April 2004

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES REVIEWS

Better Use of Data and Improved Guidance Could Enhance HHS's Oversight of State Performance

GAO Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-04-333, a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2001, the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) implemented the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) to increase states' accountability. The CFSR uses states' data profiles and statewide assessments, as well as interviews and an on-site case review, to measure state performance on 14 outcomes and systemic factors, including child well-being and the provision of caseworker training. The CFSR also requires progress on a program improvement plan (PIP); otherwise ACF may apply financial penalties. This report examines (1) ACF's and the states' experiences preparing for and conducting the statewide assessments and on-site reviews; (2) ACF's and the states' experiences developing, funding, and implementing items in PIPs; and (3) any additional efforts that ACF has taken beyond the CFSR to help ensure that all states meet federal goals related to children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of HHS ensure that ACF uses the best available data to measure state performance, clarify PIP guidance, and help regional offices better integrate their oversight activities. In commenting on this report, HHS generally agreed with GAO's findings and said that it is committed to continually monitoring and improving the CFSR process.

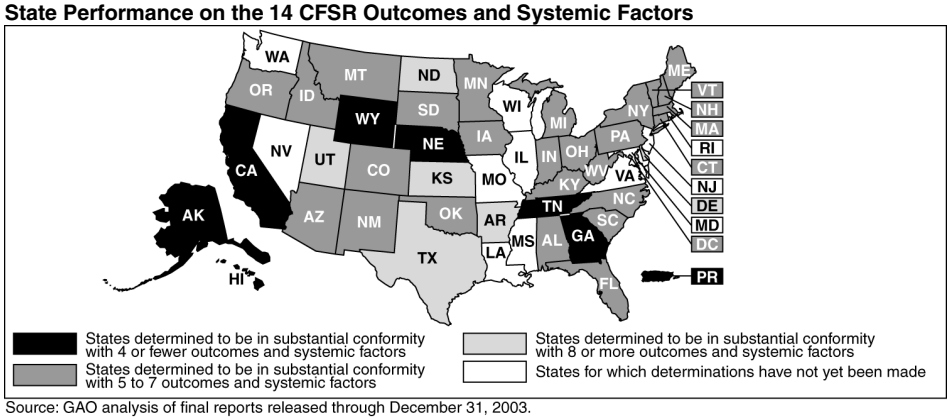
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-333.

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

What GAO Found

ACF and many state officials perceive the CFSR as a valuable process and a substantial undertaking, but some data enhancements could improve its reliability. ACF staff in 8 of the 10 regions considered the CFSR a helpful tool to improve outcomes for children. Further, 26 of 36 states responding to a relevant question in our survey commented that they generally or completely agreed with the results of the final CFSR report, even though none of the 41 states with final CFSR reports released through 2003 has achieved substantial conformity on all 14 outcomes and systemic factors—see figure below. Additionally, both ACF and the states have dedicated substantial financial and staff resources to the process. Nevertheless, several state officials and child welfare experts we interviewed questioned the accuracy of the data used in the review process. While ACF officials contend that stakeholder interviews and case reviews complement the data profiles, many state officials and experts reported that additional data from the statewide assessment could bolster the evaluation of state performance.

State Performance on the 14 CFSR Outcomes and Systemic Factors



Source: GAO analysis of final reports released through December 31, 2003.

Program improvement planning is under way, but uncertainties have affected the development, funding, and implementation of state PIPs. Officials from 3 of the 5 states we visited said ACF's PIP-related instructions were unclear, and at least 9 of the 25 states reporting on PIP implementation in our survey said that insufficient funding and staff were among the greatest challenges. While ACF has provided some guidance, ACF and state officials remain uncertain about PIP monitoring efforts and how ACF will apply financial penalties if states fail to achieve their stated PIP objectives.

Since 2001, ACF's focus has been almost exclusively on the CFSRs and regional staff report limitations in providing assistance to states in helping them to meet key federal goals. While staff from half of ACF's regions told us they would like to provide more targeted assistance to states, and state officials in all 5 of the states we visited said that ACF's existing technical assistance efforts could be improved, ACF officials acknowledged that regional staff might still be adjusting to the new way ACF oversees child welfare programs.