

A Long Road Ahead: An Update on the Arkansas Child Welfare System



A report by:
Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families
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Summary of Report

- This report examines performance data from the child welfare system at the Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) from January 2005 through March 2006 on child safety indicators and performance measures related to family preservation and reunification.
- These indicators worsened considerably in 2004. Since then, some have shown slight improvement, while others have leveled off and are no longer getting worse. Significant improvements still need to be made so that children and their families do not hang in limbo waiting for help.
- DHHS began experiencing a staffing crisis for family service workers in 2004 which led many of these indicators to decline. For much of 2005, the vacancy rate for family service workers positions hovered around 23 percent. It improved to 18 percent in December 2005, and to 16 percent in March 2006. However, the performance indicators have not rebounded to levels seen before the staffing crisis.
- Key findings of this report include:
 - The percent of victims seen by an investigator within 72 hours is still 68 percent as compared to 89 percent in 2000.
 - Only 47 percent of maltreatment assessments are concluded within 30 days after an allegation of maltreatment is made compared to 80 percent in 2000.
 - The initial staffing occurring within 30 days of a case opening happens in only 29 percent of the cases.
 - The percentage of foster children receiving no monthly visits from caseworkers is 56 percent. This indicator continues to be poor even after DHHS changed the policy to reduce the number of home visits from weekly to monthly.
- As newly hired family service workers are trained, these indicators should improve. However, it is unclear whether increased staffing levels, by itself, will be enough to dramatically improve performance. A comprehensive assessment of the system is needed to determine what other changes are necessary so that children can receive appropriate services to lead healthy and productive lives.

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*This report is available online at www.aradvocates.org
under "Issues" click on "Child Welfare"*

Introduction

In August 2005 Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) released a report on the Arkansas child welfare system entitled “More Than a Decade of Change – Yet Many Things Remain the Same.” The report examined performance data from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) from 2000 to 2004 on child safety indicators and performance measures related to family preservation and reunification. A key finding of the report was that many indicators worsened considerably in 2004 as the percentage of unfilled family service worker positions (the “vacancy rate”) climbed to a record 24 percent. DHHS began an intensive recruitment effort in 2005 to fill these positions, and as of March 2006 the vacancy rate had improved to 16 percent. This report reviews data from January 2005 through March 2006 to determine if the performance indicators have improved as new workers have been hired. The conclusion, as detailed below, is that some indicators have shown slight improvement, while others are no longer declining. Significant improvements still need to be made. A long road lies ahead.

Background

Within DHHS, the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has responsibility for the child welfare system. Although the Arkansas State Police conducts investigations in most cases of severe maltreatment, this report focuses only on DCFS. Seventy-five percent of all child maltreatment investigations are conducted by DCFS. As with our earlier report, DCFS data was examined from the monthly Compliance Outcome Reports (COR), the Quarterly Performance Reports (QPR), and the monthly Position Control Field Staff Summary Reports.

During 2002 the vacancy rate for DCFS family service worker positions averaged approximately 10 percent. In June 2003 the vacancy rate started to climb, reaching its high of 24 percent in September 2004. The increased vacancy rate, and corresponding increase in worker caseloads, led to a decline in many important performance indicators including: (1) children interviewed within the required 72 hours of the allegation; (2) investigations of allegations completed within the required 30 days of the report; (3) visits between foster children and their parents; and (4) family needs assessments completed within the required 30 days.

As DCFS is working to fill family service worker positions, the number of child maltreatment reports are rising. In state fiscal year (SFY) 2004 there were 20,536 referrals for child maltreatment assessments. In SFY 2005 the number of referrals grew to 23,433.¹ However, the number of victims from the reports that were found to be true remained constant. In both SFY 2004 and SFY 2005 there were approximately 8,000 victims of maltreatment.² As in previous years, more children are neglected than abused, and in SFY 2005 65 percent of the victims were neglected.³ In many neglect cases, the parents are going through stressful times that result from a job loss, little education, a limited income, no support system, and drug and alcohol addictions.



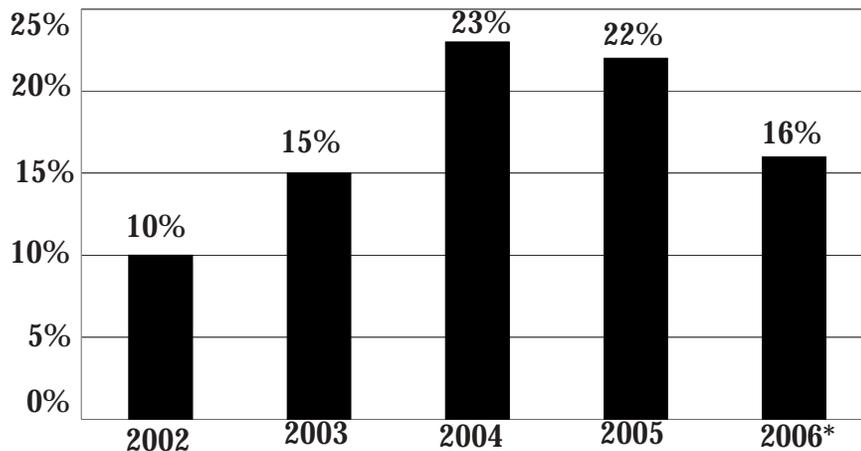
Vacancy Rates for Family Service Workers

In December 2004 the average family service worker vacancy rate for the entire state was 23 percent compared to an average of 10 percent during all of 2002. This vacancy rate includes all positions related to family service workers including trainees, specialists, and supervisors. The state is divided into 10 service areas, and in the previous report the following areas had the highest rates: Areas 1 (northwest Arkansas), 7 (south central Arkansas), and 9 (north central Arkansas). Area 1 had the highest worker vacancy rate of 41 percent in 2004.

According to DCFS in an *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* newspaper article in September 2005, the dramatic increase in the vacancy rate resulted from a state budget shortfall in 2001 which led to many cuts at DCFS including a hiring freeze. Because of a change in federal funding, DCFS's budget also lost \$7 million. The hiring freeze was lifted in July 2004 and DCFS has also received an increase in federal funding.⁴

To address the high vacancy rates in 2004, DCFS began an intensive recruitment effort of family service workers. For much of 2005, the vacancy rate continued to hover around 23 percent, and finally in December 2005 it dropped to 18 percent. In March 2006, it dropped to 16 percent. Area 1's vacancy rate dropped from 41 percent in 2004 to 19 percent as of March 2006.

Statewide Family Service Workers Vacancy Rates

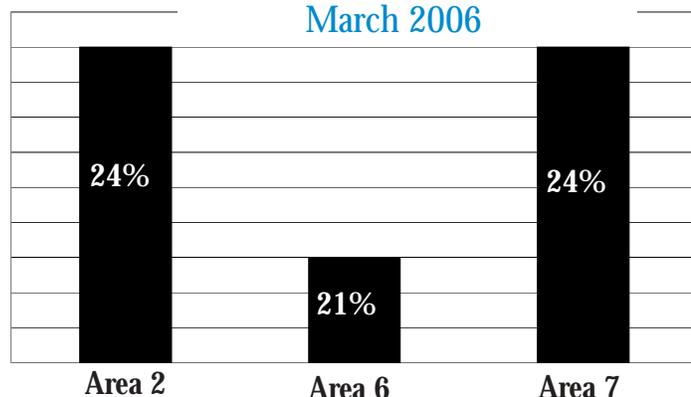


*for March 2006

Source: DCFS Position Control Field Staff Summary

The three highest vacancy rates as of March 2006 are Areas 2, 6, and 7. DCFS is still continuing its statewide recruitment effort in 2006.

Three Highest Vacancy Rate Areas for March 2006



Area 2: Crawford, Franklin, Johnson, Logan, Scott, Sebastian, Yell Counties

Area 6: Pulaski County

Area 7: Bradley, Calhoun, Cleveland, Dallas, Grant, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lonoke, Prairie Counties

Source: DCFS Position Control Field Staff Summary

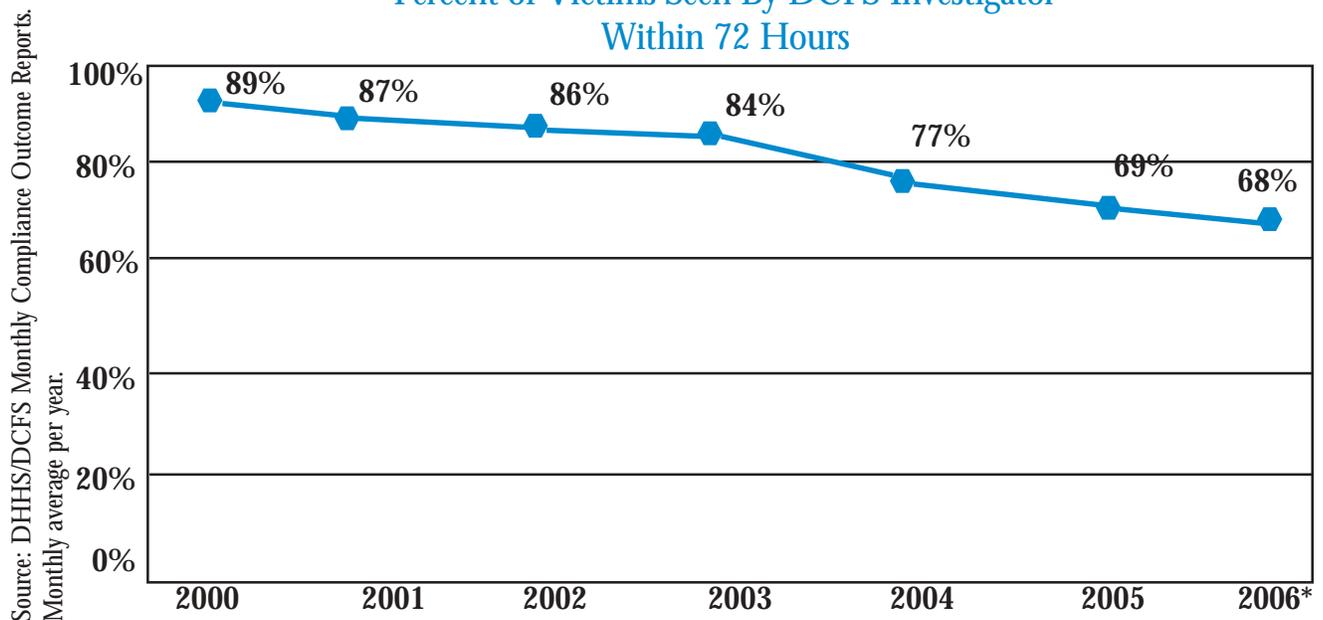
10 Service Areas for State



Progress on Child Safety Outcomes

After an allegation of maltreatment is received, the timeliness of the investigator's first contact with the child victim is important to ensure the child's safety. If it is not a case of severe maltreatment, DCFS investigators are required to see the child within 72 hours of the allegation. DCFS's goal is to comply with this requirement in 95 percent of the cases, which they were close to from 2000 to 2003. However, the percentage of children seen within this time frame dropped in 2005 to 69 percent, and remained at that level during the first quarter of 2006, despite the increase of staff by 6 percent statewide.

Percent of Victims Seen By DCFS Investigator Within 72 Hours



The child victim should also be interviewed or observed outside the presence of the alleged offender. The percentage of cases in which this was done dropped to a low of 62 percent in November 2005, and then began to increase during the first quarter of 2006. The average for the first quarter of 2006 was 67 percent, and the percentage for the month of March was 71 percent. This is an improvement when compared to 2005. However, this is low compared to 2003 when the state-wide vacancy rate was similar at 15 percent, but performance was at 90 percent. In the first quarter of 2006, the staffing vacancy rate was at 16 percent, but the performance was only 67 percent.

Percent of Cases Where Child was Interviewed Outside the Presence of the Offender						
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006*
96%	94%	92%	90%	79%	68%	67%

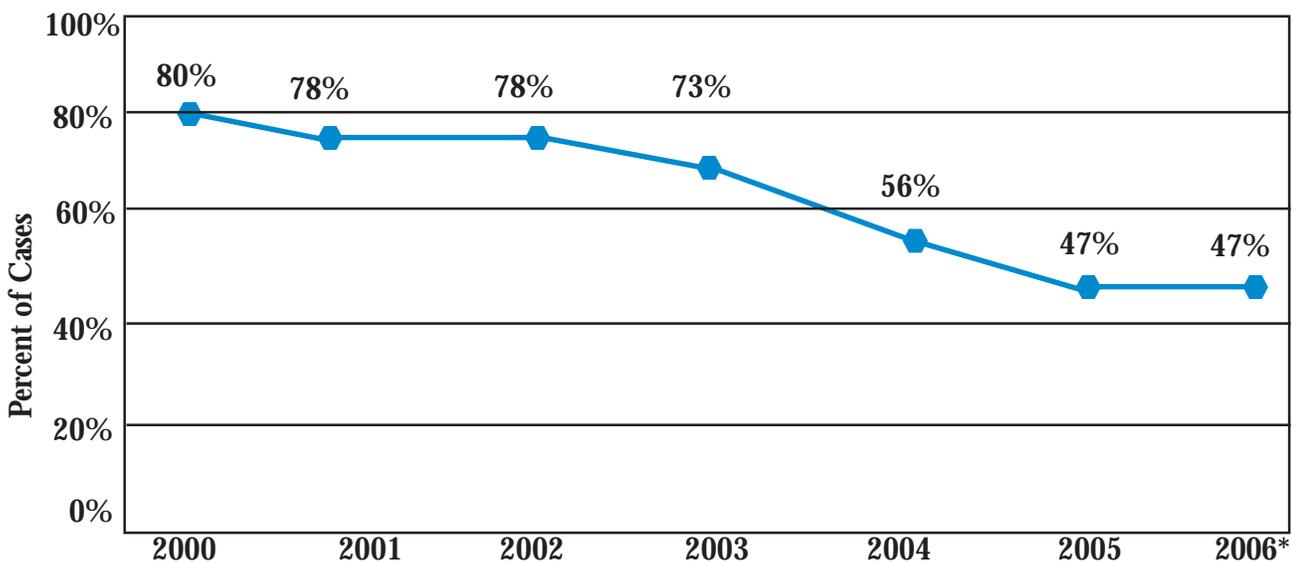
* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

The investigator's child maltreatment assessment should be finished within 30 days after an allegation of maltreatment is made. During this time the child victim and their family may remain in limbo while waiting on the investigator to determine whether the allegation is true or unsubstantiated. In 2004 the percentage of assessments completed within 30 days was 56 percent. The percentage reached a low of 41 percent in October 2005 before it started to increase. As of March 2006 the percentage was 50 percent. DCFS's goal is 90 percent.

Only 47 percent of maltreatment assessments are concluded within 30 days after an allegation of maltreatment is made.

Maltreatment Assessment Concluded Within 30 Days of the Report



* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

Progress on Family Support and Reunification Outcomes

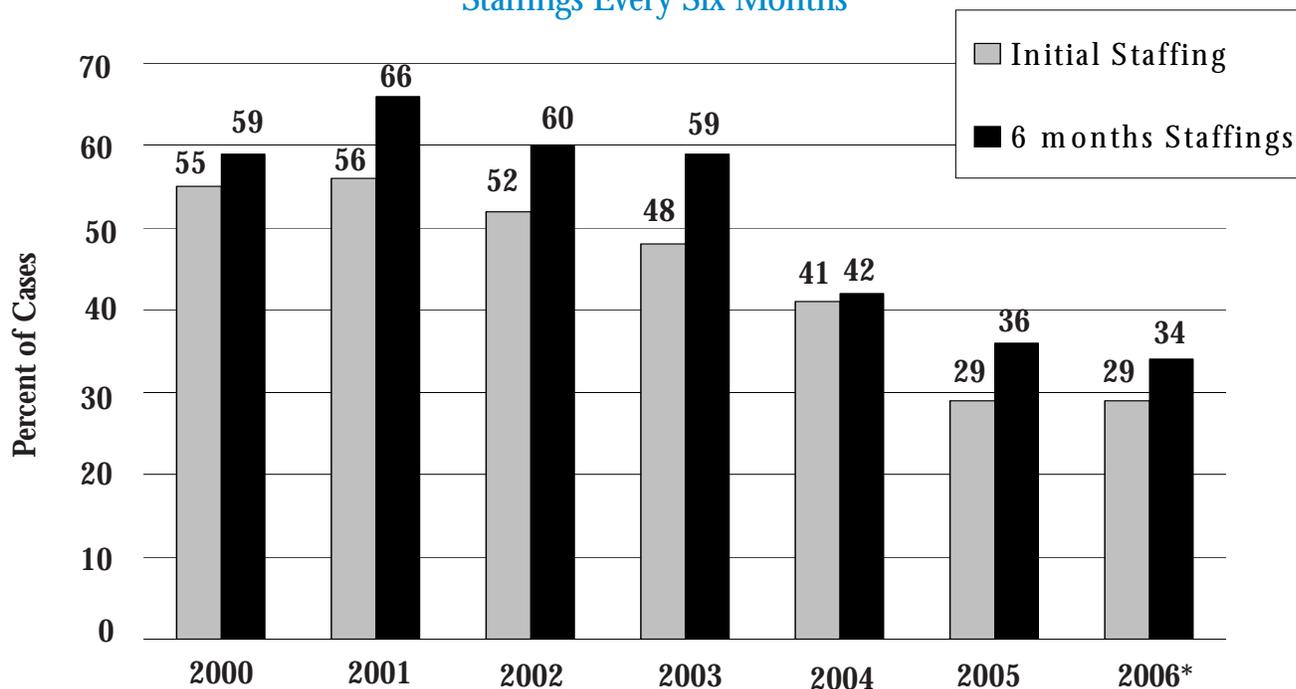
After a protective service case is opened, a family needs assessment and staffing should be completed within 30 days. These are the first steps in the process of good case management. It ensures action is taken quickly to evaluate the needs of the child, and ensures that all the appropriate parties are involved. The percentage of cases in which family needs assessments were completed within 30 days rose from a low of 37 percent in 2005 to an average of 44 percent in the first quarter of 2006. This is way below DCFS's goal of 80 percent.

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006*
65	63	57	53	43	37	44

The percentage of cases in which the initial staffing of the case occurs within the required 30 days of the case opening has not yet started to rebound. This indicator has been at unacceptable levels during the last five years. It was at its highest in 2002 at 56 percent and has declined steadily since that time. For the first quarter of 2006 it was at 29 percent. Without an initial staffing the parties cannot participate in the development of a meaningful case plan. This plan serves as a roadmap for all the parties in the case and should detail the parties' responsibilities and expectations. If DCFS does not assess the needs of the family in a timely manner, they will not be able to put an action plan in place to help the family.

Once the initial staffing takes place, a staffing should occur every six months to re-evaluate the case and to ensure that the appropriate services are being provided to the child victim and the family. This staffing, like the initial staffing, rarely takes place. It is still at one of the lowest percentages - 34 percent, for the first quarter of 2006. This is compared to a high of 66 percent in 2001.

Initial Staffing Within 30 Days of Case Opening & Staffings Every Six Months



* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

One of the most challenging tasks for the caseworker is to have regular visits with the child. This helps establish consistency, routine, and trust. When the data was examined in the first report from 2000 to 2004, this indicator was measured based on a policy requiring weekly visits. In 2005, DCFS changed the policy to reduce the number of required home visits with children.⁵ Weekly visits are only required during the first month of placement, and then monthly visits thereafter. The caseworker must still maintain weekly contact with the child after the first month, but the contact may occur outside the home or by the telephone. The policy was also changed to allow weekly contacts from other DCFS staff members to be counted. Despite DCFS' reduction in the number of home visits required, DCFS still falls short in its duty to have appropriate home visits with the children in its care. Fifty-six percent of the children still receive no monthly visits from their caseworker under DCFS' new reduced guidelines.

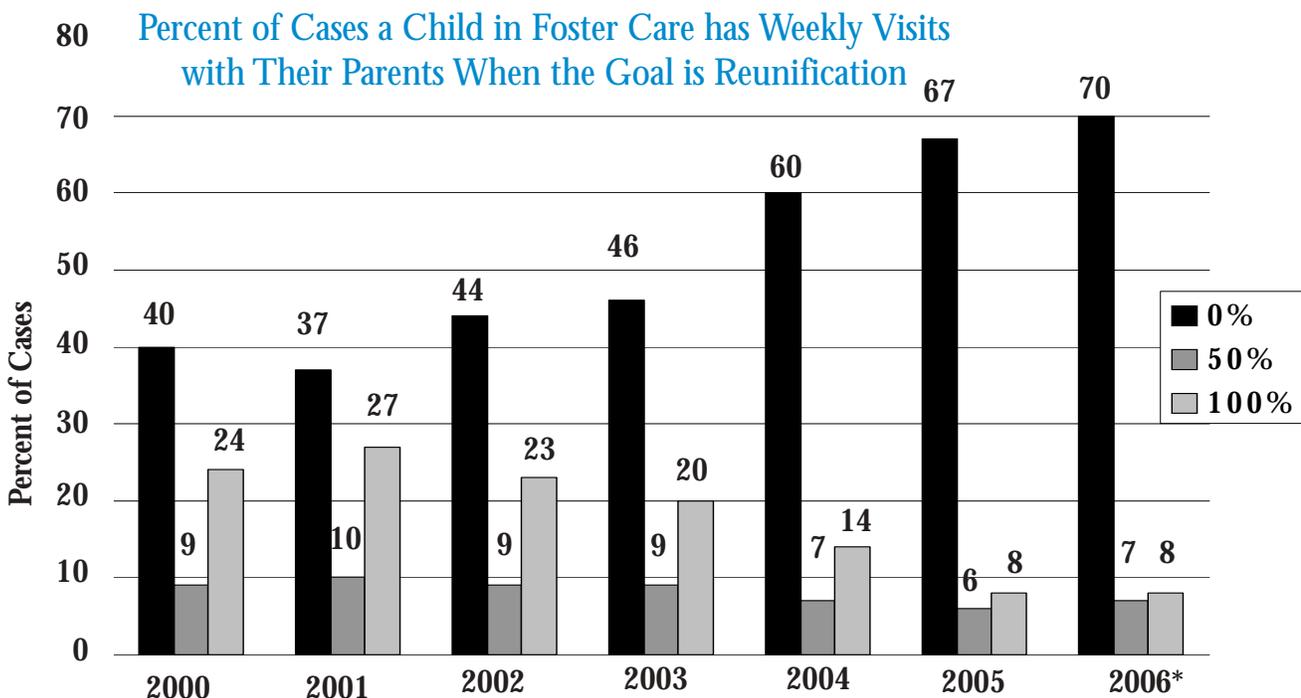
Percentage of Cases Receiving No Monthly Visits from Caseworker	
2005	2006*
62%	56%

Visits made by caseworkers continue to be low even though the policy was changed from weekly to monthly.

* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

While it is important that the case worker have regular visits with the child, it is also important the child in foster care have regular contact with his or her parents and siblings if the goal is to achieve reunification of the family. In 2004, children in foster care did not have weekly visits with their parents in 60 percent of the cases. The percentage has continued to rise, despite an increase in staffing. For the first quarter of 2006, 70 percent of the cases did not have any weekly visits with the parents.



* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

To keep as much of the family together as possible, children should be placed with at least one of their siblings in foster care. The percentage of cases in which this was done in 2005 and 2006 was close to the 2004 rate of 73 percent, still well below the 93 percent of 2001.

Child Placed with at Least One of Their Siblings						
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006*
91%	93%	92%	79%	73%	74%	75%

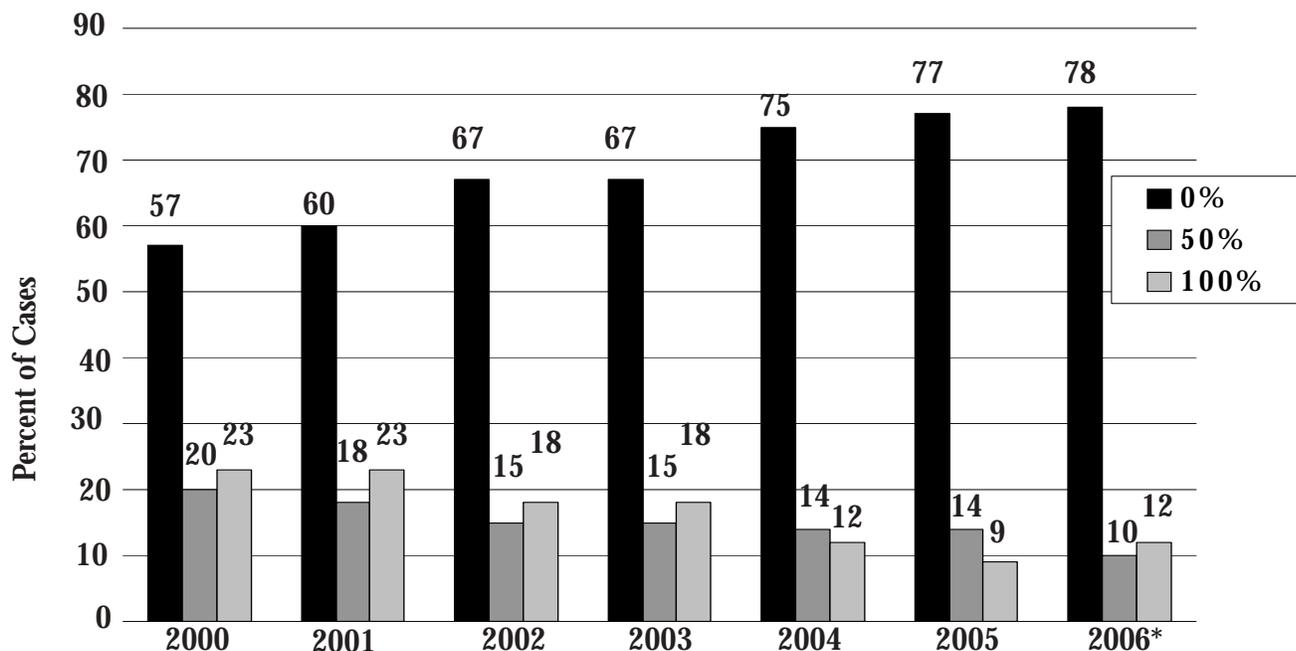
* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

If children cannot be placed with siblings, it is important for them to have regular visits with their siblings. Unfortunately, the percentage of cases in which there were no bi-weekly visits (0 percent) continued to rise in 2005 and 2006, reaching a high of 78 percent. DCFS's goal is the exact opposite of this – 80 percent of cases should have bi-weekly visits between siblings.

Children should be placed with siblings and, if not possible, should see each other bi-weekly. Bi-weekly visits did not occur in 78 percent of the cases.

Bi-Weekly Visits Between Siblings in Foster Care



* The average for January - March 2006

Source: DHHS/DCFS Monthly Compliance Outcome Reports. Monthly average per year.

Conclusion

DCFS has made progress in decreasing the vacancy rate for family service workers, but many of the new workers are still in training and cannot assume the responsibilities of investigations or caseloads.⁶ A new worker must complete 10 weeks of training before they can assume a full caseload. As more staff are trained to assume these responsibilities, improvement should be seen in the performance indicators. However, many of the indicators are exceptionally low and fall well short of the goals set by DCFS. These goals are designed to ensure that children receive services in a timely manner. As seen in the report, DCFS was much closer to many of these goals in 2002 than it is today, when it had similar staffing levels.

It will always be very difficult to have DCFS fully staffed. Turnover plagues the child welfare system because of high caseloads, stressful working conditions, lack of administrative support, and lack of access to needed services for clients. One solution would be to allot DCFS more positions than needed so that they could always have a small number of case workers being trained who would be ready to assume caseloads given that workers will always quit to seek better paying jobs that are less stressful.

According to a March 2006 report, current caseloads average 33 cases per family service worker.⁷ Even when they are fully staffed, caseloads are still higher than the recommended standard of 15, and there are other factors such as the ones listed above that impact their work. Nevertheless, the first step is for DCFS to return to normal staffing levels so that caseloads can decrease. This has been a focus of DCFS since 2005 as they still try to recover from the staffing crisis. However, it is unclear whether increased staffing levels, by itself, will be enough to dramatically improve DCFS's performance. State leaders, policy makers, and child advocates need to continue to monitor these performance indicators to make sure that significant improvement does indeed occur.

With appropriate services children can grow up to live healthy and productive lives.

DCFS has formed an advisory committee of outside individuals to help provide feedback on the child welfare system. However, a comprehensive assessment of the system is needed that would include an evaluation of the organization's structure and their budget. Even though positions are being filled, are they serving the right functions? Is enough training provided to staff? Is the budget adequate and is money being spent in the right places? What type of organizational and leadership structure is needed to implement these changes? A comprehensive assessment would help answer these questions.

Children need a nurturing and loving environment to grow. Neglect not only impacts their physical health, but also their emotional and social development. These children rely on public intervention to help them, and with the appropriate services, they can grow up to live healthy and productive lives. Our children cannot wait.

(Endnotes)

¹ Annual Report Card, SFY 2005. Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services, DCFS Quality Assurance Unit, December 2005, p. 19.

² Ibid p. 20.

³ Ibid p. 22.

⁴ Charlotte Tubbs, "Proposal Revealed on Kids, Families", Arkansas Democrat Gazette, September 23, 2005.

⁵ Annual Report Card, SFY 2005. Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services, DCFS Quality Assurance Unit, December 2005, p. 17.

⁶ Quarterly Performance Report, 2nd Quarter SFY 2006. Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services, DCFS Quality Assurance Unit, February 2006, p. ii.

⁷ Family Service Workers Caseload by Home Area/County for March 2006. Arkansas Department of Human Services, April 18, 2006, p. 41.

NOTES:



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