

AUDIT PROPOSAL

Foster Care Services for the Health and Safety of Children

SOURCE

This audit proposal was requested by Representative Jarrod Ousley and Representative Susan Concannon.

BACKGROUND

Kansas' foster care program is administered by the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and has been privatized since 1997. The department contracts with service providers to provide foster care services across the state. The foster care program is charged with protecting children who may be physically or mentally abused or neglected. The department may provide preventive services to a family when child abuse is suspected with the goal of keeping the child in the home. If unsuccessful, the department may ask the county or district attorney to petition the court to place the child in its custody. After a court order puts a child in the custody of the department, the child may be placed back with the family with the written permission of the court, with relatives or friends of the family, with a foster family, in a group home, or in an appropriate state-operated facility.

Several entities are primarily responsible for ensuring the safety and interests of the children, families, and foster parents in the Kansas foster care system.

- DCF has a primary role in recommending whether a child should be removed from their home, who should have custody, and whether parental rights should be terminated. DCF contracts out case management and child placing services.
- Case management contractors are responsible for developing a case plan for the child and providing the necessary services to help the child achieve permanency and ensure the child's well-being. Contracted case management staff monitor a child while in foster care through a minimum of monthly individual visits with the child, and monitor the progress being made to achieve case plan goals.
- Child placing agencies sponsor foster families and help regulate licensed foster homes. Staff from the child placing agencies are required to visit each foster home monthly to provide support to the family and coordinate services.
- District court judges: Determine whether a child should be declared a CINC, who should have custody of the child, whether adequate progress is being made toward reintegration, whether adoption should be pursued, whether parental rights should be terminated, and whether the child should be returned home.

Legislators have expressed concerns about missing children, and whether foster care contractors and child placing agencies are providing appropriate services to help protect the health and safety of children in foster care.

AUDIT OBJECTIVES AND TENTATIVE METHODOLOGY

The audit objectives listed below are the questions we would answer through our audit work. The steps listed for each objective convey the type of work we would do. These may change as we learn more about the audit issues.

Objective 1: Are foster care stakeholders following adequate policies and procedures to ensure the safety of children in foster care? Our tentative methodology would include the following:

- Contact professional associations such as the National Association of Social Workers, and review literature to determine which types of factors and best practices should be considered and implemented as part of the removal and placement process to ensure foster children's safety.
- Interview DCF officials to determine what requirements they place on case management contractors and child placing agencies to ensure children's safety, and what they do to monitor performance in this area.
- Interview case management contractors and child placing agency officials and review documents as necessary to determine their standard procedures to ensure child safety and appropriate services.
- Based on sample of cases, review contractor files, complaints and interview staff to determine whether foster care contractors and child-placing agencies followed appropriate policies and procedures.
- For recent cases of missing or runaway foster children, analyze case files and other information to determine if there are any patterns or trends across specific courts or judges, case managers, child placing agencies or the characteristics/demographics of the child or family.
- Follow up with DCF, the courts (Office of Judicial Administration) and contractor officials for any issues identified.

Objective 2: Do foster care case management contractors have sufficient capacity to provide necessary foster care services? Our tentative methodology would include the following:

- Collect information from each case management contractor to determine and compare their average staff caseloads and the specialized services they provide for children in their care (e.g. mental health services) to best practices, other contractors, and over time.
- Work with DCF and contractor officials to identify trends in the number of children in foster care who received specialized services in recent years, as well as number of children, and location and availability of foster homes.
- Review how DCF monitors case managers and system capacity, as well as what they do to follow up on complaints related to case management contractor performance and capacity.

- Survey case workers and foster parents as to whether they think there is enough capacity in terms of caseloads, availability of therapists and other providers, amount of drive time, number and location of homes available, etc.
- For any problems we identified, we would interview contractor and department officials as necessary to better understand those issues and to determine what has been done to resolve them.

ESTIMATED RESOURCES

We estimate this audit would require a team of **3 auditors** for a total of **5 months** (from the time the audit starts to our best estimate of when it would be ready for the committee).