

Mr. Richard Armstrong
 Director
 Idaho Department of Health and Welfare
 450 West State Street, 5th Floor
 Boise, ID 83720-0036

Dear Mr. Armstrong:

From May 1 – 5, 2006, staff of the Children’s Bureau, ACF Region X, and the Office of Information Services (OIS) conducted an Assessment Review of Maine’s Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). The AFCARS data used for the review was from the report period April 1 - September 30, 2006 (2005B). I have summarized the major findings from the AFCARS review in this letter. Enclosed please find the full report.

The AFCARS assessment review evaluates two areas: the AFCARS general requirements (reporting populations and technical standards) and the data elements. Information collected on these areas is combined and a rating factor is assigned to each of the general requirements and each data element. The rating factors are: “1,” the system is not collecting the AFCARS data elements and the data are not transmitted to ACF; “2,” technical corrections are required; “3,” improvement in data quality is needed; and “4,” the State fully meets the AFCARS standards. The report provides a more detailed explanation of each of the rating factors.

General Requirements

Rating Factor	Foster Care Population (8)	Adoption Population (3)	Technical Requirements (16)
4	7	3	16
3	1	0	0
2	0	0	0
1	0	0	0

Data Elements

Rating Factor	Foster Care (66)	Adoption (37)	Total
4	15 (23%)	15 (41%)	30 (29%)
3	10 (15%)	11 (30%)	21 (20%)
2	41 (62%)	11 (30%)	52 (51%)
1	0	0	0

The State was found to be in compliance with the general requirements. However, there are a significant number of technical modifications needed for both the data entry screens and the program code that extracts the data. As noted in the attached report, there are areas that require enhancements to the screens in order for the AFCARS data to be collected more accurately and in accordance with the AFCARS requirements. These changes will require more time and resources, but should lead to better data collection. Some of the technical modifications affecting the data elements are described below.

One item to be completed is the interface with the title IV-A system. Data on whether title IV-A is a source of income to the child is required for AFCARS reporting and the State is unable to obtain this data currently due to the lack of an interface. The AFCARS data is required regardless of the status of the implementation of an interface. The State either needs to complete the interface as soon as possible or develop an alternative approach to report the required AFCARS data.

Other areas in which FOCUS is incomplete are in the collection of: whether the child was previously adopted, regardless of location or type of agency; and, the primary basis for special needs. The State currently only reports whether a child was previously adopted if the adoption occurred from the Idaho child welfare system. The State is going to have to add fields to the system in order to record whether the child had been previously adopted and what age the child was at the time of the adoption. In regard to determination of the primary basis for special needs, the program code, not the case worker, selects the primary reason by selecting the first reason that was entered. The State must modify the system in order to allow case workers to select the greatest barrier to a child's adoption.

One set of data elements that is being underreported includes those related to whether the child has been seen by a licensed professional and found to have health/mental health conditions. For AFCARS reporting purposes, the information reported for these elements reflect chronic and/or significant diagnosed conditions that the child may have. According to the frequency report for the 2006A data, which reflects technical changes made by the State since the site visit, 29% of the children in foster care have a diagnosed condition that is reportable to AFCARS (such as, attention deficit disorder, reactive attachment disorder, etc.). This was not a significant change from the percentage reported by the State for the 2005B report period. The State staff indicated that the numbers do not reflect the situation as they know it of children in Idaho's foster care system. This number should also be approximately the same as children placed in therapeutic placement settings.

You should note that as a result of the technical corrections made to the system, the State's semi-annual data submission may fail to meet the "missing data" standard. In order to ensure the data are complete, the agency must increase supervisory oversight and require workers to enter the data in a timely manner. Assessment of the validity of the data prior to submitting it to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) will also be required. To do so, the State may utilize the management reports created by the agency, as well as the Data Quality Utility and the Frequency Utility posted on the Children's Bureau's website. It is important that the AFCARS data accurately reflect the circumstances of children in foster care and under the agency's responsibility.

Another area related to data quality is the accuracy of data converted from other systems or paper files to FOCUS. While no discernable pattern was found during the analysis of the case file review, the errors found were related to older cases not having the correct dates of first removal. The State must review all open cases where the current removal episode started prior to the State's conversion to FOCUS. The accuracy of the data is important for accurate assessment of how well services are meeting the needs of children and their families.

The enclosed documents include the final report of the on-site review, the final findings of the general requirements and data elements, and the AFCARS Improvement Plan for the data elements. Within 30 calendar days after the receipt of this report and the attached AFCARS Improvement Plan, the State staff must submit the Improvement Plan electronically to the ACF Regional Office and the Children's Bureau, and OIS with estimated due dates for completing the tasks identified in the Improvement Plan. An electronic copy of the final matrices will be e-mailed to your staff. The State should provide electronic quarterly updates of its progress to the Regional Office and the Children's Bureau.

Once ACF and the State agree that the quality of the data is acceptable, the AFCARS Improvement Plan will be considered finished, and a letter will be sent to the State from the Children's Bureau confirming this fact. The letter will include a summary of the actions taken by the State and the completed AFCARS Improvement Plan.

Additionally, the State's plan for implementing the changes to the system and for caseworker training must be included in the State's title IV-B Annual Progress and Services Report as part of the information required in 45 CFR 1357.15(t) and 45 CFR 1357.16(a)(5).

The ACF Regional Office will work with the State to determine if technical assistance is needed, and available, to implement the AFCARS Improvement Plan. The State may obtain technical assistance from the Children's Bureau's National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT). If you wish to request on-site technical assistance from the NRC-CWDT, please contact your ACF Regional Office.

In closing, I would like to thank the staff who participated in the review for their hard work and commitment to collecting accurate and reliable AFCARS data. If you have any questions regarding the report, please contact Angelina Palmiero at (202) 205-7240.

Sincerely,

Susan Orr, Ph.D.
Associate Commissioner
Children's Bureau

Enclosures

cc: Michelle Britton, Administrator, Division of Family and Community Services
Steve Henigson, Regional Administrator, Region X
Angelina M. Palmiero, M.S.W., AFCARS
Terry Watt, Director, Division of State Systems
Jerry Milner, National Child and Family Services Review Team