DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC SECURITY

Your Partner For A Stronger Arizona

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Arizona Child Safety Review and Action Plan

Background

Over the course of the past six months there has been a series of child fatalities and near fatalities both within the Child Protective Services (CPS) system as well as outside of the system. In August, Governor Brewer met with the leadership of the Department of Economic Security (DES). She asked for the status of the Arizona child protective services investigation process. As part of that briefing she wanted to know what the agency needed to implement greater efficiency, including an assessment of staff workload and the overall status of child safety within the State. Accordingly, the DES has conducted a comprehensive review of all Department data, trends, policies and staffing regarding child safety.

The review of the data over the past five years revealed several findings. First, the workload has remained fairly constant, both in the number of cases as well as severity. Likewise, the Children's Services budget line-item has also remained fairly stable. There has, however, been a spike in the number of cases for which the investigation process has not been completed. Additionally, the child protection staff attrition rate was also a cause for concern. Consistently, the turnover in the child protection staff runs at approximately 20 percent annually.

Accordingly, the DES began to look into policies and practices to determine if adjustments could make a difference in the effectiveness of the system. In January 2011, the DES engaged the Change & Innovation Agency (CIA) in facilitating an assessment of the child abuse investigation process with a core team of internal staff. The core team was comprised of field office supervisors and key staff in the areas of policy, training, and technology, and focused on mapping the investigation process from the time a report is assigned until it is closed, opened for in-home services, or transferred to on-going units.

The core team's recommendations were informed by a series of eight focus groups with over 40 CPS staff, supervisors, judges, Foster Care Review Board members, attorneys, providers, and other stakeholders from across Arizona. The focus group participants were asked questions related to the process steps that were most relevant to their work including, the Child Safety Assessment (CSA), Strengths and Risk Assessment, case plans, dependency petitions, and court reports. The core team's recommendations have formed a foundation upon which the Department will continue to evaluate ways to better address child safety and to communicate those efforts internally and externally on an ongoing basis.

Findings

The Department has concluded that over the past five years, while the number of reports that are assigned to CPS staff for investigation has remained constant, there has been a spike in the backlog of cases, and staff attrition continues to run high, thus leading to the conclusion that the following areas need to be reviewed:

- Improving the process and procedures
- Staff development, hiring, and retention
- Capacity building
- Determination of funding needs

Starting with the time a report is received by the Child Abuse Hotline, the team estimated that the current investigation process takes between 178 and 203 days to complete. Implementing the core team's recommendations is anticipated to shorten that time to just over 40 days. In total, the team's recommendations are estimated to produce a total savings of 199,650 work hours per year, equivalent to the addition of 96 staff.

Next Steps

Based on the DES's review of current practice and system performance, the Department has identified the following to address: improving practice, strengthening the workforce, and promoting transparency and communication.

Improving Practice

An evaluation of the CPS investigation process work flow has been conducted in order to eliminate unnecessary redundancies and activities, mitigate structural barriers, and promote the development and use of tools and resources.

As the practice of the Arizona child safety system has evolved, layer upon layer of new practice has been added onto the old. This circumstance along with staff turnover and continued vacancies in investigations has led to 9,903 cases that were identified statewide in August 2011 as non-active. To address this problem, a Social Work Assessment Team (SWAT), comprising supervisors from the Central and Southwest Regions (Maricopa County) with a combined experience of 230 years, was established to analyze the information in these cases, and determine whether they can be closed or require additional action. The review of these cases is anticipated to be completed by the end of December 2011.

An additional review by the SWAT was conducted in August, 2011 of 459 reports that were identified as open investigations with three or more prior reports within the past 24 months. The

SWAT has evaluated those cases and identified the ones that require immediate attention or additional review by management. Currently, a process is being developed to address how new reports of child maltreatment with multiple prior engagements will be clinically reviewed.

While the actions described above reflect important improvements, additional improvements will be made as they are identified.

Strengthening the Workforce

In order to better support the DES staff, an assessment of current recruitment, retention, and training and development activities for the workforce of Arizona's child safety system is being conducted to ensure that they have the support necessary to successfully perform the work to which they dedicate themselves each day.

The DES must work to achieve and sustain staffing within its approved budget level. Historically, the DES has struggled to maintain its appropriated staffing. For example, in December 2010, there were 1,043 CPS worker positions appropriated; however, only 884 positions were filled due in part to the lack of qualified applicants applying for those positions. Since February 2011, the DES management has made filling 100% of the authorized positions a priority in developing the CPS workforce.

Specifically, the DES is employing mechanisms to further develop its child welfare workforce. These mechanisms include:

- Continuing relationships with universities and community colleges to refine curriculum to meet practical needs of caseworkers in the field;
- Exploring immersion training for newly hired CPS Specialists across the state to get them into the field and working more quickly;
- Conducting a full assessment of CPS training and staff development needs, based on input from staff;
- Exploring additional resources, including technology, needed by staff to perform their jobs in the most effective way possible.

Promoting Transparency & Communication

The DES is committed to the highest level of transparency and communication as permitted by all state and federal laws related to the disclosure of confidential information.

The DES will engage the following mechanisms to address internal and external communication:

- The Director will continue to hold weekly senior staff meetings to monitor progress;
- The Director will hold bi-monthly meetings with child welfare supervisors;

- The DES senior child welfare team will continue to hold weekly case review meetings;
- The CPS Division Director will continue to meet monthly with Deputy Directors of the Department to monitor progress;
- The Director will utilize social media as appropriate;
- The Director will blog on a weekly basis;
- The Director will be in the field with caseworkers monthly (e.g. ride-alongs, site visits, etc.); and
- The Director will hold open forums for the stakeholder community and public at-large where key elements of the semi-annual Child Welfare report will be presented.

The Legislature has strictly prescribed the information it requires the DES to collect and submit on a semi-annual basis on the operation of its child safety system. The DES provides this semi-annual report at www.azdes.gov and to designated parties. The DES will develop additional mechanisms to publicly present the results contained in the report. This would allow the public to have a direct one-on-one interface with the DES leadership and its child welfare team thereby increasing the transparency of the program. To be clear, this would not include discussion of specific cases, but would be responsive to questions about the overall functioning – accomplishments and challenges – of the child safety system. It would also provide an additional opportunity for the DES to receive feedback and recommendations.

Summary

Building a robust, effective, and efficient child safety system is a never-ending process. As a child safety system the DES must always be challenging, re-evaluating and evolving its policy and practice. The DES now has an opportunity to recalibrate its system – as we build on its many strengths and, at the same time, address its weaknesses.

Again, this plan is not meant to be exhaustive in nature. It intentionally includes improvements that can be made within the Department in the near-term. There are many other issues related to a strong child safety system that require a more deliberate and collaborative effort than the immediate moment affords us. As part of this plan, therefore, the DES proposes to develop a process to facilitate this collaboration.

It is our firm belief that if implemented diligently and effectively the elements of this plan will strengthen child safety in the near-term and provide a strong foundation for the future.

Table 1: Overall Implementation Timetable	
Activity	**Timeline**
Review and development of the Improvement Plan	Begin Date: September 2011 Completion Date: October 24, 2011
Revisions to Improvement Plan	Begin Date: October 2011 Completion Date: October 31, 2011
Implementation of Plan	Begin Date: November 1, 2011 Completion Date: Ongoing
Evaluation	Begin Date: January 1, 2012 Completion Date: Ongoing quarterly

Table 2: Current Provision Timetable	
Activity	**Timeline/Frequency**
SWAT review	Begin Date: August 2011 Completion Date: December 31, 2011
Workforce development	Begin Date: February 1, 2011 Completion Date: Ongoing
Senior staff meetings with Director	Weekly
Meetings with child welfare supervisors with Director	Bi-monthly
CPS Division Director meetings with Deputy Directors of the Department	Monthly
Critical case review meetings with senior child welfare team	Weekly
Local CPS office caseworker and supervisor meetings	Monthly
Social media use by Director	As appropriate
Director blog	At least weekly
Director engagement in the field	Monthly
Open forum on semi-annual report	Begin Date: February 2012 Completion Date: Bi-annually