

MINUTES
Western Citizen Review Panel Meeting
March 11, 2016
Buffalo, New York

Attendees:

Ellen Kennedy, Panel Chair
Danny Sklarski
Paula Mazur
Caterina Plotnicki (for Dennis Walczyk)
Stefan Perkowski

Guests:

Kelly Reed, Monroe County Human Services Commissioner, (by phone)
John Thompson, OCFS Training Coordinator (by phone)
Dana Whitcomb, OCFS Buffalo Regional Office Director

WRI Staff:

Lee Lounsbury, Executive Director
Judy Stanger, CRP Coordinator

Handouts:

- Agenda
- 2015 Citizen Review Panels' Annual Report
- SCAA Child Welfare Priorities 2016-17
- The Osborne Association: NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents
- 13-OCFS-ADM-02 Safe Sleeping of Children in Child Welfare
- 11-6-15 Western CRP Minutes

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 a.m. by Panel Chair Ellen Kennedy.

DMR Initiative in Monroe County

Commissioner Kelly Reed provided an overview of the Disproportionate Minority Representation (DMR) in Monroe County. Monroe County child welfare teams tend to comprise white staff; especially white females, and many of the families served are from other races and ethnicities. Commissioner Reed said that “we don’t always understand what’s going on in their homes, and we encourage *courageous conversations*”.

Based on data collected from 2006 to 2010, the vast majority of Monroe County children in foster care are African American. Monroe County received grants from the NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) to look at ways to achieve racial equity in child welfare. Through an institutional analysis, the county determined that race was playing a role in decision-making, and disproportionality needed to be addressed. As a result, the county:

- Recently implemented a process of “blind removals” where final decision making about whether to remove a child from his/her home is made by supervisory/administrative staff who receive materials and briefings without information about the family’s race, ethnicity, address or names

- Made an effort to diversify the caseworker staff and encourage minority staff members to participate in examining county policies
- Created cultural brokers positions. These are individuals from various cultures were trained to support clients who may not be comfortable speaking to staff

OCFS Regional Office Update

OCFS Regional Office Director Dana Whitcomb reviewed the past year's work. The Regional Office has met with each county in the western region to review the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) data and identify areas that need to be strengthened. Other major updates included:

- A youth engagement specialist will be based in the Buffalo OCFS regional office as of March 29.
- There were 44 fatalities in the eight-county region in 2015 that resulted from abuse and neglect.
- The Regional Office is responsible for monitoring corrective actions related to incidents in residential and outpatient care facilities. These corrective action plans are a result of investigations of reports received by the state Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs.

OCFS Training Update

OCFS Training Coordinator John Thompson discussed training to support the implementation of the OCFS Model of Practice, which was released in January, 2015. Discussions about the Model have been held with OCFS regional offices, county Departments of Social Services, and voluntary contract agencies. The Model will be fully implemented by the summer of 2017. Regional Office staff have taken the Principles of Partnership training course, and have done a number of team building exercises to support the roll out of the Model with local districts and agencies.

Mr. Thompson said that through a statewide workgroup, foundational competencies have been identified, upon which the child welfare caseworker training will be revised. The core competencies for child welfare staff are fundamental to the implementation of a child-centered, family-focused practice model. CPS workers are required to complete Core training within six months of starting their jobs. Other caseworkers are encouraged but not required to take the training.

OCFS is in the process of evaluating the skills caseworker use in the CPS differential response model, Family Assessment Response (FAR). OCFS data indicate that FAR has been effective, but it used by too few local districts. In the local districts that have implemented FAR, it is used for too few cases. Regional offices will be responsible for championing this level of practice and making sure that counties are screening cases appropriately.

The Panel members discussed several issues related to FAR, including: whether counties need to have separate and distinct FAR units, improved implementation rules, and more flexibility for counties in staffing FAR units.

WRI Updates

Judy Stanger, WRI Panel Coordinator, briefly discussed the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, administered by the Osborne Association. She has been attending Initiative meetings, and will continue to forward pertinent information to Citizen Review Panels.

Meeting Between OCFS and Panel Chairs

Panel Chair Ellen Kennedy discussed a meeting the three Panel Chairs, WRI and OCFS had last month. The discussion included the Panels' Annual Report and ways in which OCFS and the Panels could work together more effectively. Deputy Commissioner Laura Velez will attend the joint Panels' meeting in June to provide updates about OCFS' work to strengthen child welfare. OCFS will work to have staff at every Panel meeting so they are aware of the recommendations that will be included in the Annual Report each year.

Panel's Focus for 2016

The Panel reviewed the November 2015 Western CRP meeting minutes. Possible topics for discussion in 2016 were presented, including:

- The possibility of the Western Review Panel holding public hearings
- Efforts to increase CPS staffing in the 17 counties in Western New York. Mr. Whitcomb stated that Erie County has been working to improve hiring practices and to operationalize time management.
- The impact of Health Homes on Preventive and Foster Care services.
- The implementation of trauma-informed care, including a report from Erie County on its Solution Focused Trauma Informed Care model.
- Efforts to address Disproportional Minority Representation, including reports from other regions and Family Court experts.

The meeting was adjourned at noon. The next meeting of the Western Citizen Review Panel is scheduled for May 13, 2016.