional funding would better assist our youth in transitioning to adulthood. However, the Independent Living providers are contracted through Federal funding. The funding has not increased in 10 years. It is very difficult for providers to keep the same level of services, with the increase of supplies, transportation, and salaries, with no increase in funding.

- The panel recommends the development of an intensive training camp for teen-aged youth in foster care which will promote the acquisition of independent living skills, decision-making skills, vocational/educational goal-setting, and resource utilization. This camp should not replace, but rather supplement the transitional services which exist now.

**OCS Response:** Each year a “Reality City” is held in the Southern and Northern Regions for youth attending and who have attended Independent Living Skills training. This is comprised of a one day skills building experience for youth. Perhaps with the assistance of the CRP’s there can be research into possible grants through foundations that would fund camps for youth in the various regions.

- We recommend that teenage pregnant mothers in foster care be enrolled in in-depth parenting programs such as Volunteers of America, Early Childhood Supports and Services, Nurse Family Partnership, Healthy Start ABC’s, and the like as a part of their case plan to ensure that they learn the skills necessary to care for their child.

**OCS Response:** We will look at the possibilities of MOUs with other agencies to assist our youth who are pregnant or parenting.

- We recommend the creation of a Peer Mentoring Program in which young adults who have had successful transition experiences be used as trainers and models for teens beginning this process for themselves. Our panel believes that teens will relate to and imitate a peer instructor more readily than an agency representative.

**OCS Response:** We are meeting with an outside organization to develop a mentoring program for our foster youth who are both in high school and college so that their success in pursuing academics will increase. This program is just in the initial stages. We have foster youth who will participate in the discussions with the other organization.

- We recommend the creation of a monitoring system for those aging out of foster care so that OCS can more accurately assess the outcomes of their journey toward independent living and continue to make effective changes that will address deficits in the current system.

**OCS Response:** The Federal requirements for youth aging out of the foster care system have increased. Beginning in October 2010 youth between the ages of 17-21 years old will need to be tracked for statistical information and outcomes. This new tracking system is called the “National Youth Transitional Database (NYTD). Federal law which was passed in October 2008 requires that a transitional plan be developed for all youths within 90 days prior to them exiting the foster care. Because we see the urgency of youth aging from foster care, our policy reflects that all youth at age 15 (closest to their Family Team Conference (FTC) will have a transitional plan and the plan will be amended every six months. Since this is a new requirement, all transitional plans will be sent to OCS state office so that we can monitor trends, needs and opportunities for our foster youth.

6. Finally, in order to respect the request made by the adolescents participating in our focus group, the panel wishes to recommend that every effort be made by OCS to engender sensitivity in regard to group dynamics when planning training and other group meetings of children in their care. Whenever possible we ask that juvenile offenders be trained in separate group settings so as to not implicate the children who are in state custody for reasons beyond their control.

**OCS Response:** Due to the lack of adequate funding our Independent Living providers are stretched to the max. This issue has been discussed in the past and it was recommended that OCS and OJJ youth be combined so that they can assist each other. We are required by the Chafee funds to service both OCS and OJJ youth.