

Date: July 2019

To: Minnesota Citizen Review Panel members

From: Jamie Sorenson
Director
Child Safety and Permanency Division

Re: Minnesota Department of Human Services' response to the
Minnesota Citizen Review Panels' 2018 Annual Report

The following is a response from the Minnesota Department of Human Services (department) to the Minnesota Citizen Review Panels' 2018 Annual Reports regarding each panel's activities and recommendations.

Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel

The Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel's (CRP) mission statement is to "Provide opportunities for citizens to play an integral role in ensuring the child protection system is protecting children from abuse and neglect, and ensuring a nurturing home environment."

In 2017, the panel designed and delivered results of a survey to foster care providers in Ramsey County. In 2018 they analyzed the results which indicated foster care providers would like to add training topic options for more experienced foster families, and ongoing support from Ramsey County Social Services (county). The panel requested presentations from organizations providing training to foster families, such as the county, department and vendor MN Adopt. Based on the analysis of these training options they recommended the addition of training and support opportunities for caregiver families, both relative and traditional foster care providers. A more detailed summary of findings was presented to the panel by Tonya Long in June 2018. A copy of the findings is attached to this document.

Another key finding was that most of the foster parents surveyed were not consulted, included or informed about development of the out-of-home placement plan (OHPP) for children in their care. They also were not asked to sign the plan; many did not know what the OHPP was.

The panel sent these recommendations to Womazetta Jones, Ramsey County director of social services. They included increased support groups for foster parents and the addition of training topics for foster families, and levels of training, i.e., beginning and advanced training options.

The panel also focused on using the foster parent survey information collected to plan and create a “Foster Parent Resource and Tip Guidebook” in 2019. Other sources for family caregiver preparation, such as county and department foster parent information and resources, were reviewed and discussed. Additional data regarding foster parent training was requested from the county by the panel.

In 2018, panel members also:

1. Attended and participated in Ramsey County Child Mortality Review meetings.
2. Participated in developing the Ramsey County strategic plan with other community advisory committees.
3. Participated in many trainings and conferences in the metro area. Two members attended the National Citizen Review Panel conference in Michigan.
4. Decided to focus on sex trafficked and sexually exploited youth in 2018-2019. The first presentation on this topic was presented at the December 2018 meeting.

Recommendations to Ramsey County staff and Board members were made based on findings from the foster parent survey, including:

1. Increased training for county staff on the department’s out-of-home placement plan, emphasizing requirements that children in foster care and their foster parents be involved in developing and approving the OHPP.
2. The county develop new support group topics for foster parent training based on recommendations from current foster parents, and provide ongoing foster parent support groups and activities to all interested foster families.

The department’s response to recommendations

1. The department provides Foundation training for all child protection caseworkers within six months of hire. This training includes both online modules and nine days of in-person training, offered statewide. All required assessments, forms and processes are covered in this training, including the out-of-home placement plan. The OHPP has spaces for signatures of foster parents, youth in care, and biological parents (if involved). Panel members noted that information regarding the plan is often not provided to foster parents, which indicates that they have not been involved in developing plans, and may or may not agree with a plan. Department staff agrees that inclusion of all parties is critical to developing and implementing the best plan possible.

Several activities included in the Foundation new worker training are focused on participant’s increased understanding of the importance of collaborative planning. Trainings will continue to emphasize this in future Foundation, case planning, and permanency trainings. Inclusion of all parties in developing independent living plans (ILP) is also highlighted in adolescent training provided by the department because youth in care need to be included in the planning process for their future. Trainers will emphasize the importance of including youth in planning for all new workers.

In response to the Panel's recommendations, the department offers training for family caregivers through TrainLink and MnAdopt. Both venues offer requested and/or required training topics, available online or in person, based on requested and scheduled trainings. If specific topics are desired, department staff encourages agencies to provide information to the Training Unit so it can determine if training can be scheduled or developed based on need.

Information regarding training is at:

(<https://www.bing.com/search?q=mn+child+welfare+training+system&src=IE-SearchBox&FORM=IESR4A> link). In addition to local support, including support groups for caregivers, MnAdopt offers support, most via Facebook but some on site in the county or region requesting assistance. This organization supports adoptive, foster and kinship families.

Department staff extend thanks to Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel members and county staff for their work in 2018. Members were committed to their work regarding improving family caregiver training and support, which leads to caregivers providing emotional and practical support to children in their care. They carefully considered recommendations based on information gathered in the family caregiver survey. Members also wanted to collect quality of service data from youth in foster care about their experience in care. Instead, the county invited the panel to have input into the process of data collection for a Ramsey County Social Services project funded by the Annie E. Casey organization in 2018.

The Ramsey County CRP annual report is in this file.

Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel

The Hennepin County panel's mission continues to be "As citizen volunteers we collaborate to understand, communicate and recommend improvements to the child protection systems and engage our communities to ensure the safety and well-being of all our children and families." In 2018, the panel worked to achieve this mission by conducting three projects, attending training and conferences to learn more about the child welfare system, and recruiting new Panel members.

The panel also re-emphasized two of the five overarching themes from the 2017 report, including:

1. Too often, Hennepin County caseworkers lack awareness of the roles and functions of external agencies that they either work with, or should be working with, to help serve child protection clients. ...**We would encourage Hennepin County to emphasize the importance of working with community partners during the induction process and also invite staff from outside agencies to present to Hennepin County staff on an ongoing basis.**
2. The Citizen Review Panel continues to struggle with recruiting new members; it has been especially difficult to recruit people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Last year was particularly challenging as required background checks deterred some prospective applicants, and other applicants dropped out due to the length of time it

took to process background checks. Hennepin County agreed to eliminate some of the background check forms and the application process seemed to go more smoothly. However, even with that, there has been difficulty attracting new members. **The Panel will continue to look for help from Hennepin County Children and Family Services, and also will be connecting with nonprofit agencies to try to increase panel membership.** Recruitment efforts are especially critical now as five panel members will be leaving at the end of 2019 due to term limits.

The projects for 2018 included:

- “How effectively is kinship care being used in Hennepin County?” (year two of a two-year project)
- Complex cases in Hennepin County (year one of a two-year project)
- Workforce retention and secondary trauma (year two of a three-year project).

How effectively is Hennepin County using kinship care?

The specific focus of the project was:

“Exploring how, and how effectively, Hennepin County is using kinship care to achieve the goals of safety, permanency, placement stability, reduced disproportionality and racial disparities, and well-being for children in out-of-home placement.”

The project team also included insights and ideas from research and best practices from other states to help Hennepin County and Minnesota continue to improve.

Recommendations for Hennepin County include:

1. **Improve support and engagement of kinship families by county workers, including clear, consistent communication.** There are several types of support that the county should provide to assist caregivers, including:
 - **Provide general information to kinship caregivers** about the process, people involved, child’s needs, and available services.
Rationale: Overall, most caregivers interviewed felt that they had been given good information by at least some county workers with whom they were involved. The kinship workers and licensing workers were most often reported to be helpful. Those that had child service workers assigned to children in their home found these workers to be helpful. Almost all caregivers interviewed expressed some confusion about who the various workers were who came to their home and what their roles were. They commented that communication between various workers was poor and that they were often given different messages by different workers.
 - **Provide frequent and ongoing communication.** This includes the various facets of communication – speaking, writing and listening.
Rationale: Communication among workers and with kin caregivers were often cited as problems by caregivers interviewed. Kin providers frequently talked about the difficulty in getting calls returned by child protection workers.

- **Provide workers who are knowledgeable about each other’s work**, responsibilities, family needs, and other related areas – not to duplicate, but to be knowledgeable to provide the best possible support and services.
Rationale: Caregivers who had stable workers reported this as a plus. Unfortunately, this was not true for many of those interviewed.
- **Provide respite care support** for needed rest and time to recharge.
Rationale: Some of those interviewed commented on the need for more respite care, and also a problem with getting children into daycare. This was especially a problem before the kin provider became licensed.
- **Provide workers who are culturally competent**, including a need for knowledge and understanding of the Native American culture, laws and practices.
Rationale: There were comments on the need for more cultural competency of workers involved with their family. They did not feel they were treated respectfully and that inappropriate questions were asked of them.
- **Provide timely financial assistance.**
Rationale: The overall process of getting licensed and receiving payments was felt to be too slow – often taking several months. People had trouble getting their accounts set up, and payments were not reliable.
- **Provide training for kinship caregivers** that is on-going and meets the needs of families.
Rationale: Getting necessary training done in a timely fashion was also difficult for many caregivers. Several commented that there needed to be more online classes for those who work or live out of the metro area. Also, many of the classes did not seem to be very helpful, and there should be a greater selection of classes.
- **Provide the best placements for children.**
Rationale: Kinship workers reported a lack of county support for kin foster parents because the focus was on getting children placed, not supporting placements. In other words, the placement was the priority, not matching a child’s needs.

2. **Recommendation: Improve county infrastructure to support effective kinship practice**

By having a specific kinship unit with committed, passionate staff, Hennepin County has a strong foundation for doing good kinship care practice. This work could be further improved by strengthening Hennepin County’s infrastructure that supports workers and that affects the experience of potential and current kinship families. Specifically, it is recommended improving the following elements of the infrastructure:

- **Financial paperwork and processes** —Multiple caregivers stated that they experience a lot of challenges getting payments processed in a timely manner; these delays created hardships for kinship families (e.g., slow payments, paperwork repeatedly getting lost by county staff, having to re-submit and hand-deliver forms because staff didn’t receive them by mail, etc.) Kinship caregivers already face challenges as the county asks them to come forward to care for children—who may have complex needs—and to navigate complicated child welfare system

requirements. It is critical to ensure that the county's own payment and reimbursement processes do not create additional burdens for these families. It is recommended improving the timeliness and processes for getting payments processed, including minimizing paperwork requirements when possible (e.g., options for submitting paperwork online/electronically).

- **Kinship search and engagement approaches** —interviews with kinship workers indicated that staff have many creative approaches and individual strengths for finding, engaging, and communicating with possible kinship caregivers (e.g., using various databases and other tools to search for kin, having strategies for staying in touch with identified resources, etc.) However, there does not seem to be much of a shared, formalized knowledge base that is shared across the entire team, leaving individual workers having to rely largely on their own expertise. It is thought that the important work of the kinship unit could be made even more effective, efficient, and consistent if Hennepin County captures recommended strategies and practices in a formal way—such as in a written guide and suggested protocols — and facilitates more knowledge sharing across staff.

3. **Recommendation: Strengthen teaming approaches within the county, both informally and formally**

Recommended strategies:

- The county needs to work on developing relationships among staff from different areas. This could be done by having regular meetings among staff from kinship, licensing, child protection and child services with participation strongly encouraged by supervisors. Workers could share with others how they approach their job and also ask questions of other workers. Besides having more formal meetings, units could be encouraged to invite others to informal get-togethers — perhaps over lunch. In interviews, Panel members heard of one unit that tried to do this by inviting other staff to a popcorn party. Unfortunately, no one except workers from that unit attended. This would seem to exemplify a lack of importance that staff place on getting to know others. Management will need to stress that developing better working relationships and knowledge of the functions of other workers is a priority for the department. Improving communication and cooperation among workers will help Hennepin County provide better services to clients.
- A licensing and kinship worker should be assigned to each child protection unit. These workers could then meet at regular intervals with the units to develop a relationship and a better understanding of each other's roles. Panel members heard from child protection supervisors that a public health nurse be assigned to each child protection unit, meeting regularly with the unit. This collaboration is valued and should be a model for collaborating with kinship and licensing workers. Some child protection units also have “embedded” child service workers in the unit. This strategy also appears to enhance communication between at least the child service and child protection workers.
- Panel members heard the excuse that workloads were so heavy that it was difficult to find time to return calls or attempt to get information from other workers involved in a case. Now that workloads are decreasing, especially for child protection workers, it will be crucial to encourage and even insist on regular communication

among workers. Supervisors will need to take the lead in looking at how and when a worker communicates with other workers involved in a case, and to work with their staff to improve communication and cooperation. It will also be important for supervisors to stress the importance of communication and working with others when decisions need to be made.

4. Recommendation: Strengthen the approach for matching children with potential kinship caregivers

Recommended strategies:

- Hennepin County should use assessment tools that are readily available (e.g., Strengths and Difficulties, the Child and Adolescent Service Intensity Instrument (CASII), Early Childhood Service Intensity Instrument (ECSII), etc.) to assess the strengths and needs of children who need to be placed in out-of-home care. This should be done prior to placement as much as possible.
- Whether it is child protection or child services workers who do a child's assessment, the results, combined with the social worker's clinical assessment, needs to be shared with kinship workers. These workers can then look for a kin placement that can best meet a child's needs. Kinship workers would also be able to provide potential kin caregivers with information about a child and how taking a child into care might impact caregivers and their family. Ideally, licensing workers should also be included in the discussion of where to place a child as they have the best knowledge of who may or may not be licensable.
- In cases where an assessment of a child cannot be done prior to placement, assessments should be done as soon as possible and findings shared with kin caregivers and also with all workers involved with a kin caregivers — both Hennepin County workers and workers from other agencies. By doing so, Hennepin County will be in a better position to support foster caregivers, if problems arise.
- If it has not happened, a family group conference should be scheduled. By doing so, additional supports may be found for kin caregivers and child(ren). Given the reluctance of kin caregivers to seek help, this may be one way for them to realize and accept needed help.

5. Recommendation: Develop an approach for assessing how well children are doing in their kinship placements

Having a structured approach for assessing how well kinship placements are meeting children's needs and contributing to positive outcomes will help Hennepin County ensure that it is using kinship care as a strategy to achieve placement stability, permanency, safety and well-being, rather than assuming that placing more children with kin will inherently lead to better outcomes. It is recognized the complexity of determining child well-being and members acknowledge that this recommendation does not involve simply tracking or analyzing a few data elements, but it is believed that is critical for a child welfare system to assess the effectiveness of its practice, not just the percentage of cases in which a practice is used.

Recommendations for the Minnesota Department of Human Services

Although this project focused primarily on kinship care efforts in Hennepin County, Panel members also identified areas of need at the state level related to kinship care. The recommendations below would help the department play a leadership role for the entire state— benefitting children and families in Hennepin County as well as elsewhere in the state— to promote and support effective and equitable kinship care practice.

1. Recommendation from Hennepin County CRP: Conduct an analysis of the waiver (variance) requests for foster parent licensing for relatives across the state and patterns of specific requirements being requested to be waived (granted a variance).

It is recommended that the department conduct an analysis of requests for licensing waiver requests that it receives from each county for licensing kin as foster parents to explore factors, including:

- Which licensing requirements are most commonly requested to be waived, including whether waiver requests and decisions differ across counties
- Results of waiver requests (i.e., whether approved or denied)
- Race of applicants and whether there are differential impacts of waiver decisions for applicants of any race.

Minnesota Department of Human Services' response

Note: After a conversation with current CRP project members, information regarding variances for background studies were identified as the main focus of the request. Foster care licensing rule requirement variances are kept in the file of the child and stored in the county or private licensing agency making a request. Background check information is stored at the state agency, thus is easier to access. The information is in state records so inquiries will be limited to department background check data. The revised questions are below.

The revised questions for the data request include:

- Overall number of requests for a variance on a background check in the specified time period
- Type of crime or determination that resulted in a disqualification
- Length of time passed since the crime/determination was adjudicated
- If a variance was granted
- Race/ethnicity of persons requesting and receiving a variance.

Data

During the 2018 calendar year, the department made 95 reconsideration decisions involving an individual's disqualification for a family child foster care program. It granted a set-aside or

variance for 85 of those individuals. The additional information requested is not uniformly available.

Family child foster care background and reconsideration process

Background studies

Background studies are used as a screening mechanism to protect the health and safety of children. It ensures that those providing licensed child foster care do not have a history that may adversely affect children in care. Background studies determines whether a person committed an act that would disqualify them from providing child foster care.

Who must be studied?

In Minnesota, all licensed family child foster care providers must undergo background studies, including every individual age 13 and older living in the household with a licensed provider. In addition, a background study is required for individuals who may have unsupervised access to foster children when information indicates that they have a history that would disqualify them.

Background study process

For family child foster care, county or private child placing agencies are responsible for submitting background study requests online using NET Study 2.0. If a subject is applying for a child foster care license, background studies for them and all household members must be completed before an application for licensure can be approved. Some child placing agencies will have subjects enter their information into NET Study 2.0, but agencies are ultimately responsible for verifying that information is correct, and submitting requests to the department. These placing agencies are also required to update information in NET Study 2.0 as changes occur to ensure that the department has the most current contact information, and to ensure rosters accurately reflect every person affiliated with a license or license application is subject to a background study. If a study was submitted but a person is no longer affiliated with a license/application, county agencies should update the roster to reflect that change, both for the sake of accuracy and to avoid unnecessary delays in the broader licensing process.

All child foster care background studies include a check of:

- Criminal history information maintained by the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA)
- Records of substantiated maltreatment of vulnerable adults and minors from investigations completed by counties' adult protection and child protection staff, the department, and Minnesota Department of Health
- Minnesota's Predatory Offender Registry
- When department staff has reasonable cause to believe there is additional information, a study may be expanded to include records from police departments, courts and other agencies in Minnesota and other states
- Criminal records maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) for subjects 18 years and older

- A check against child abuse and neglect registries of any state in which a subject has resided within the past five years.

Disqualifications

An individual is disqualified if s/he is found to have committed any act or offense listed in Minnesota Statutes, section 245C.15. Individuals may be disqualified based on information showing:

- A conviction of, admission to or Alford plea to any crimes listed in section 245C.15
- There is a preponderance of evidence indicating that a subject committed an act that meets the definition of any crimes listed in 245C.15
- A subject was found responsible for substantiated maltreatment of a minor or vulnerable adult that is determined to be serious and/or recurring, or failure to report such maltreatment
- A subject's parental rights were involuntarily terminated by a court, or
- A subject received certain administrative disqualifications that carry over to background study disqualifications.

If a background study subject is disqualified, s/he will be notified of the disqualification and any applicable appeal rights in writing. The county or private child-placing agency that initiated a background study will be notified of disqualifications, and provided a summary of information received as a result of a background study.

The period of disqualification depends on an act or offense for which an individual is disqualified. The period of disqualification begins once a person's sentence, if any, has been discharged. The disqualification periods are:

- Permanent, the most serious, disqualifying offenses which result in disqualification regardless of how much time has passed [section 245C.15, subd. 1]
- Fifteen years, felonies in section 245C.15 not specified as permanent disqualifications [section 245C.15, subd. 2], and involuntary terminations of parental rights
- Ten years, gross misdemeanor-level violations of offenses in section 245C.15
- Seven years, misdemeanor-level violations of offenses in section 245C.15, substantiated maltreatment of minors or adults determined to be serious and/or recurring; failure to make required reports for incidents in which maltreatment was serious or recurring, and certain administrative disqualifications based on misuse of government funds.

Regardless of the period of disqualification, all can be appealed to challenge whether a disqualification is correct.

If a background study is related to an application for child foster care, a license cannot be granted until all background studies affiliated with an application are completed. For a license

to be granted, all related disqualifications must either be set aside, or an applicant or household member must be granted a variance to a disqualification.

Requesting reconsideration of a disqualification

Individuals who are disqualified have an opportunity to appeal it by requesting reconsideration. Subjects can request reconsideration on the basis that information used to disqualify was incorrect, and may request that a disqualification be set aside on the basis that an individual does not pose a risk of harm to those receiving services. Along with the notice of disqualification, the department provides a form and instructions for how subjects can request reconsideration.

Reconsideration process

For background studies related to family child foster care, requests for reconsideration are sent to the county or private child-placing agency for its review and recommendation whether to set aside or grant a variance to a disqualification. An agency will forward its recommendation to the department, which will review requests and recommendations, making a final decision. The subject, agency, and the license holder (if applicable), is notified in writing of the decision.

Reconsideration decision

When reviewing requests for reconsideration, department staff review everything submitted by the subject, including letters of support, police reports, transcripts, treatment records, etc., to make a risk of harm decision. This is evaluated by analyzing factors established in §245C.22. In addition, per §245A.035, the department is required to consider the importance of maintaining a child's relationship with relatives as an additional significant factor in determining whether a disqualification should be set aside or a variance granted.

Set-aside: If a request for reconsideration provides sufficient information to demonstrate that an individual does not pose a risk of harm to any person served by the program, the department's commissioner may set-aside a disqualification. While a subject remains disqualified, s/he may have direct contact with or access to persons receiving services for that license, and may also hold a license, if applicable. The scope of the set-aside of a disqualification is limited solely to the license specified in the set-aside notice.

Not set aside: If a request for reconsideration does not provide sufficient information to demonstrate that a subject does not pose a risk of harm to any persons served by the program, a disqualification will not be set aside. If a license holder or applicant's disqualification is not set aside and a variance is not granted, a license will be revoked or denied.

If a background study in connection with an application for child foster care is not set aside – a background study for a household member – a license will not be granted when there is a disqualification that is not set aside unless a variance is granted to a license holder/applicant.

Variance: When the commissioner has not set aside a subject's disqualification, and there are conditions under which a disqualified individual may provide direct contact services or have

access to those receiving services that minimize risk of harm, the commissioner may grant a time-limited variance to a license holder. For applicants, a variance goes into effect when a license is issued. When variances are granted, applicants or license holders are notified in writing of the conditions of a variance.

For child foster care where a license holder resides in a licensed home, some offenses cannot be set aside, including:

- Permanent bar to set aside: Disqualifying offenses under section 245C.15, subd. 1, cannot be set aside, nor can a variance be granted to a license holder, regardless of how much time has passed. [section245C.24]
- Ten-year bar to set aside: Disqualifying offenses under section 245C.24, sub. 3, cannot be set aside for 10 years from discharge of a sentence imposed, if any. This 10-year bar covers a variety of offenses and offense levels.
- Seven-year bar to set aside: Disqualifying acts under section 245C.24, sub. 4, cannot be set aside for seven years. These seven-year bars are based on certain maltreatment determinations.

This information is from the department's Licensing Division.

Department's response

The system responsible for licensing foster kin and non-kin caregivers in Minnesota is complex. Options for requesting a variance or appealing a disqualification exist in multiple settings. All potential caregivers have a background study completed. This consists of two main areas, a check of records to see if a proposed caregiver(s) have any criminal convictions, and a check of county and tribal records. If there was a conviction for specific crimes, applicants may not be considered for family caregiving approval. A review of county and tribal records determines if a determination was made for child maltreatment. This can also rule applicants out as a caregiver. Both can also possibly be set aside or granted a variance by filing an appeal to the Background Studies Unit at the department. When appeals are filed, an administrative law judge reviews cases and issues a decision.

The foster care licensing process for both kin and non-kin caregivers in Minnesota includes a background study for all required individuals (caregivers and adults who live in the home or have contact with children). In addition to the background study process, the county or private licensing agency completes a home study assessment which includes several interviews with applicant(s) and family members to assess applicants' ability to meet foster care standards, and provide a healthy environment for a child. The rules governing foster care include capacity limits; physical environment and home safety; caregiver qualifications and training; placement, continued stay, and discharge of foster children; respite and substitute care; and records for foster children. Licensing agencies are also required to obtain three letters of reference, and may request physical, mental, or chemical health evaluations from specialists, if needed to assess an applicant's ability to provide a safe environment for foster children.

In the case of a proposed kin placement, children may be placed with kin on an emergency basis while the licensing process is completed. The process often begins after a child/ren are placed with kin after a preliminary criminal record check and inspection of the home using the department's Home Safety Checklist. Unlike non-kin foster caregivers who are fully licensed before a child is placed in their home, kin caregivers are often not prepared ahead of time because the need for caregiving may occur suddenly.

County and private licensing agencies have authority to grant variances to foster care rule requirements that do not affect the health or safety of foster children. This department [guidance document](#) describes how variances are granted. The entire licensing process can take several weeks to months to complete. If a variance for the home study is requested and granted, or not granted, the information is kept in the child's file by the placing agency (county or private licensing agencies). This information is not aggregated.

2. Recommendation from Hennepin County CRP: Develop an approach for assessing how well children are doing in their kinship placements, and how well the whole kinship family is doing.

As described above in recommendations for Hennepin County, Panel members believe it is critical to have a structured approach for determining how well kinship care placements are working, both for the child and kinship family. While making a recommendation to Hennepin County to develop an approach to assess how well kinship care placements are contributing to positive outcomes for children, it is also believed the department should take a strong leadership role in assessing the effectiveness of kinship care practice. Panel members support the department's ongoing efforts to promote use of kinship care and strongly recommend that it provide leadership on the importance of both using kinship care placements and ensuring that it is being used effectively with positive outcomes for children.

One of the steps that Panel members believe is particularly important for Hennepin County and the department is to consider: "*Step 2: Develop written policies and protocols that reflect equity for children living with kin and recognize their unique circumstances,*" with the following key points:

The child welfare system must have a unique perspective when working with kin families and adopt policies that reflect an understanding of different ways kin and non-kin become involved in the process. Kin-first systems take time to review their policies and practices to ensure they clearly outline how relative caregivers will be notified and engaged when children first enter care, the issues caseworkers should be attuned to in assessing kin families, and how all stakeholders, including the legal community, can advocate for the full range of support kin families' requirements to meet children's needs.

While the experiences of kin families may differ from those of non-kin, the supports they need to care for children who have experienced trauma are the same. This means kin families should receive the same financial supports and services to support children as all other foster families. Kin families may need extra support since many step in without warning, and may have immediate needs, such as filling out required paperwork, navigating the licensing process, obtaining car seats and cribs, etc.

Panel members believe that the point about ensuring that kin families receive both the same supports and services as other foster families *and* acknowledging that kin families may need extra support is a valuable point for Hennepin County and the department to address in order to ensure that kinship families are provided necessary support to ensure that placements contribute to positive outcomes for children.

Department's response

The department shares the above belief regarding the importance of working with relative care providers in a way that honors their special circumstances. The department published bulletin 19-68-09, Relative Search, Notice and Consideration in Placement, on April 18, 2019, to update state policy guidance regarding relative placements. This document provides information regarding relative search, notice and consideration consistent with Title IV-E requirements.

Bulletins addressing ongoing support of resource families were also posted in 2019 – bulletin issued April 30, 2019, Resource family and caseworker visits discussion tool, focuses on supporting communication between resource families and caseworkers. Department staff believe it is essential to ensure children's and youths' needs are met, families are receiving support and services, and placement stability is enhanced. Bulletin 19-68-2019, New Notice of Hearing – Foster Parent Form, seeks to give foster parents an opportunity to participate in and provide information to the court regarding children in their care. It has been distributed to court administrators statewide.

For additional insights on the project's approach and methodology, content and background, etc., see the full report posted in this file.

Project 2

Complex cases subcommittee report

As a result of discussions with Hennepin County child protection leadership, a subcommittee agreed to engage in review of complex cases in the system. **It is planned to identify commonalities in these cases that have led to costly resource-intensive outcomes.** This will be a two-year project with recommendations offered in the 2019 final report.

In an effort to better define “complex cases,” Panel members met with both Hennepin County staff and key informants in the community. It has been difficult to identify a clear definition of a complex case.

For the Panel’s purposes, members identified complex cases as those in child protection involving families that receive an array of child protection services over time due to significant maltreatment of children. These cases tend to be families with complex configurations and unstable environments, often having multiple needs, requiring significant resources in both money and time, and found to be hard to engage or changes in foster care.

This project involves reviewing complex cases in child protection so that members might identify missed opportunities for early intervention and potentially effective interventions as a case progresses.

Methodology

A record review commenced in December. Fifteen complex cases chosen by Hennepin County child protection supervisors were provided for review. Members reviewed the 15 cases with the following criteria in mind:

- Evidence of intractable maltreatment of children who are difficult to control or manage
- History of maltreatment of parents when they were children
- Home and physical environment
- History of alcohol abuse, drug addiction and/or mental illness of parents
- Length of time in system
- Complexity of family constellation; e.g., children born from multiple partners
- Degree of family isolation
- Unrelated adults in the household
- Children who themselves are difficult to engage
- Children who are difficult to raise due to physical, medical, or mental health challenges
- Poverty and/or housing instability
- Other criteria that may become apparent as the review progresses.

From these 15 cases, members will select four to five families that, based on criteria, will provide prototypes for a range of the most significant issues. These cases will constitute references within the project, and will remain anonymous with no identifying characteristics in the final report.

With this smaller subset, members will be asking questions such as:

1. What are the identified obstacles to successful engagement and incentive to change?

2. Is the intention of case management to build parent-child interactions so they can successfully deal with adversity?
3. Where were the opportunities that county staff could have stepped in to provide support and parenting help?
4. Is the case plan designed to help parents learn and improve?
5. What is the length of time away from parents?
6. How many workers have been assigned to the case? Turnover rate?
7. Was there effective support to parents in managing the system?
8. Whether placement is foster, institution or kinship care, is there evidence of ongoing child protection involvement and support?
9. Are there permanent obstacles to success?
10. Are there interventions that have been successful in other cases that might be incorporated into practice?

Members expect to complete this project in 2019 and provide recommendations to the county and state agency.

For insights on the project's approach and methodology, content and background, etc., see the full report posted in this file.

Project 3

Project report: Workforce retention and secondary trauma

The purpose of the study is to examine **how the Induction process impacts the retention and satisfaction of new employees, including how the county addresses the risk of secondary trauma**. This report represents the second year of a three-year project. Induction is the training program for newly hired child protection workers who are ultimately assigned to units for investigation, field work, or Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). The overarching objective of this project is **to explore how the Induction process supports staff retention, which in turn provides better services to families and children involved in the child protection system**. This report offers recommendations for development and maintenance of an effective system of orientation, in order to enhance professional performance and retention of staff.

Looking toward a new model for staff training

Beginning in February 2019, Hennepin County will be launching a new approach to training new employees, replacing the current Induction model with a Training Academy. While a statewide academy system with regional hubs has been envisioned by the legislature, it was an unfunded mandate for a number of years and has not been implemented. Consequently, Hennepin County has chosen to restructure the induction process, accessing county funds for that purpose.

The Hennepin County plan includes an initial week of shadowing with an experienced worker, following an active case. New hires will also follow the entire continuum of child protection services, from screening/intake, transitioning into investigations, interviewing and in the field.

All new inductees, upon completion of academy training, will begin their unit assignment in the field, prior to some ultimately being assigned to Investigation.

The county's newly initiated activity of "all staff meetings" is a step toward improving cohesion. It provides opportunities for staff to be together, meet in small group breakout sessions, introduced to administrators, hear agency updates, and celebrate the good work of child protection workers.

This newly implemented activity of all-staff meetings also includes self-care as a topic of those sessions. This may address the perceived lack of preparation, training, and support around secondary trauma and burnout.

In year three, this Citizen Review Panel project will evaluate effectiveness of the new Training Academy model, in comparison to the current induction process.

Findings

The existing induction process is inadequate to prepare new employees for the critical work they are embarking on. Significant support needs to be provided to develop an academy that meets the needs of new staff, taking into consideration issues listed in this report. The Panel has been informed of the major components of the new academy and agrees with the changes. These changes should include:

1. Improved staffing with trainers and supervisors who are organized, approachable and non-judgmental.
2. Changing the culture to be supportive of asking questions and expressing concerns.
3. A dedicated location and consistent scheduling of training sessions. This will hopefully enhance participants' feelings of being professionally treated and respected.
4. Training that effectively demonstrates how to take a case from the first call through assessment and placement to termination.
5. Creation of a system of support in which all staff can air concerns without fear of retribution.
6. Assignment of a mentor for each new employee for the first year.

Summary

Leadership sets the tone and expectations for what occurs in any institution. **Panel members' experience with present leadership is that they are creating a substantially different tone within the agency.**

The Citizen Review Panel has experienced this change in interactions with leadership. Members are experiencing greatly improved transparency and acknowledgement of the agency's strengths and shortcomings. This is a marked difference from interactions with previous leadership.

Findings of this study on induction show little change from the 2017 study. The respondents of both studies expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the quality and usefulness of

training. In interviewing agency leaders, members were informed that the academy, beginning in early 2019, will be substantially different, and will address many issues in this report. Next year's study will address whether this has happened.

Additional work

Members attended workshops/conferences to continue learning about relevant work pertaining to children and child protection. These included:

- Member of state Mortality Review Committee (monthly meetings)
- Member of Hennepin County Child Well-being Advisory Committee (bi-monthly meetings)
- Prenatal to 3 Policy Forum, University of St. Thomas
- New member training for the Citizen Review Panels
- One member attended the 17 national Citizen Review Panel Conference in Michigan (three-day conference)
- Member of the Practice Standards Steering Committee for Hennepin County
- Participated in a panel that interviewed applicants for child protection social work.

For additional insights and information on the project's approach and methodology, content and background, etc., see the full report posted in this file.

Department staff thank the Hennepin County panel members and staff for their work this year. Panel members produced thorough, skilled project work plans, then developed, executed and analyzed findings. Department staff members attended meetings and provided information on the tremendous change process occurring at Hennepin County, and also took advantage of the experienced and thoughtful panel members to introduce additional options for input into thinking and planning for improvement in the child protection process. Both groups demonstrated real commitment to better outcomes for children which is appreciated.

The complete report is attached.

Chisago County Citizen Review Panel

The mission statement for the Chisago Citizen Review Panel is "To provide an opportunity for citizens to play a role in ensuring children are protected from abuse and neglect, and to encourage and help build nurturing homes for children in our communities."

The Chisago panel is actively recruiting new members, but has accomplished significant work this year with a small panel.

The 2018 project

In spring 2018, the Chisago County Citizen Review Panel began pursuing a focus on foster care, specifically on non-relative foster care providers. The Panel gathered information regarding the

topic by consulting with Chisago County staff, soliciting feedback from foster care providers, and review of statewide and local data.

Grant funding was used to execute the foster parent listening session. Funds were spent on providing a meal during the meeting and providing gift cards to participants to offset the cost of child care.

Panel members reviewed data available through the department's Data Dashboard, as well as recent annual Maltreatment and Out-of-home and Permanency reports. County level data is still being gathered.

After all data is compiled and reviewed, findings will be presented to the Chisago County Board, which include:

- Increased numbers of children in care between 2015-2017:
 - In 2015: 101 2016: 126 2017: 140.
 - This is further represented by changes in the number of days of care provided for each year, which were:
 - 2015: 19,194.
 - 2016: 20,377.
 - 2017: 28,023.
 - The numbers of staff and foster care providers should reflect this increase. The increase requires that prevention and early intervention services should be reviewed.
- Need for additional foster care providers, especially located within certain areas of the county. Sufficient providers throughout the county benefit children by enabling them to remain living in their school district, providing general familiarity. The Rush City school district has only one non-relative foster care provider within the district.
- Need for more local training/continuing education opportunities for foster care providers. Foster care providers and county staff have both identified this as an area of focus. Accessible trainings on relevant topics allow providers to be more informed on the needs of children in their care, thus provide better care.
- Need for greater judicial understanding of foster child needs, especially regarding visitation and permanency. Foster care providers and county staff have both identified this as an area of focus. County supervisory staff members have recently had a productive meeting with judges and hope that can continue on a regular basis.

Panel members also participated in eight reconsiderations, attended numerous trainings, and read materials about foster care.

Department staff thanks the Chisago Panel for its persistence and work over 2018. Its main work projects were research and analysis of foster care options and support for family caregivers in Chisago County. It continues to assess training needs and support for family caregivers. The Panel also continued to provide public education regarding prevention of traumatic head injuries by collaborating with various organizations such as public health and community education. These dedicated and effective community members consistently donate time and energy to the community and have an impact beyond numbers on the well-being of children in the community.

Full report attached.

Washington County Citizen Review Panel

The mission statement of the Washington County Citizen Review Panel is “Citizens partnering with child protection services, advocating to keep children safe.”

Panel members actively participated in the following projects:

1. **Caseworker/staff appreciation** – In March, five Panel members attended various child protection team meetings in the Cottage Grove and Stillwater offices. They brought treats and a thank you letter signed by all Panel members.
2. **Child Abuse Prevention Month** – The Panel piloted a contest where children were asked to draw pictures of how to prevent child abuse. The Hillside Elementary Kids Club in Cottage Grove agreed to participate. Pictures were completed in February. These pictures were used for a display at the Park Grove Library in Cottage Grove in April, along with Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) brochures and a copy of the County Child Abuse Prevention proclamation for April. Pictures were also used in a display binder at the Community Services table at the Washington County Fair in August. **See several picture examples, Attachments 1 and 2, of this report.*
3. **Washington County Fair** – Three CRP members each did a shift at the county fair along with foster care recruitment staff. A long list of names was generated of people who would like more information about becoming foster care providers. A number of others took postcards with upcoming information meeting dates.
4. **CRP brochure** – To aid in recruiting additional Panel members and for use at events such as the Washington County Fair, the Citizen Review Panel brochure was updated with fresh photos, updated bios and information, including all Panel members. Copies were printed for future use. **See Attachment 3 for a copy of the brochure.*

5. **Foster Care Providers Appreciation Project** – Six Panel members participated in this project during October and November to collect free pizza certificates and/or gift cards so that all 82 county foster care providers could take their families out for a pizza night in appreciation of the important work they do providing safe homes for children. A letter was drafted (**See Attachment 4*) explaining the project to potential pizza vendors.

Panel members assisted with seven county child maltreatment reconsiderations in 2018.

Panel members also requested and actively hosted at their meetings a number of presentations on topics such as the Indian Children Welfare Act (ICWA), a high level view of child protection, the opioid epidemic, reframing child protection, local projects to support families, etc. and attended many local and national trainings and webinars.

See full report and attachments

Department staff appreciates the time and expertise provided by Panel members to leverage support and understanding in the community regarding child protection. Panel members generously considered and noted work done by county staff in provision of support and assistance to families and children in Washington County. They also developed a way to honor and support foster families and at the same time promoting them in the community. It requested donations of pizza from local merchants and gave gift cards to county staff who sent them to families during the holidays. Panel members consistently ask questions about ongoing issues in child protection and endeavor to provide practical support to county staff and families as the same time.

Winona County Citizen Review Panel

The Winona County Citizen Review Panel’s mission statement is:

“Winona County Citizen Review Panel promotes and supports the continuous improvement of a child protection system that will provide safety, permanency and well-being for all children in Winona County.”

Panel members have become active in other community meetings to broaden perspective of other community groups that have child protection issues of concern. Examples are the Children’s Justice Initiative, and the Primary Prevention Project that meets to discuss a number of issues related to child protective services, including human trafficking, domestic violence, and other family- and child-related issues. Mary Hewett and Tammi Stoos are members of the Winona County Community Services Advisory Committee. They work with the county administrator and commissioners to monitor the Winona County Human Services Department, public health, and Veterans Administration.

The Panel hosted a reception for Winona County child protection staff as a gesture of appreciation for their work on behalf of children and families. The event took place at the November Panel meeting. Members provided food, beverages and door prizes. Gift certificates

were given to all child protection workers, donated by Panel members. In addition to recognition, Panel members had opportunities to discuss efforts of ongoing plans for foster care recruitment efforts, the rising number of out-of-home placements, transition of youth out of foster care, and exploration of human trafficking issues in southeastern Minnesota by the local CRP.

The Citizen Review Panel provides an important service to the Child Protection Unit by being available to conduct redetermination reviews on substantiated child protection cases. Minnesota Statutes provide that subjects of a child abuse or neglect report, for which there was a substantiated finding, has the right to request a redetermination of that finding. A group of Panel members is assembled to review the entire investigation, including all reports, interviews and evidence. Cases are usually presented by the investigators; the Panel conducts its independent review and makes a determination regarding the initial finding.

In 2018, the Panel conducted four redetermination reviews, with all findings upheld. These reviews also provide feedback and positive support to investigators regarding consistency and accuracy of findings. Two of the reviews involved serious cases of medical child abuse and child sexual abuse, both of which resulted in felony charges against parents/caretaker/perpetrator.

These investigations consumed many hours of intensive investigation by county child protection staff, as well as coordination of investigative efforts with law enforcement agencies in multiple jurisdictions. "We would be remiss if we did not recognize the outstanding efforts of investigators involved in these two difficult cases."

Tammie Stoos attended the National Citizen Review Panel Conference in Michigan in June. Other members attended local and statewide trainings.

As a review, Citizen Review Panels involve community members in ensuring that the child protection system works well and protects children from abuse and neglect. Panel members review and evaluate various aspects of child protection systems at the state level and in their communities. Panel members are concerned about restrictions on staff overtime throughout the year, and at this time regarding the loss of one child protection staff person, and the resignation of the director on December 14. This placed enormous stress on staff and leadership at a time when the number of investigations and children in placement continue to increase. It is hoped that these positions will be filled as soon as possible.

Concern remains about the growing numbers and costs of out-of-home placements in Winona County, monitoring trends locally compared to state and national trends regarding out-of-home placement. The numbers have more than doubled in the past two years. Although the number of investigations has increased dramatically, it should be noted that of investigations completed, only 9% resulted in children placed out-of-home. This is identical to the percentage of placements per investigations completed statewide.

The Panel continue to study trends as to WHY the increasing number of out-of-home

placements. One obvious issue is that of parental drug and alcohol abuse, and cases of domestic violence. Ten years ago, the majority of children were placed out of the home due to issues of neglect. Now, nationwide statistics show that 28% of out-of-home placements are due to serious drug and alcohol use by parents, and another 26% due to domestic violence! These numbers are no different for Winona County families. The Panel must continue to address the growing problems that methamphetamine- and opiate-related drugs are creating for children and families in Winona County.

In addition to placement, there are widespread concerns about the length of time children are spending in foster care. It is known that the longer a child is in out-of-home care the less chance there is for positive reunification. This becomes especially true with children over age 14. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a pivotal stage as youth learn skills needed to be healthy productive adults. This is called TRANSITION; every child in foster care must have a transition plan that addresses this developmental learning process.

In 2018, there were 171,162 youth over age 14 in foster care nationally. In Minnesota, this number was 4,067 for children age 14 or older, about 25% of the national foster care population, and 28% of Minnesota's total foster care population. Because transition planning is a significant step for these youth, the Winona County Citizen Review Panel has taken on the task of reviewing transition plans for those ages 14-18 using the Casey Life Skills Assessment tool, and the department's independent living plan as a reference to see if requirements are being met for successful transition. Goals will be to determine if there are gaps in services or obstacles in the system that need to be addressed, and if requirements are being followed with all plans consistent and documentation complete.

Department staff is appreciative that this group of concerned and active citizens participate on the Citizen Review Panel. Members contribute time and extensive expertise to improvement of the child protection system in Winona County. This is enhanced by the additional time they contribute to other civic improvement groups and activities in the community. Because of their connections with and insight into the community, they are able to make informed decisions on community resources and linkages within Winona County. They are also able to balance community resources and needs, and do not hesitate to effectively advocate for children in the community.

Information from the full report is attached.