

Office of the Child Advocate
Data Work Group co-chaired by the Department of Children & Families
MEETING MINUTES APPROVED by DWG on 9/28/2021
Thursday, August 26, 2021
10:30 a.m. – 12:00p.m.

Meeting held virtually via WebEx pursuant to the Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, s. 20 signed by Governor Baker on March 12, 2020.

Data Work Group Members and/or Designees Present:

Maria Mossaides, OCA Director, Co-Chair
Linda Spears, DCF Commissioner, Co-Chair
Representative Michael Finn, House Appointee
Lauren Matteodo, Office of Senator Adam Gomez
Mike Dsida, CPCS
Julie Wilson, HKS
Tammy Mello, CLM
Mary McGeown, MSPCC
Susan Elsen, MLRI

Government Associates:

Lisa Rosenfeld, Office of Representative Michael Finn
Representative Natalie Blais, MA State House
Jordan Meehan, MA LGBTQ Youth Commission
Katie Verra, Office of Senator Velis
Ann Narris, CPCS
Kathleen Bitetti, Office of State Auditor

Staff:

Ruben Ferreira, DCF
Emily Hajjar, DCF
Paola Ferrer, DCF
Cristina Tedstone, DCF
Kristine Polizzano, OCA
Jessie Brunelle, OCA

Members of the Public:

Rachel Gwaltney, CLM
Kate Lowenstein, Citizens for Juvenile Justice
Polly Crozier, GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders
Other members of the public on the phone who did not self-identify

DWG = Data Work Group

OCA = Office of the Child Advocate

DCF = Department of Children & Families

Joint Committee = Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities

RRI= Relative Rate Index

RoD= Rate of Disproportionality

SOGIE= Sexual Orientation Gender Identity and Expression

Meeting Commenced: 10:31 a.m.

Welcome and Introductions:

Ms. Mossaides welcomed the attendees to the virtual meeting. Ms. Mossaides recognized the presence of a quorum of Data Work Group members in the session. A roll call was not held due to the number of participants in the virtual meeting; members of the public were asked to identify themselves in the Zoom chat room.

Approval of Minutes:

Draft minutes from the July 9, 2021, meeting of the Data Work Group were provided to members via email in advance of the meeting to facilitate approval. Ms. Mossaides invited questions or concerns with the draft minutes as proposed and hearing no objection she asked members to vote on their meeting minutes via roll call.

Maria Mossaides, Linda Spears, Lisa Rosenfeld, Mike Dsida, Julie Wilson, Tammy Mello all voted in the affirmative. Mary McGeown abstained from voting as she was not at the July meeting. The July Data Work Group meeting minutes were approved.

Presentation and Discussion of Data Field Updates for the DCF FY21 Annual Report

Ms. Mossaides introduced the co-chair, DCF Commissioner Linda Spears. Commissioner Spears told the group that they would spend time today speaking about updates the Data Work Group can expect to see in the FY21 Annual Report. She introduced Ruben Ferreira who would walk through those updates with the group.

Mr. Ferreira updated the group that work is well underway on the FY21 annual report. He told the group that in this year's annual report, DCF is trying to provide disproportionality data at more points throughout the report as recommended by this working group. He explained relative rate index (RRI) and relative rates of disproportionality (ROD) would be provided at each data point in which it is available and appropriate. A member asked him to define "appropriate" in this context, to which Mr. Ferreira brought up concerns on using Massachusetts overall child population data as a baseline comparison group or DCF's own 51A intake baseline population. The two populations answer two separate questions. He said he will use both baseline comparisons in the report to highlight this to the extent possible. Mr. Ferreira clarified to the group that the Massachusetts child population data that DCF uses are city and town estimates updated each year. Mr. Ferreira reminded the group he is open to additional feedback once the report is out for future iterations of the annual report.

The following tables in the FY21 DCF Annual Report will be updated to be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, and to the extent possible, will include RRI and RoD measures:

- Table 19- placement length of stay
- Table 21- Placement moves/ 1000 placement days
- Table 23a- Care Exit Reasons
- Table 25- 51A intakes
- Table 26a- protective intakes by screening decisions
- Table 27A- Screened in responses by emergency screening or not
- Table 28A- determination at conclusion of response

Mr. Ferreira said this was the base of his list of updates, but there may be additional updates to come.

The Commissioner told the group that by providing RoD and RRI measures in the annual report, the state can get more of an idea of what the numbers mean and can inform where further research is necessary. She continued to explain that DCF is working diligently on the analysis of disproportionality data to have clarity on where potential solutions may lie in terms of prevention services and supports through things that can be done within the department. She described this as “what happens at the front door” and “what happens at the back door.”

Ms. Mossaides reminded the group that FY21 data will likely be an anomaly due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. She provided an example of how this is playing out for transition age youth data. She explained that federal and state policies around child welfare shifted in an emergency response and will contribute to a difference in the data for FY21 compared to prior years. The Commissioner added specific DCF initiatives to support youth during this time and mentioned the concerns around data anomalies this year. So far, Commissioner Spears mentioned two areas this is true:

1. The total volume of cases coming in the front door is substantially lower than it would normally be. The number of youth reported to DCF was on a decline prior to the pandemic, but that will be exacerbated by the pandemic. She explained the rates by reporter type have changed as well (more police compared to previous years, and fewer teachers reporting due to remote classrooms).
2. At the same time, there have been longer case processing times and “slowness at the back door.” Not only are older youth staying involved with the Department, but some youth are also coming back due to the federal age limit extending from 22 years old through 26 during the pandemic. Additionally, adoptions and reunifications were delayed. DCF is working with the courts to make sure cases are moving forward as quickly as possible.

A member asked if guardianship data should distinguish between guardianships that receive subsidies and those that do not. DCF clarified that all DCF sponsored guardships receive subsidies.

The group discussed the different types of guardianships and the concerns around probate court-issued guardianships that do not fall within DCF purview and receive subsidies from the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). This is an ongoing equity concern for the OCA. The group discussed the benefits of disaggregating data between youth living with kin for guardianship compared to foster parents.

Mr. Ferreira told the group the annual report does include a table on total dollars spent on subsidies. He told the group he could disaggregate this by adoption and guardianship subsidies. Ms. Mossaides cautioned some families may not take the subsidies.

DCF SOGIE Data Availability Updates

Commissioner Spears introduced the next item on the agenda. She explained to the group that one of the other issues DCF is trying to figure out with help from the LGBTQ Youth Commission concerns SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression) data. She provided background to the group.

In FY17-FY18, with the help of the Department's LGBTQ Liaisons, DCF added a SOGIE data field to its case management system to start collecting this data. FY20 was the first year SOGIE data was reported in the annual report. DCF has noticed there are process and skill challenges to make sure this data is up to date for every child. The Commissioner explained there is a skill set and sensitivity to collecting SOGIE data that caseworkers need to possess.

Currently, much of the SOGIE data is missing, Commissioner Spears explained, and the true scope of the LGBTQ youth DCF population, and their needs, is unknown. To address this, DCF is working on multiple fronts:

Programming: The Commissioner explained DCF is making improvements in the way they identify foster families through a new family resource policy rolling out late in FY22. This policy will allow DCF to do more regarding baseline care and identification of gender-affirming foster homes. Data will be collected in iFN to systemically identify supportive homes. The Commissioner explained DCF is discussing the possibility of specialized trainings for homes that wish to become gender-affirming homes and how to support LGBTQ children.

Training: The Commissioner explained that this Fall DCF would issue its gender-affirming healthcare policy. Along with that policy, DCF is providing three trainings to their staff on LGBTQ issues. These trainings include: 1) A two-part training on LGBTQ issues 2) A training around healthcare issues for this population 3) A parent and youth panel discussion. The training series will take place all between September and November 2021 and has been announced to staff.

SOGIE Data Collection and Reporting: The Commissioner told the group DCF is moving toward making this a required field. But first, staff must be trained on how to appropriately collect this

data. She told the group that they plan to start at the management level and LGBTQ liaisons so that way they can eventually provide support to caseworkers.

Mr. Ferreira told the group that the SOGIE data DCF included in the FY20 annual report (Table 13) will be updated this year to be disaggregated by the following age groups:

- early adolescence (0-14 years old)
- middle adolescence (15-17 years old)
- late adolescence (18-21+ years old) (New)

He went on to explain the difficulties of reporting intersectionality with this data due to the small numbers and missing data. He provided example data suggesting 75-87% of youth were missing this data. He said of the data they *do* have, he can see that 24 children identified as transgender. This trend can be seen in sexual orientation data as well.

The Commissioner reiterated the importance of collecting and reporting data to show the complete story of kids in care and how to accurately report their needs. She told the group the data will increase and grow in its accuracy to better inform placement and service needs for these young people.

A member of the working group asked if a special report and deep dive into this problem and data is necessary. The Commissioner explained that in her discussions with the LGBTQ Youth Commissioner, the data categories DCF collects currently are solid, but best practices have evolved as well. She stated that before expanding and making any categories mandatory, she wants to make any improvements in this area as well as figure out what questions DCF would answer with this data.

A guest spoke to the group about the importance and urgency of collecting and reporting SOGIE data that has been a discussion since December 2019. She mentioned incomplete data is of concern since the YRBS reports 17% of Massachusetts' youth identifying as LGBTQ and other states have found disproportionality in the number of LGBTQ youth in their child welfare systems. She urged DCF to make the data a mandatory field, and the trainings mentioned should also be mandatory. She emphasized that caseworkers are asking you about sensitive information regarding very personal details (e.g. abuse and neglect) and this data collection should be no different. She told the group she was concerned that LGBTQ youth are not being seen by the Department and they need to be seen.

The Commissioner agreed with the guest's comments and let the group know that the main challenge in making anything mandatory is the fact that there are over 3,000 DCF employees that need to be trained on these policies and practices. That is why she prioritized management, LGBTQ

Liaisons, and identifying gender-affirming homes as one immediate step the Department could take to address these concerns.

A member urged the Commissioner that as part of DCF trainings and policies, there needs to be clear guidance on confidentiality and sharing this information. She emphasized that some youth do not want their sexual orientation or gender identity disclosed to an unsafe adult and that information will need to be protected.

The Commissioner told the group that DCF is also in the midst of procurement for congregate care, and for the first time, DCF will be creating residential specialized programs for LGBTQ kids.

A member suggested evaluating the process of the policy and training rollout so other state agencies could benefit from this work. The Commissioner mentioned she has been brainstorming about any specialized trainings that should take place as well.

Regarding data collection, Ms. Mossaides told the group about the Juvenile Justice Policy and Data (JJPAD) Board's issued reporting recommendations for state agencies to report race, ethnicity, and SOGIE data. The OCA's goal is to have all child-serving entities reporting similarly. Jordan Meehan (MA LGBTQ Youth Commission) reiterated the youth commissions' support for this document and said DCFs reporting categories were comprehensive and stressed the importance of acting quickly. A guest also recommended using the JJPAD reporting recommendations.

Ms. Mossaides summarized the conversation that Ann Narris (CPCS) and advocacy organizations will develop a list of questions that they want DCF to answer regarding LGBTQ youth in their care and the data they think would answer those questions. Commissioner Spears and the Department will continue to work with the LGBTQ Youth Commission on this front as well.

Ms. Mossaides also mentioned that if working group members have thoughts on the two bills pending in the State House, they should reach out to her, as this group is set to sunset after January 2022. This group will need to think about recommendations to the legislature, and members' thoughts on this topic may have changed over the course of the working group.

A member asked if the group could develop a plan for setting data benchmarks for the Department and set a timeline for doing so. A guest urged this group to continue to meet. Another member stated Massachusetts' Child Welfare Coalition's support for the Data Work Group work to continue but suggested a change in membership to get representation from families involved with the Department.

Ms. Mossaides says she's unsure of how the Legislature will move forward and that a forum to discuss some of these data issues has been important. She mentioned that some issues are beyond

data and require more practice changes first, and those issues are beyond this group's work. For example, visitation and outcome practices.

A member suggested that most working group members are willing to continue to meet and, again, stressed setting numerical targets for the Department for the data that the group wants to measure. He asked for clarification on whether that was going to happen or not.

The Commissioner reminded the group that they were all in general agreement that setting timelines would be a valuable thing to do. She reminded the group DCF has shared their monthly policy improvement dashboard with the group. She said what is important for her is to create benchmarks that align with policy and agency reform improvements and ensure alignment between federal and state requirements. She told the group DCF has committed to a considerable amount of work related to the Almond report including issuing six new policies and two major reforms. That's an enormous lift for her staff and she is sensitive to that. The Commissioner made a commitment to this group to figure out how they would move forward with the data work group work.

Concluding remarks:

In closing, Ms. Mossaides suggested another DWG meeting to be scheduled in September. She asked the group to fill out a Doodle poll to determine when that meeting should take place. The Commissioner and Ms. Mossaides thanked everyone for their time.

Adjournment: 12:10pm