



Highlights of [GAO-04-418T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, comprised of two subparts, is the primary source of federal funding for services to help families address problems that lead to child abuse and neglect and to prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families; however, a number of challenges exist that impair states' ability to deliver and track these services. This testimony is based on findings from three reports issued in 2003 and addresses the following: (1) states' use of Title IV-B funds in providing a wide array of services to prevent the occurrence of abuse, neglect, and unnecessary foster care placements, as well as in providing other child welfare services; (2) factors that hinder states' ability to protect children from abuse and neglect; and (3) the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) role in helping states to overcome these challenges. Findings are based on multiple methodologies, including a survey to child welfare directors on states' use of Title IV-B funds; an analysis of nearly 600 exit interview documents completed by staff who severed their employment from 17 state, 40 county, and 19 private child welfare agencies; and a survey of all 50 states and the District of Columbia regarding their experiences in developing and using information systems and their ability to report data to HHS. In each case, GAO also conducted multiple site visits to selected states and interviewed child welfare experts and HHS headquarters and regional officials.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-418T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

CHILD WELFARE

Improved Federal Oversight Could Assist States in Overcoming Key Challenges

What GAO Found

States use of Title IV-B funds to provide a wide variety of services to prevent the occurrence of abuse, neglect, and foster care placements, as well as to provide other child welfare services. According to GAO's Title IV-B survey data for fiscal year 2002, states spent about 60 percent of subpart 1 funds on the salaries of child welfare agency staff, administration and management expenses, and child protective services, while about 10 percent were used to provide family support and family preservation services. In comparison, states spent about 62 percent of their subpart 2 funds on family support and preservation services.

Child welfare agencies face a number of challenges related to staffing and data management that impair their ability to protect children from abuse and neglect. Low salaries hinder agencies' ability to attract potential child welfare workers and retain those already in the profession. According to caseworkers GAO interviewed, high turnover rates and staffing shortages leave remaining staff with insufficient time to establish relationships with families and make the necessary decisions to ensure safe and stable permanent placements. States also face challenges developing appropriate information systems needed to track abuse or neglect reports and monitor children in foster care. In addition, several factors affect states' ability to collect and report reliable adoption, foster care, and child abuse and neglect data, including insufficient caseworker training, inaccurate and incomplete data entry, and technical challenges reporting the data.

HHS plays a role in helping states overcome some of the challenges they face in operating their child welfare programs, but additional oversight or technical assistance could assist states in meeting the needs of children served by child welfare agencies. HHS's oversight of Title IV-B focuses primarily on states' overall child welfare systems and outcomes, but the agency provides relatively little oversight specific to Title IV-B subpart 1. In addition, HHS plays a limited role in states' workforce activities by offering partial reimbursement for training expenses and managing discretionary grant programs. The agency monitors states' information systems development and data reporting, but despite the availability of technical assistance, states reported ongoing challenges reporting reliable data.

In the related reports, GAO made several recommendations to HHS. GAO recommended that HHS provide the necessary guidance to ensure that regional offices monitor states' use of Title IV-B subpart 1 and to consider gathering additional information on its use. GAO also recommended that HHS take actions that may help child welfare agencies address recruitment and retention challenges. Last, GAO recommended that HHS consider ways to enhance the guidance and assistance offered to help states overcome key data challenges. HHS generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations, except that it noted that its level of oversight of Title IV-B was commensurate with the program's scope and intent.