

Charles D. Baker
Governor

Karyn Polito
Lieutenant Governor



Marylou Sudders
Secretary

Linda S. Spears
Commissioner

Annual Report on Foster Care Review

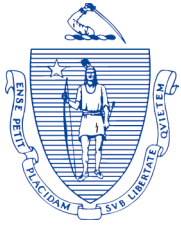
As Required by MGL c.18B, §6A

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Massachusetts Department of Children & Families



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ANNUAL REPORT ON FOSTER CARE REVIEW

This document serves as the Department of Children & Families' annual legislative report on the Foster Care Review Unit, as required by MGL c.18B, §6A, which reads, in part:

“... The director of the unit shall submit an annual report to the governor, the child advocate and the joint committee on children, families and persons with disabilities on the performance of the unit. The report shall contain: an analysis and evaluation of the foster care review system and recommendations, if any, for its improvement; the total number of children in the care of the department or its agents during the previous fiscal year; the number of children who were in its care for more than 6 months; the number of reviews conducted; the number of children returned to their parents or guardian; the number of children for whom guardians, other than the department or its agent, were appointed; the number of children released for adoption; and the number of children adopted.”

This language asks the Department to draw upon information and data from the previous fiscal year and: **I**) provide an analysis and evaluation of the current foster care review system; **II**) provide recommendations, if it has any, for the system's improvement; and **III**) report several data elements.

The following responses are based on information and data from Fiscal Year 2017, which ran from July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017.

I. “[An] analysis and evaluation of the foster care review system...”

The Foster Care Review Unit (FCRU) is an independent unit within the Department of Children & Families. The FCRU conducts case reviews for families within six months after a child is placed out of the home and every six months thereafter when a child, up to age 22, remains out of the home and in the care of the Department.

The current Foster Care Review (FCR) scheduling process is completed manually over several days. Cases generated for a FCR are reviewed by FCR managers to identify those needing special accommodations such as the need for an interpreter, a police detail due to potential safety concerns, etc. Considerations are given to the scheduling availability of space, FCR staff, and all invited parties. Volunteer case reviewers are then scheduled for reviews based on their availability. The

FCRU receives numerous requests each month to reschedule reviews; these requests are accommodated whenever the schedule allows.

A Foster Care Review is conducted by a three-member panel consisting of a case reviewer from the FCRU who convenes the meeting, a manager or supervisor from the DCF area office who is not directly responsible for the case under review, and a volunteer case reviewer from the community who is trained by the FCRU.

The FCR focuses on the extent to which the child's needs for safety, permanency, and well-being are being met. The panel makes determinations and recommendations that inform the next period of action planning with families in order to achieve a child's permanency plan by a projected date. The structure of the FCR allows parents and children 14 and older to attend and actively participate in the review process for their family; these parties, in addition to substitute care providers and children's attorneys, have the right to grieve determinations and request a Fair Hearing when a panel determines that an alternative permanency plan is most appropriate for a child. Parents are allowed to bring a person of support with them. Interpreters are secured for reviews, when needed, by the DCF area office working with the family. Safety plans are developed with the DCF area office staff when concerns exist for the potential of volatile behavior at a review.

FCRU case reviewers provide FYI Memos on the day of reviews, to inform DCF area office management when concerns have been identified through the review process regarding the safety or well-being of a child, or when delays toward permanency exist. DCF specialty unit staff are included in the FYI Memos, as needed, to assist in resolving concerns or barriers. FCRU managers convene follow up to these Memos and submit Priority Alerts as appropriate.

During FY17, a new FCR policy was drafted and negotiated with the SEIU 509. New regulations (110 CMR 6) were drafted and open for public comment until March 3, 2017; the Department plans to promulgate these regulations in 2018. FCRU continued work with the EHS/DCF Information Technology department on the development of a FCRU module, results, and reporting structure within i-FamilyNet. In addition, DCF is continuing to work on developing an automated scheduling system for case reviews. When youth 18-22 years of age were added to the FCR process, the number of pending reviews increased commensurate with the increase in overall workload. With the addition of a case review team prior to the start of FY17, reviews were up-to-date by the end of the fiscal year.

The statewide FCRU is currently staffed with 38 (36.17 FTE) case reviewers—who are configured into seven teams—and four volunteer coordinators, who supervise the FCR volunteer case reviewers. The case review team, volunteer coordinator, and part-time Clerk IV covering the Western Massachusetts offices are housed at the Department's Western Regional Office. All other staff is assigned to Central Office, in Boston. Each FCRU team of case reviewers is supervised by a FCR Manager. The Volunteer Unit is supervised by the Director of Volunteer Services. The FCRU maintains a Director of the Unit and one Administrative Secretary.

II. "...and recommendations, if any, for its improvement..."

An automated FCR scheduling system is anticipated to be ready for user acceptance testing (UAT) in spring 2018. Once fully implemented, this system should ensure a 30 day notice to all invitees, allowing for earlier notification than the arduous manual scheduling process currently resourced by FCRU managers. Significant workload reduction will permit FCRU managers to better support the supervision of FCRU case reviewers, and the timely review, approval, and release of FCR reports to families and DCF Social Workers.

Collaboration among the FCRU, DCF area staff, and DCF legal will continue in order to ensure that all appropriate parties are invited to each case review.

The FCRU has been challenged to expand recruitment sites and opportunities for volunteer applicants in an effort to increase its pool of volunteer case reviewers.

Second Party panel member attendance will be tracked in an effort to increase the number/percentage of full FCR panels.

Upon implementation of the FCR i-FamilyNet build, process and outcome reports will be developed to track FCR Determinations, as well as, other key FCR measures. Fidelity metrics will be developed to assess fidelity to the new FCR policy. These reports will be utilized to identify strengths and areas needing improvement in case practice, as well as, the FCRU process and practice.

III. Data Elements

"the total number of children in the care of the department or its agents during the previous fiscal year;"	16,057
"the number of children who were in its care for more than 6 months;"	14,051
"the number of reviews conducted;" ¹	14,478
"the number of children returned to their parents or guardian;"	15,041
"the number of children for whom guardians, other than the department or its agent, were appointed;"	532
"the number of children released for adoption; and"	922

¹ A "review" may cover one or more children in a family/sibling group.