

CHILDREN IN CRISIS

AN UPDATE ON THE ARKANSAS CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



Report by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

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August 2007

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Executive Summary

This report is the third annual update of the Arkansas Child Welfare System by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF). It examines the Division of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) performance data from January 2000 through March 2007. The data shows that DCFS performed well on many of its indicators in the early 2000s, but began experiencing a significant decline in performance in 2004. This decline corresponded with a state-wide shortage of family service workers in 2004 with 23 percent of positions unfilled. DCFS appears to have turned the corner on its staffing shortage as the percentage of unfilled positions has improved to 11 percent. However, many of DCFS's performance indicators have not yet shown improvement.

Key findings from this report include:

- The percentage of victims seen by an investigator within 72 hours is only 71 percent, compared to 89 percent in 2000.
- Maltreatment assessments completed within 30 days of the report have improved to 58 percent, but are still far below the 80 percent achieved in 2000.
- Initial staffing occurring within 30 days of a case opening remains at only 29 percent of the cases.
- The percentage of children remaining at home who receive no monthly visits from family service workers remains poor at 54 percent.
- The percentage of comprehensive health assessments completed within 60 days worsened significantly in the first quarter of 2007 to 44 percent.

Two major changes at DCFS have taken place this year, including an \$8 million budget increase in the 2007 Legislative Session and the appointment of a new DCFS Director. With these changes, it will be important to see if performance indicators begin to improve in 2007. The budget increase will help keep funding for 75 staff positions, provide an additional \$3 million for service contracts, \$1 million for foster care board payments, \$1 million for adoption subsidies, and additional funding for training and technology for workers.

Although the vacancy rate has improved, there are not enough workers. Current caseloads are at 31 cases per worker, the recommended standard is 15; and the number of children in the system continues to increase. As a new director leads DCFS, the timing is perfect for a comprehensive assessment of the organization's structure, policies, practices, and services. Currently, an organizational assessment is being conducted, and the first part of the assessment will include the organization's structure.

As seen from the data in this report, far too many children are still not receiving the timely care they need in order to make sure they are safe and have the services to help them and their families. With appropriate help and services, they can grow up to live healthy and productive lives.



Introduction

In our 2006 annual update of the Arkansas Child Welfare System, AACF found that the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was still trying to solve a state-wide staffing shortage of family service workers that began in 2004. The report also showed that DCFS continued to do poorly on a range of performance indicators. This 2007 update will examine DCFS's staffing and performance from calendar year 2006 through the first quarter of 2007. Examining DCFS's monthly Compliance Outcome Reports, it will focus on the following indicators: (1) investigations of alleged child maltreatment, (2) assessments to determine the children and families' needs, (3) staffings to monitor the progress of the case, (4) contacts between the family service workers and children, (5) contacts among the children and their parents and siblings, and (6) physical health assessments of the children.

DCFS appears to have turned the corner on its staffing shortage as its state-wide family service vacancy rate has improved to 11 percent. However, many of their performance indicators have not yet begun to improve. Far too many children are still not receiving timely care to ensure safety and needed services for them and their families.

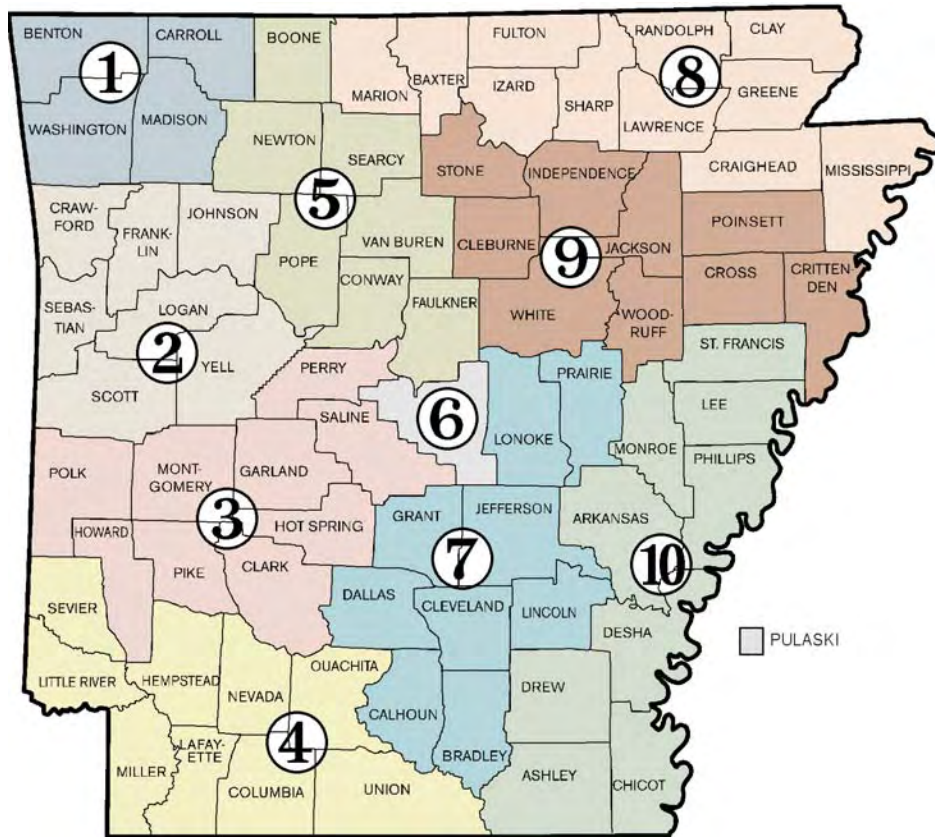
Background

DCFS is charged with protecting children who have been abused and neglected, and providing services to help them and their families. Dealing with families in crisis is a major and difficult task. These families rarely have a support system that can help them in their time of need, and many of their parents have drug or alcohol addictions. The parents often have hit hard economic times and lack the education necessary to have a decent paying job.

In the early 2000s, DCFS made good progress on many of the performance indicators included in this report. However, in 2004 these performance indicators began to decline as the vacancy rate for family service workers increased. The number of victims in the reports that were found to be true grew from approximately 8,000 in SFY 2005 to 8,895 in SFY 2006². A majority (66%) of these victims were neglected and not abused³. These families usually need help with housing, transportation, food, substance abuse treatment, and other support services. If we do not help these families, their children do not have a chance of growing up in a safe, loving and stable family.

At the same time that DCFS works to correct these problems, the number of children in the system continues to increase. The number of child maltreatment assessments increased from 23,433 in SFY 2005 to 25,178 in SFY 2006¹.

Numbers refer to DCFS Service Areas



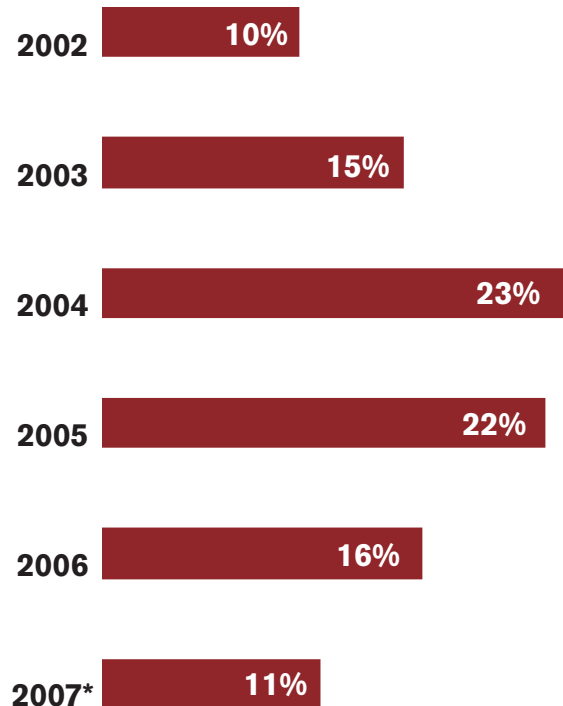
Vacancy Rates for Family Service Workers

In December 2004 the state-wide vacancy rate of family service workers soared to an all time high of 23 percent. Since that time DCFS has undertaken an intensive recruitment effort, and as of the first quarter of 2007 the vacancy rate has improved to 11 percent according to the DCFS Field Staff Summary Reports. This is near the level that it had been before the staffing shortage began in 2003.

A review of the vacancy rates in the ten DCFS service areas indicated that Area 2 and Area 6 had the highest vacancy rates at 14 percent in the first quarter of 2007. As seen from the chart, Area 6 covers Pulaski County, and Area 2 covers Crawford, Franklin, Johnson, Logan, Scott, Sebastian, and Yell Counties.

Staffing vacancy rates alone do not account for the poor performance indicators, but they are a significant factor. This report does not provide an explanation for the performance, or examine factors that might contribute to poor

Statewide Family Service Workers Vacancy Rates



2007* = first quarter

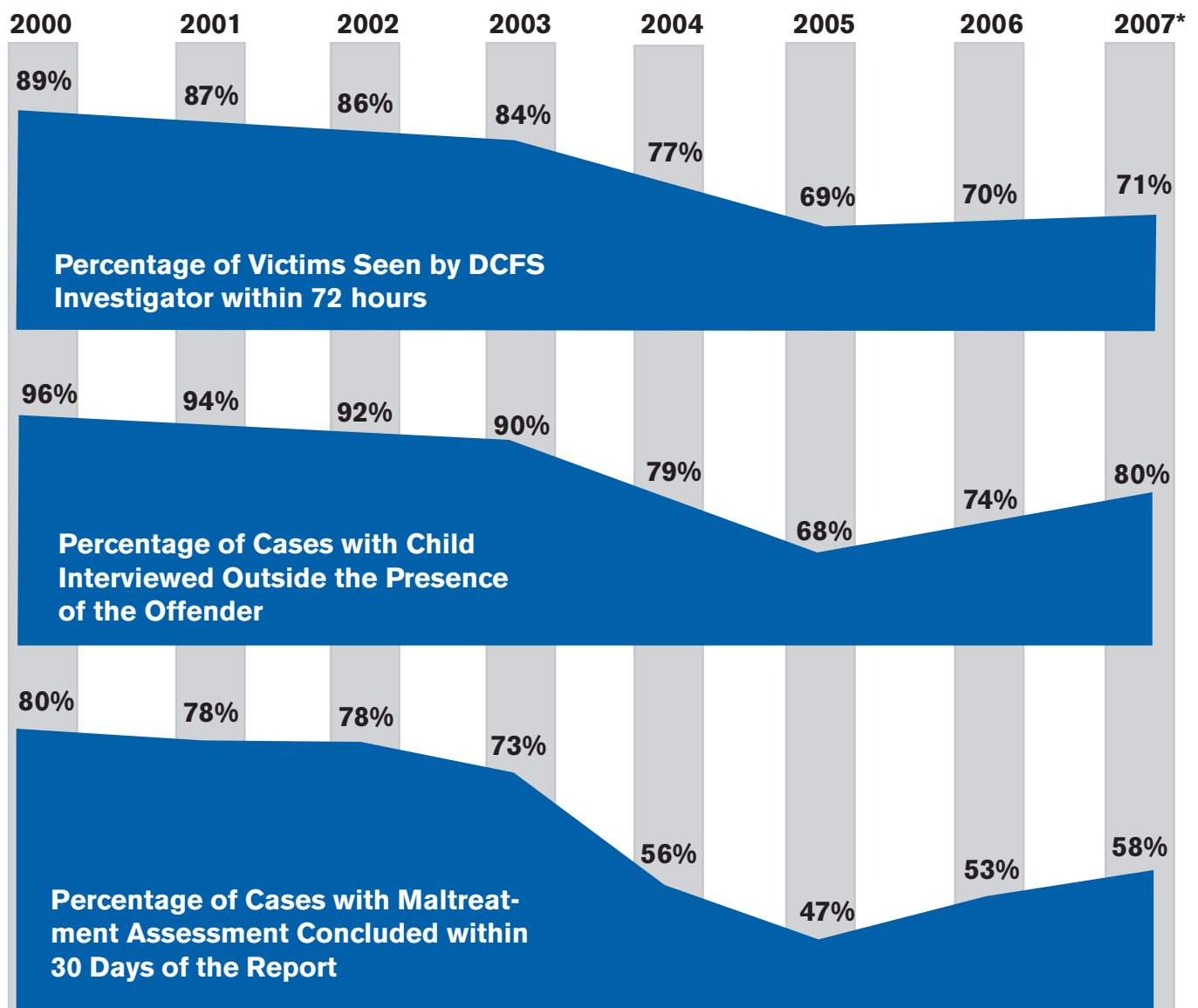
performance. The following information does analyze key performance indicators for child safety and family support in calendar 2006 and the first quarter of 2007.

Progress on Child Safety Performance Indicators

Once an allegation of child maltreatment is reported to the state police hotline, an investigation must begin promptly to ensure the child is not in danger. If the report is not a case of severe maltreatment, DCFS has 72 hours to initiate the investigation. The investigation begins when DCFS makes the first contact with the victim child. DCFS's

goal is to comply with this requirement in 95 percent of the cases, and they have fallen short of that goal over the last several years. The percentage of children seen within 72 hours has seen little improvement with 70 percent in 2006 and 71 percent in the first quarter of 2007.

Once the investigation begins, the victim child should be interviewed outside the presence of the alleged offender. DCFS's goal is to do this in 95 percent of the cases, and in the early 2000s they met this goal. After an especially poor performance in 2005 (68%), DCFS showed improvement with 74 percent in 2006 and 80 percent of the cases in the first quarter of 2007.



2007* = first quarter

The investigation should be completed within 30 days of the reported allegation. Many times children and their families can hang in limbo, awaiting a determination. DCFS continues to struggle with this performance indicator. Their goal is to obtain it in 90 percent of the cases. In 2006, their performance improved slightly to 53 percent and it continued to improve in the first quarter in 2007 to 58 percent.

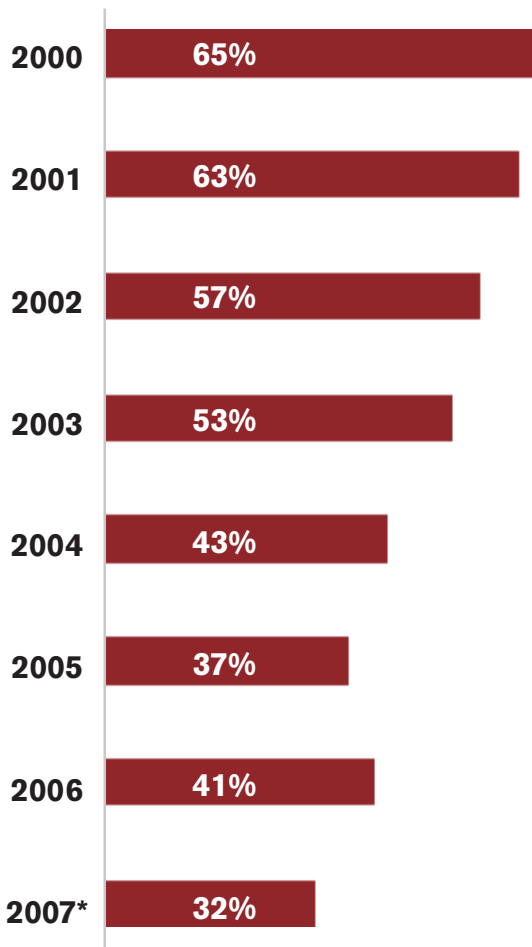
Progress on Family Support and Reunification Performance Indicators

Once a report is found to be true and a case is opened, an assessment should be completed within 30 days. The assessment analyzes the family's strengths and their service

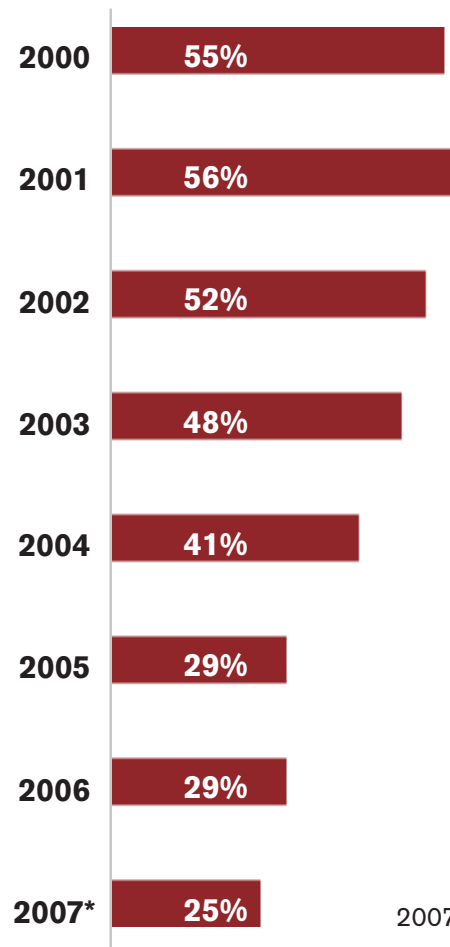
needs so that the goal of the case can be defined and the services can be determined to provide for both the family and child victim. A good case plan cannot be developed until this assessment is completed. DCFS's goal is to obtain this in 80 percent of the cases, but assessments for children who remain at home with their families continue to fall short of this goal. In 2006, only 41 percent of the cases had a family needs assessment completed within 30 days of the case being opened. The first quarter of 2007 was even worse with only 32 percent.

An initial staffing should also take place within 30 days of the case being opened. At this staffing all parties should be present including DCFS, parents, attorneys, foster parents, age-appropriate children, and others involved with the case.

Percentage of Cases with Needs Assessment within Required 30 Days for Children Who Remained at Home



Percentage of Cases with Initial Staffing within 30 Days of Case Opening for Children Who Remained at Home

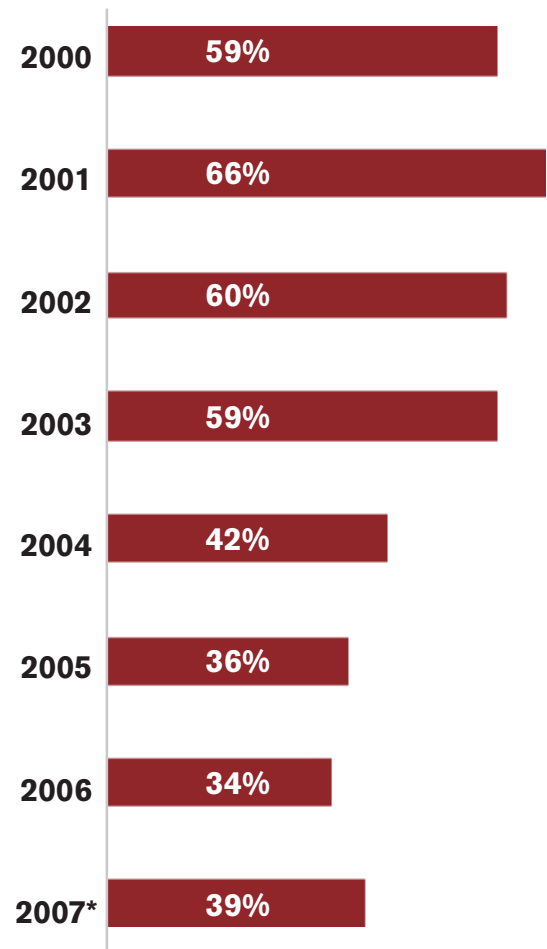


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This staffing allows all the parties to be involved in developing a meaningful case plan. For 2006 the initial staffing was held within 30 days for children who remained at home in only 29 percent of the cases, and for the first quarter of 2007 it was held in only 25 percent of the cases.

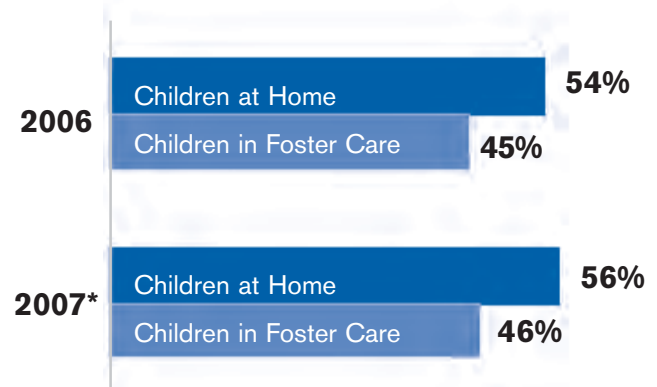
In addition to the initial staffing, regular staffings should be held with all parties while the case remains opened. These staffings provide the opportunity to monitor and discuss the progress of the case. For children who remain at home, DCFS policy requires that a staffing be held every six months, and their goal is to obtain this in 80 percent of the cases. For 2006, these regular staffings were only done in 34 percent of the cases, and in 39 percent of the cases for the first quarter of 2007.

Percentage of Ongoing Case Staffings for Children Who Remained at Home



Another critical aspect of good case management requires the family service worker to maintain regular contact with the child. This contact assures service consistency, and helps establish routine and trust. Originally, DCFS policy required weekly visits between the child and worker. Beginning in 2005, DCFS changed the policy to require weekly visits by the family service workers only during the first month of placement, with monthly visits thereafter. In 2006, for children who remained at home, 54 percent of the cases had no monthly visit. For children in foster care, 45 percent of the cases did not have the required monthly visit by the caseworker.

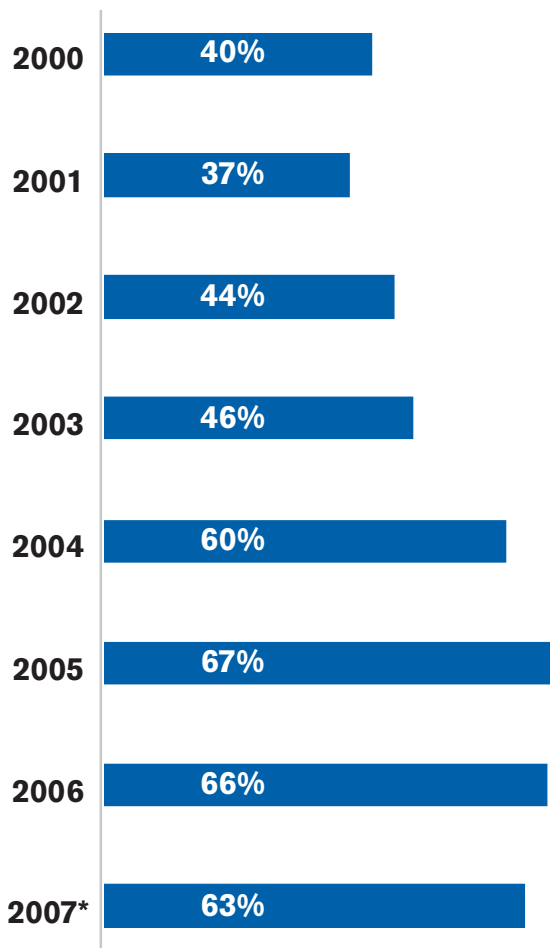
Percentage of Cases Receiving No Monthly Visits from Caseworkers



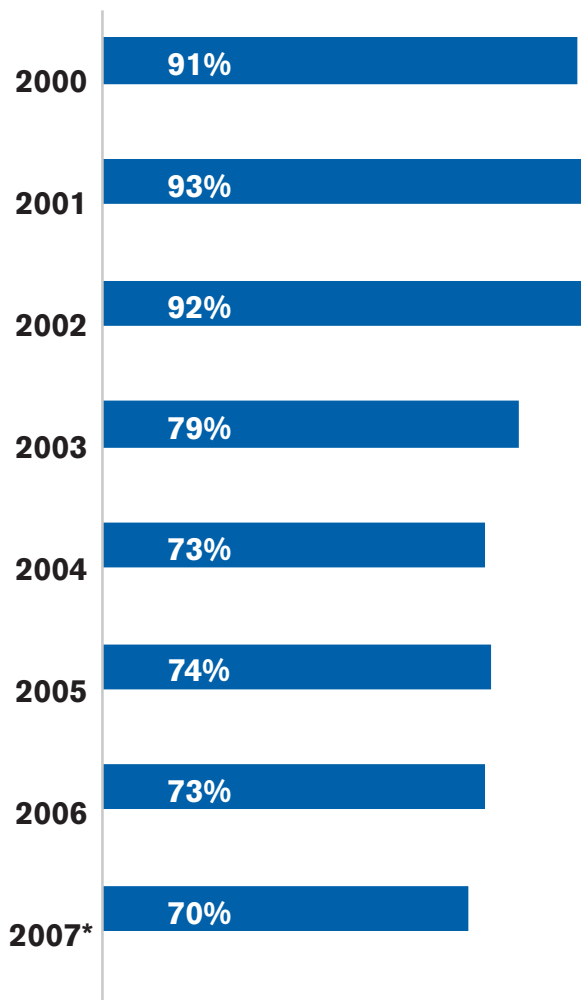
If the child is in foster care and the goal of the case is for the child to be reunified with his parents, DCFS policy requires that the child have weekly visits with their parents unless they are restricted by the court. These visits allow for the children to maintain regular contact with their parent so that a bond can remain between them. In 66 percent of the cases in 2006, children did not have weekly visits with their parents.

2007* = first quarter

Percentage of Cases a Child in Foster Care had No Weekly Visits with Parents when the Goal is Reunification



Percentage of Cases With Child Placed with at least One Sibling



When children are removed from the home, they should be placed with their siblings if possible. This helps keep part of the family intact so that children are not completely removed from their family environment. In 73 percent of the cases the child was placed with at least one sibling during 2006. Even though this is still a good percentage compared to the other indicators, this is actually a decline from previous years as indicated by the chart.

If siblings cannot be placed together, they should have bi-weekly visits with each other while they are in foster care. The percentage of cases in which there were no bi-weekly visits continued to be high, and for 2006, 76 percent of the cases had no bi-weekly visits.

When a child enters the child welfare system, it is important that they receive a physical health assessment. DCFS policy requires that children who have not suffered severe maltreatment or do not have acute illnesses, receive an initial health screening within 72 hours. In addition to this initial health screen, they must also have a comprehensive health assessment completed within 60 days. DCFS's goal is to do this in 95 percent of the cases. In analyzing the 2007 data, DCFS has started to fall short on this indicator. For the first quarter in 2007, only 44 percent of children had a comprehensive health assessment completed within 60 days.

2007* = first quarter

Conclusion

As seen from this report, even though DCFS has improved its staffing rate, the performance numbers show very little improvement. However, DCFS is a large organization, and it will take time for their performance to improve as these new workers are being trained. Further, at the current staffing, caseloads are still far too high at 31 cases per worker. The recommended standard for caseloads is 15 cases per worker. Fortunately, some help is on the way for DCFS in the form of a significant budget increase of \$8 million from the 2007 Legislative Session. This increase is much needed and will help keep 75 staff positions whose funding would have ended on July 1. It will also provide an additional \$3 million for service contracts, an additional \$1 million for foster care board payments, an additional \$1 million for adoption subsidies, and additional funding for training and technology for workers.

DCFS named a new Director at the beginning of 2007. Under the new director's leadership, DCFS has begun to analyze staffing around the state and look at ways to pro-

vide more staff support. This includes: (1) moving unfilled positions in smaller counties to areas that have larger populations and higher caseloads; (2) contracting for certain services that workers provide such as foster home recruitment; (3) continuing to use assist teams when an area is understaffed and significantly behind on their workload; and (4) shifting certain functions such as adoption placements back to central office. While increased staffing support will help, it alone will not improve the performance indicators. Many more changes will need to be made. With an increase in the DCFS budget and a new DCFS director, the timing is perfect for a comprehensive assessment of the organization's structure, policies, practices, and services. Currently, an organizational assessment is being conducted, and the first part of the assessment will include the organization's structure.

Children who are abused and neglected deserve to grow up in a safe, loving, and stable family. Neglect not only affects their physical health, but also their emotional and social development. With appropriate help and services, these children can grow up to live healthy and productive lives.

Endnotes

¹ Annual Report Card, SFY 2006. Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services, DCFS Quality Assurance Unit, December 2006, p. 19

² Ibid p. 19.

³ Ibid p. 22.

For More Information:
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This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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