

**June 2006 Annual Report
of the Citizen's Review Panel
Jefferson County**

Legal Exhibit 6

The Citizen's Review Panel of Jefferson County has met three times this year and will meet in June for a total of four meetings this year. We have completed 13 case specific reviews with three more planned in June of 2006. We speak to the case supervisor after the reviews to discuss our findings. Then we send a report detailing the results of the reviews with corrections needed and recommendations for improvement. Interviews have been conducted with professionals and community members including foster parents, school counselors, day care providers, probation officers, staff from the prosecutor's office and CASA staff and advocates. The case reviews reflect many needed services that have been provided to the families by the caseworkers and staff at DHHS. The caseworkers provided transportation to the parents and children to visits, medical appointments, counseling sessions, court hearings and to many other service providers in and out of the county. The case specific reviews also reflected areas that needed improvement. These included:

- All current and signed court orders need to be in the case file
- Current recommendations from mental health counselors, school counselors, and any other service providers need to be in the file.
- The court reports and narrative relating why case was opened should be in the case file. All required forms such as case plans, needs assessments etc should be in each family members' file.
- Dictation should be specific relating to the appearance of the parent/children, their interaction, the condition of the home and who was present. Discussions should relate to the case plans and any efforts the parents and children have made toward these goals or any problems related to their not being able to keep appointments related to the case plan/visits and workers suggestions.
- Each family member's dictation/forms should be in their own file and not mixed up with other family member's records.
- Court cases should be reviewed by supervisors two weeks prior to court date to ensure caseworker is familiar with the case and that all parties have been properly notified and case plans and forms are in the file, and the orders of the court have been met. If not a reason why not.
- Continued use of supervisory review tool and new case assignment form by supervisor.
- Cases that have been closed should have a closing statement as to why the case is no longer opened.
- More local foster homes opened to prevent out of town travel by caseworkers.
- Hire and train clerical aides to assist the caseworker in keeping the required paper work completed and filed in case record.
- More transportation aides to assist caseworkers in travel needs.
- Hire after hour staff to work when office is closed.

- Relocation of DHHS office to a larger more appropriate building better suited to meet the needs of the staff and families they serve.
- Increase the number of supervisors from 4 to 5 reducing their case load from 35 to 28 which would be more manageable.

Since 2003 there has been an increase in the turnover rate of caseworkers in Jefferson County. Specifically the FSWI and FSWII positions in the Children and Family Service Division. The panel began making specific recommendations regarding this problem at that time and has continued to date. This problem has worsened and has affected every area of the child protection system in our county. The panel has interviewed staff from the Prosecutors office, the Juvenile Justice office, foster parents and the local Mental Health Center. All complaints from the above sources center around a lack of experienced caseworkers they deal with on a daily basis. Some of the problems expressed were:

- The caseworkers come to court and do not have the case file or do not have any knowledge of the case file or explanations as to why previously ordered services from the court were not carried out. The judge has been issuing contempt orders against the Department on a regular basis. This adds to the workers stress level as new workers or worker with heavy caseload, this court pressure may appear unfair or not resolvable leading to their resigning. Community professionals see DCFS as closing cases even foster care cases just to get them off their caseload; when they think the family is still in need of services.
- The prosecutor's office is having problems obtaining information from the caseworkers on cases coming up for trials. They expressed concerns about Protective Service cases where the child was a victim of sexual abuse and the perpetrator was coming back to the home that the PA staff believed was not closely supervised.
- Foster parents are not getting the information they need on children placed in their homes and workers are not visiting the foster homes as required. They are not notified of court hearings or what occurred at hearing. Siblings are not being put together even when foster parent agrees to take them. Caseworkers contact foster parents to take a child and when the foster parent agrees they do not hear back from the caseworkers. Sibling visits are not occurring, as they should.
- Caseworkers are so new and inexperienced they do not know the foster homes and can not make good decisions as to what homes to place the children in with the short time frame they are working. One worker said her supervisor told her not to contact her at night with such questions pertaining to emergency placements.
- New caseworkers not receiving the support they need but are given a heavy caseload with serious cases to start out with. Young caseworkers are having difficulty dealing with the demands of the job and the accountability of the court system. Jefferson County was at one time this year down 50% of their caseworker from up to 28 workers to 14, giving new workers 35 -40 cases at times. The supervisors have up to 35 cases each to supervise.

- Caseworkers must work all day and be available to go out at night and transport foster children out of town not returning until late a night. Caseworkers spend much of their time transporting clients to and from service providers and do not have time to update the case files needed for court and to ensure compliance requirements. Caseworkers are tired and under stress are expected to routinely make good decisions affecting the lives of children and families.

It is the belief of the panel that the experienced caseworkers have provided extensive, quality and needed services to the families they are assigned to but it is apparent that regardless of the training and experience of the workers, the turnover rate has affected them as many seasoned workers and supervisors have also left the last year. Staff retention must be made a priority of the State if any of the other programs will be effective.

The State Child and Family State Plan FFYS 2000-2004 with objectives and recommendations to bring the State into compliance with the requirements of the Angela R. lawsuit was reviewed. The objectives and recommendations in this plan were excellent and improvement in the agency was clearly seen. The objective of staff retention and development was addressed in the 2004 state plan and reviewed by the panel for the purpose of this report. However, it appears during the past three years some of these recommendations pertaining to staff development and retention have not been adhered to with setbacks occurring in the agency service delivery to children and families. Specific areas affected were: weekly visitation, sibling and family visitation, interviewing children who are subjects of a child maltreatment report, documentation of the use of family needs assessment, required case staffing, case plans and assessment foster family homes.

The State Plan recommended a staff retention strategy that included staff development opportunities, policies and practices that facilitate team building among staff, more effective acknowledgement of exceptional performance and worker safety improvement strategies. The Division was to develop worker incentive initiatives. This was also a recommendation of the recent focus group study in Area VII.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy Annual Report Description of Summary and Recommendation was also referred to by the CRP. It stated that DHS will identify and eliminate barriers that prevent the achievement and maintenance of the settlement agreement standards on staffing and casework practices. Several barriers to stable staffing listed by the Study were :

- Delays in hiring caused by the lengthy paperwork required. (This has again become a problem in Jefferson County.) Another barrier was chronic delays in obtaining lists of qualified applicants from the central personnel office. Intense problem solving efforts between DCFS and division of Administrative Services removed the barrier.

It is still 5-6 weeks before an applicant can be contacted with a job offer. Interviews are conducted at the county level and sent to the State office but stays in that office 2-3

weeks before any decisions are reported back to the county office on the hiring status. Often the recommended applicant has accepted another job.

- Staffing levels and caseload ratios were to be tracked and used in decisions regarding the deployment of staff. Workload Analysis would be conducted to assign weights to various types of cases. Such data was to be used to make informed decisions about the deployment of staff and determining appropriate staffing levels for county offices. Options to assure staffing standard of 15 cases per worker was recommended in the state plan addressing vacancy ratios. This was accomplished on January 1, 2000 using the State plan objectives and recommendations.

The past three years in Jefferson County, the staffing caseload has been three times higher than the standard reached in 2000. Cases have averaged 35 –40 per worker in Jefferson while smaller counties with low caseloads have the same number of staff members.

- A DCFS state policy was to have been developed that implemented a process to identify management and or casework problems at the early stages giving area managers and county supervisors opportunities to intervene in a timely fashion. The responsibility for maintaining this goal rested with Community Services and Planning and Policy Unit according to the State Plan.
- Causes of worker stress was to be determined and options to decrease stress implemented. Accomplished Date listed as July 1, 2000.

The worker in Jefferson County stress level has been very high the last three years and reasons listed have been: after hour work and out of town transportation duties, lack of support from supervisors, court appearance pressure, and increasing caseload due to worker turnover. A recent example of lack of support from the State level was given to the panel:

Last year while there was a staff shortage in Jefferson County DCFS workers were required to travel to Lonoke to assist the county office there for several weeks while things continued to back up at their own office.

A 14 year old Jefferson Co. foster child was hospitalized in Little Rock with no family support system so the Jefferson County DCFS staff was told they would have to sit with the girl 24 hrs a day as long as she was there. This again added to the pressure of the county office and staff. Also, in court contempt cases the worker reportedly comes under heavy scrutiny and criticism from the state office staff that some described as disrespectful and threatening to them and fearing they will be terminated the worker often resigned. The OCC attorney is seen by some county DCFS staff as critical and not supportive and not preparing them effectively for court.

The morale of the DCFS is described as being the lowest that they can recall. When workers have flex time and take days off it puts them further behind so the flexible scheduling is of no help when the staff shortage is so great.

The DHHS building in Jefferson County does not provide an environment conducive to good worker morale. The long dark halls with small offices are depressing and pose a

barrier to effective casework with children and families. The furnishings in the visitation room are old and dirty hindering positive interaction between family members. It prevents the worker from taking pride in their job when the message they get and the families they work with receive is that they don't deserve anything better. If families come they want to leave as quickly as possible. There are no security officers and no metal detectors despite the fact that many of the family members coming to the DCFS office are upset and some even angry at the caseworkers who removed their children. With the problem of violence in our nation and our city today this should be an issue that is addressed. There has already been a workplace shooting in Jefferson County Tyson's plant this year. It is only a matter of time with parents who have anger problems and drug addictions may attempt an act of violence in the DCFS office. A Prevention plan needs to address the need for security at this office.

- Another objective in the State Plan was to increase the capacity of DCFS to respond to families after normal work hours. One county remained open until 10:00 p.m. each Tuesday and Thursday for scheduled activities.

This is an area that causes much stress for all the DCFS workers. The CRP is recommending the hiring of additional staff to cover after hour reports or problems. This would do more to retain workers than anything else with the possible exception of an emergency shelter in Jefferson County.

Areas of improvement seen at the local DCFS office include the following:

Information on foster children's Medical Passports has improved

Improved communication with the local DCFS office and foster parents

Initial clothing allowance procedure is better.

The DHS office has a new telephone system

Mentoring between a UAPB staff person and new workers is very helpful.

Medical services provided to foster children has been very good.

Jefferson County has now filled all of its vacant positions and new workers will be in training for the next six weeks. We are hopeful that this will reduce the stress to new workers and our retention rate will improve. It is very important that the State DHHS office adhere to the recommendations of the State Plan and the recent UAPB study on retention and staff development if services to families are to improve in our area.

The state used grant funds to purchase professionals services for families, which have greatly benefited them, but none of these or other programs and services made available to and for the families can be successful without a stable frontline work force. A successful and effective State DHHS' DCFS program hinges on staff retention. Constant turnover prevents services to be delivered effectively and professionally to families and to the court.

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