

Maryland 2018 CFSR Final Report

instances when face-to-face contact was not made within required timeframes. Alternative response assessments were found to be generally timely and effective. The case review revealed no incidents of reported repeat maltreatment during the period under review.

Although investigations are usually initiated timely, services to prevent entry into foster care and to allow children to remain safely in their homes are not consistently offered to families. Children are often placed into foster care without the benefit of safety services, and those remaining at home are at risk of entry. The review also showed that when safety services are provided, they are often ineffective and do not meet the specific needs of the family. Safety plans are not adequate and are often developed without the input of appropriate individuals or without ensuring that all parties understand the plan.

The lack of quality in assessments is a common theme throughout the case reviews. Safety and risk assessments are not routinely conducted at key points in the case and do not consistently address presenting or underlying issues within the family. The review found that Maryland's recently implemented standardized assessments, Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) and CANS—Family Version for In-Home Services (CANS-F), are not utilized consistently or accurately completed. Key participants said that the assessments are burdensome to complete and not particularly useful in identifying needs or individualized services. The information in the statewide assessment and provided by stakeholders identified significant issues with the results of the assessments, and there is a lack of integration into service plans. The assessments do not always address the social needs of children or assess all children in the family home. For parents, the assessments are not consistently comprehensive and do not always identify underlying issues. In some instances, assessments are completed without ever having face-to-face contact with the parent. Although the provision of concrete services is noteworthy in a few cases, services are not always aligned with the results of assessments. It is important that the agency evaluate the effectiveness and use of the standardized needs assessments as well as those used to assess risk and safety to target improvement efforts.

Case review results showed that fathers are rarely assessed for needs and services or involved in case planning even when residing in the home or involved in the child's life. The lack of family involvement in meaningful case planning is a recurring theme and efforts to involve the parents in any capacity throughout the case are inconsistent. As a result, reviewers found that appropriate and individualized services are not consistently provided, case goals are not consistently appropriate, and permanency is not always achieved timely. The most commonly identified service needs for parents are related to homelessness, transportation, and substance abuse and mental health treatment. Youth in care are provided independent living services in some cases, but for some youth the services are inadequate. Informal assessments of substitute caregivers are consistently conducted and services are adequately provided. Despite this, stakeholders reported and case reviews showed that Maryland's resource parents need additional support in managing the challenging behaviors of the children in their homes. A substantial number of local department resource homes do not complete their annual training requirements and this could be a factor contributing to permanency issues.

Other factors contributing to delays in permanency are systemic in nature. Although periodic reviews and permanency hearings are generally interchangeable in Maryland, cases involving youth in "permanent foster care" or long-term foster care are required by state law to be reviewed annually. Stakeholders said that generally reviews are scheduled timely, but there are delays in having timely hearings in the larger metropolitan area and also in smaller jurisdictions where legal representation is shared across counties. Goals are often inappropriate and goals are not concurrently explored. The reluctance to change goals and providing parents extended opportunities for reunification results in low achievement of timely permanency.

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The lack of a consistent process for tracking timely filing of termination of parental rights (TPR) or documenting compelling reasons negatively affects timely achievement of permanency. Some stakeholders said that there is a reluctance in the state to create “legal orphans” by terminating parental rights in cases where an adoptive resource has not yet been identified. Information in the statewide assessment and stakeholder interviews showed that the national adoption exchange is under-used and that home studies are not being completed within 60 days. Both of these issues can contribute to delays in timely achievement of permanency.

The frequency of visits between parents and children is affected by a lack of transportation, along with substance abuse and mental health issues. Yet, the quality of parent-child visits is more of concern. The quality of visits is often affected by issues with visitation settings and concerns about safety. Often, there is little support from the agency for visits or to help children maintain connections with other family members and friends. Youth, rather than the agency, commonly take the lead in communicating with non-custodial parents and other relatives. The agency does, however, make concerted efforts to maintain children in their schools of origin.

Reviewers found that visits between workers and parents are rarely occurring. When visits do occur, the quality of the visits is not demonstrated. In some instances, the agency does not contact parents despite knowing their whereabouts and how to contact them. The review found that workers do not feel that training prepares them for their responsibilities. This affects their ability to engage families in the early stages of a case. If early rapport is not established, workers and parents typically do not have much success in case planning or regular visits. The review results found that a lack of engagement of parents during worker visits, in case planning, and in assessment of needs and provision of services is more prevalent for in-home cases. This negatively affects the agency’s ability to ensure the safety of children in their homes. The lack of quality engagement is also affected by a lack of service provision for mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and barriers in communicating with incarcerated parents and those parents who speak languages other than English.

Physical and educational needs of children in foster care are generally well-addressed. Although educational assessments are not always conducted, there is often close collaboration with the school system to provide tutoring, home educational services, and development and updating of individualized education plans. Dental care is the most common physical health area needing improvement, and stakeholders said that there are an insufficient number of providers. Mental health services are also noted to be lacking in certain areas of the state as are quality trauma-related services.

Maryland’s title IV-E demonstration waiver project, Families Blossom, was designed to create a responsive, evidence- and trauma-informed system to strengthen families and promote well-being. The project uses standardized assessments, builds capacity of evidence-based and promising practices, and serves children in their homes. The waiver is in its final year of implementation. Positive results of the waiver efforts were not demonstrated in the outcomes of the review. There is a need for these practices and initiatives to be strengthened.

II. KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO OUTCOMES

For each outcome, we provide performance summaries from the case review findings. The CFSR relies upon a case review of an approved sample of foster care cases and in-home services cases. Maryland provides an alternative/differential response to, in