

Helene Nelson, Secretary
 Wisconsin Department of Health
 And Family Services
 1 West Wilson Street
 Madison, Wisconsin 53708

Dear Ms. Nelson:

From July 10 - 14, 2006 staff of the Children's Bureau, Region V, and the Office of Information Services (OIS) conducted an Assessment Review of Wisconsin's Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). The AFCARS data used for the review was from the report period October 1, 2005 – March 31, 2006 (2006A). 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 (26)

Rating Factor	Foster Care	Adoption	Technical
4	8 (100%)	3 (100%)	14 (93%)
3	0	0	1 (7%)
2	0	0	0
1	0	0	0

Data Elements (103)

Rating Factor	Foster Care (66)	Adoption (37)	Total (103)
4	15 (23%)	19 (51%)	34 (33%)
3	33 (50%)	2 (5.4%)	35 (34%)
2	18 (27%)	16 (43%)	34 (33%)
1	0	0	0

As noted in the above table, the State is in compliance with the reporting population requirements for the foster care and adoption files. However, the State received a rating of “3” for the technical requirement related to data conversion specific to the AFCARS elements. While the State continues to work on converting the data, it particularly needs to focus on improving the accuracy of the data for removal episodes and placement counts. Not all removal episodes were entered into the system at the time of conversion. Also, for those cases open at the time of conversion, not all placement settings were entered for the current removal episode. These are areas that are crucial to the evaluation of a State’s child welfare practices. In order to determine if the number of children re-entering foster care is actually increasing or decreasing, a complete removal history is needed in the information system. The State will have to address this by reviewing cases and ensuring that all removal episodes experienced by a child are entered into the system, as well as placement episodes.

There are a significant number of data elements (43%) that will require technical modifications 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 area that involves a change to the data entry fields on the screen is the collection of race information. (There are six elements between the foster care and adoption files for the collection of race.) The State’s system has the capacity to only record up to three possible race combinations, rather than the five race categories required by AFCARS. Currently, information would not be recorded or reported for those individuals who self-identify with all of the races. The State must modify the screen so that the worker can select all of the possible five race categories.

Another area that may involve a change to the design of the system is in the collection of whether a child has been diagnosed with a disability and those diagnosed disabilities. For AFCARS reporting purposes, the information reported for these elements reflect chronic and/or significant diagnosed conditions that the child may have. Wisconsin’s AFCARS data indicates an underreporting of this data. According to the State’s data reported for the period under review, only 17% of the children in foster care were diagnosed as having a disability that is reportable to AFCARS (such as, attention deficit disorder, reactive attachment disorder, etc.). The case file review supported the finding that this number is underreported. There is an issue related to how the system is designed. This was also an area found needing improvement during the State’s Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) Assessment Review in 2001. There are two sections of the system that case workers must complete related to the health of a child. One is on the “person management” screen. Here the system contains the AFCARS question and responses. The second is a “Medical Profile” section that records exam dates and diagnoses. Additionally, the diagnosis fields on the medical profile screens are not captured in a database table; they are only text fields. These should be stored in a table for reporting purposes. The medical profile section appears to be a good section for the recording of the child’s health and mental health conditions. This section would allow for the recording of the actual diagnosed condition, which then can be mapped to the appropriate AFCARS category.

Lastly, there needs to be additional oversight by supervisors to ensure that case workers do enter the diagnosed conditions into the system.

Once these changes are made, underlying data quality issues may surface. These elements and those that received a rating factor of “3” will require additional training and supervisory oversight for the timeliness and accuracy of data entry. Also, 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 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.

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 Regional Office and the Children’s Bureau 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: Burnie Bridge, Administrator, WI DCFS
John Tuohy, Director, Office of Policy, Evaluation, and Planning, WI DCFS
Angelina M. Palmiero, M.S.W., AFCARS
Terry Watt, Director, Division of State Systems
Jerry Milner, National Child and Family Services Review Team