

**State of Georgia**  
**Child and Family Services Review**  
**Program Improvement Plan**  
**2008**  
**Executive Summary**



## **Georgia's Approach to the Program Improvement Plan (PIP)**

Child welfare programs in Georgia are state-supervised and county-administered by the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) of the Department of Human Resources (DHR). Within DFCS, the Office of Family Independence (OFI) handles financial and support services (i.e., TANF, Food and Nutrition, Child and Parent Services program, Medicaid, Refugee Assistance) and Social Services is charged with handling investigations and cases of child abuse and neglect (child protective services, foster care, adoption). Because the state receives federal child welfare funds, it comes under the oversight of the Children's Bureau of the federal Administration for Children and Families. This agency conducts monitoring reviews and requires states to create two-year program improvement plans (PIPs) to address outcomes that do not meet federal standards.

The federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) conducted in Georgia May 14-18, 2007, required the state to develop a program improvement plan (PIP), an opportunity for Georgia to identify strengths in its child welfare system and develop strategies to improve services and outcomes for children and families where indicated.

### **Georgia's 2006-2007 Self-Assessment and Improvement Planning Process**

Georgia began its program improvement process prior to the CFSR onsite review with its self assessment and PIP development planning, which included:

- Regional community forums regarding the agency's programs and services
- Statewide surveys among parents, caregivers and other stakeholders (including front line staff), as well as county and regional directors
- Kickoff meeting with over 160 attendees, including technical advisors, county and regional staff, state office leadership, youth, consumers, providers, child welfare advocates, and other stakeholders.
- Workgroups corresponding to themes identified in the CFSR process, including family engagement, case planning/family team meetings, courts, data/quality case review, and assessments

Following is a description of Georgia's plan for improvement, which includes four major strategies; each strategy has specific goals and actions outlined in the plan.

### **Major Strategies: Shifting the Focus**

Georgia has engaged experts from across the nation to assist in the development of a Family-Centered Practice Model (FCPM), which will be developed in the first year of the PIP and piloted, evaluated, and revised as needed during the second year, with the goal of implementing the model statewide in ensuing years.

Recognizing that child issues are symptomatic of greater family issues, the state is now focusing on a *family-centered practice approach* to improve outcomes. All aspects of assessment and service planning are expected to include children and families, with an increased emphasis on paternal family members. The focus on family-centered practice represents significant systemic change and is the foundation of Georgia's plan.

The four major strategies of the plan include:

- I. Develop and pilot a Family-Centered Practice Model
- II. Strengthen policy and improve practice to ensure safety of children
- III. Improve permanency outcomes for children and families
- IV. Improve service array and foster parent recruitment/retention

Following is a brief description of each of these major strategies.

### ***Strategy I. Develop and Pilot a Family-Centered Practice Model***

While a more family-centered approach is being emphasized statewide, a more formal Family-Centered Practice Model is being developed that will tie together several aspects of case practice. This model will be piloted in six “innovation zones” over the course of the PIP and subsequently implemented statewide. In the meantime, some aspects of family-centered practice are already being addressed statewide for improvement, including family team meetings and caseworker visitation.

#### **Goals:**

- A. Develop and pilot a Family-Centered Practice Model in six innovation sites (Brantley, Catoosa, Fulton, Muscogee, Richmond and Walton counties)
- B. Improve and expand the Family Team Meeting practice statewide
- C. Promote placement stability and permanency through caseworker-child visit statewide initiative ("Every Child Every Month")

#### **Family-Centered Practice Model (Pilot)**

Georgia’s Family-Centered Practice Model (FCPM) will incorporate existing relevant initiatives and support the development of new initiatives. Although the FCPM is a pilot, some specific practice changes related to safety and permanency are being addressed statewide more immediately, including:

- New quality screening/intake tool/process
- “Every Child Every Month” caseworker-child visit training
- Improving and expanding the use of Family Team Meetings
- Individualizing services for needs identified in assessments, including physical health, mental health and educational services for children
- Improved foster home recruitment practices
- Permanency collaboration with the state’s Court Improvement Project (CIP) and the Georgia Office of the Child Advocate (OCA)

In addition, the Family-Centered Practice Model will work to strengthen parental capacity through such efforts as engaging parents in assessments and case planning, improving caseworker visits with parents, and including paternal as well as maternal relatives.

A systemic change such as the proposed shift to family-centered practice requires initial policy changes as well as new and ongoing training, support, monitoring, and evaluation. The PIP

therefore includes policy changes/updates as well as incorporating those changes/updates into current and new training curricula for staff – veteran and new, supervisory and frontline. To ensure that policy and training translate into practice, the state is incorporating a *transfer of learning/supervision* component in key trainings. This component includes communication before and after training with the trainees’ supervisors so that the supervisors are able to assess and reinforce learning as well as help the trainees incorporate the principles learned into practice.

#### Family Team Meetings (Statewide)

The state is currently utilizing a new family preservation case process that will also be incorporated into the Family-Centered Practice Model. This process, which includes improved family team meetings statewide, focuses on engaging families, identifying family needs and providing services linked directly to the identified needs of the family to identify best practices in this area and locate resources for families within their communities. Family team meetings (FTMs) are used to develop the case plan, set contact standards, identify appropriate collateral contacts, identify potential safety resources, and begin developing an exit strategy (community and family supports that will be in place at case closure). Each case will have, at a minimum, two FTMs; an initial case planning FTM and a closure FTM to evaluate and finalize the exit strategy.

#### “Every Child, Every Month” Caseworker-Child Visitation (Statewide)

In order to increase the ability of the case manager to assess the safety of children, the focus of the initiative is to increase purposeful, face-to-face contact between case managers and the children to better assess safety, engage children, assess current placement needs, assess current health/mental health needs, and build/preserve the child’s family connections.

### ***Strategy II. Strengthen Policy and Improve Practice to Ensure Safety of Children***

#### **Goals:**

- A. Develop and distribute to intake staff statewide a quality screening intake tool
- B. Improve ongoing risk and safety assessment tool usage statewide
- C. Improve case documentation

#### Quality Intake and Screening (Statewide)

Quality screening/intake refers to all of the activities necessary to receive referrals of suspected child maltreatment, assess whether or not a referral will be accepted as a report of child abuse or neglect, and determine the agency's response and the urgency of that response. The focus of screening/intake is to promote the safety of the child and to identify ways the family can ensure that safety, and the emphasis is on helping.

Strategies to strengthen screening/intake processes include review and revision of policies regarding agency response to reports, implementing a uniform set of screening questions, screening referrals for domestic violence and substance abuse, training screening/intake staff and incorporating a transfer of learning component.

### Improve Risk Assessment (Statewide)

Georgia is in the process of reviewing and revising its assessment process to:

- Obtain technical assistance on using the state's current risk assessment tool more effectively
- Address the needs of the family as well as all of the children in the family/household
- Provide the basis for individualized family and child case planning
- Guide the provision of appropriate services based on identified needs

### Improve Case Documentation

SHINES is Georgia's comprehensive statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS), implemented statewide as of July 2008. The SHINES data system is used to track and manage cases and replaces many of the paper forms formerly used in the field.

SHINES assists DFCS case managers throughout the entire lifecycle of a case -- from the initial intake of information through investigation to foster care placement and adoption. In each of those steps, SHINES gives case managers access to case histories (which helps eliminate duplicative data entry), information on placement and adoption resources, and state policies. The system moves case managers through documentation requirements in each phase of a case, which is expected to result in improved case documentation.

### ***Strategy III. Improve Permanency Outcomes for Children and Families***

#### **Goals:**

- A. Support Court Improvement Project (CIP) summits review of courts related to child abuse and neglect cases
- B. Support CIP review of courts related to child abuse and neglect cases to address problems of permanency, including adoption and another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA)
- C. Support court process to notify parents, foster parents, pre-adoptive parents and relative caregivers regarding their rights related to hearings and case reviews
- D. Collaborate with federal and state partners to improve permanency outcomes for children
- E. Cross-train State Assistant Attorneys General, Guardians Ad Litem, parent attorneys, Council of Juvenile Court Judges, court staff, child fatality review committees and DFCS
- F. Increase timely achievement of permanency for children through Permanency Unit Pilot in Region 4
- G. Update and/or develop policies and/or practice to improve permanency outcomes for children based on best practices
- H. Train foster care supervisors and staff on best practices for achieving permanency

Following is a description of some of the initiatives being implemented to address the above goals.

### Court Improvement Project Collaboration (Statewide)

Georgia's Court Improvement Project (CIP) is a project of the Supreme Court of Georgia to improve court practices related to child welfare in Georgia, especially permanency for abused or neglected children. DFCS, the CIP and the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) are working collaboratively in this process. DFCS, CIP and OCA jointly hosted a collaborative technical assistance meeting with the National Resource Center on Judicial and Legal Issues, American Bar Association to formalize PIP action steps related to courts and permanency issues.

### Court Compliance Officer Initiative (Statewide)

The Court Compliance Officer Initiative is a statewide collaborative effort between the Court Improvement Project (CIP) and DFCS to conduct joint quality assurance reviews. Completing joint quality assurance reviews will allow for the early identification of barriers to reunification and permanency, as well as case plan-related issues. Identified issues will be discussed during periodic meetings among DFCS leadership, CJ CJ judicial executive council and staff, CIP staff, and the Office of the Child Advocate.

### Permanency Unit Initiative (Regional Pilot)

In an effort to expedite permanency attainment for children in state custody, DFCS Region IV is piloting a Permanency Unit, which began operating in January 2008. This unit is led by a Regional Permanency Coordinator and includes multiple permanency teams to coordinate planning and services from the child's entry into state custody until permanency is achieved. The unit will focus on child well-being in the permanency process. This includes child involvement in permanency planning, therapeutic interventions, facilitating timely termination of parental rights (TPR) where indicated, timely adoption of children for whom reunification or relative placement is not appropriate, permanency staffings to establish concurrent planning, parental and caregiver involvement in permanency planning, preserving family connections of children, development of resource families for children free for adoption without identified resources and/or with special needs, and provision of specialized training for DFCS case staff related to permanency.

### ***Strategy IV: Improve Service Array and Foster Parent Recruitment/Retention***

#### **Goals:**

- A. Individualize services for family members to meet their specific needs as identified in the risk assessment
- B. Improve availability of and access to services for families and children
- C. Individualize services for youth to meet their specific needs related to education, employment, housing, supportive relationships and health
- D. Incorporate physical health, mental health and educational services for children in case plans as identified in needs assessments
- E. Provide training and comprehensive support for foster caregivers through pilots in Region 17 and five additional counties (Fulton, DeKalb, Thomas, Colquitt and Mitchell)
- F. Establish internal foster care recruitment program
- G. Increase paternal family involvement through Outstanding Paternal Involvement pilot

Following is a brief description of some of the initiatives that address the above goals.

### Improving Georgia's Service Array (Statewide)

The range and number of services to families varies a great deal in Georgia, with those in the metro Atlanta area having more services and easier access than those in rural areas, and those in the rural areas having to travel further to find the services they need. Of particular concern is availability of substance abuse and mental health treatment services for families in the more rural areas of the state.

Georgia is planning to address service array issues through (1) collaboration at the state level with the mental health, public health, education and child support agencies; and (2) through collaboration at the regional level spear-headed by DFCS regional directors.

### Individualizing Services (Statewide)

Georgia is making a concerted effort to ensure that case plans for services are individualized and address the needs of all family members based on needs identified in the (1) ongoing risk assessments in CPS and foster care cases and (2) comprehensive child and family assessments for children in foster care.

This is being addressed through technical assistance on the risk assessment; policy updates; ongoing supervisory and staff training related to case planning, caseworker-child visitation and case documentation in the newly-deployed SHINES database system; and the Family-Centered Practice Model development and implementation.

### Purchase of Service for Foster Parent Retention and Support (Pilot)

Georgia has embarked on a research and practice initiative, the Foster Family Initiative (FFI), that is focused on retaining and supporting veteran foster families by contracting for services with community-based organizations. The Foster Family Initiative is an umbrella project which includes the development and implementation of pilots in Region 17 and five additional counties (Fulton, DeKalb, Thomas, Colquitt and Mitchell) and other retention efforts throughout the state.

In an effort to address Georgia's urgent need for well-trained and supported foster families who are able to meet the complex needs of our children/youth in care, Georgia is piloting a re-focused effort with a private contractor to assist the state with foster parent retention. The contractor is to provide the support, continued skill development, and community connections that foster families need in order to increase foster home retention. Effective pilot strategies will be rolled into a prototype for the model as it goes statewide. All counties will implement improvements to their foster family retention programs based on lessons learned through the FFI.

### Foster Care Recruitment (Statewide)

Georgia is developing an internal foster home recruitment improvement initiative that will include updates to policies, training for the resource development supervisors and staff and development of regional recruitment plans.

## Outstanding Paternal Involvement Initiative (Regional Pilot)

The Outstanding Paternal Involvement (OPI) pilot in Region 16 is developing new ways to identify, engage and work with paternal relatives so that paternal relatives will be more involved with the child, the case plan and permanency arrangements.

### ***PIP Outcomes***

Georgia expects its PIP to positively affect child outcomes. The federal review includes 23 outcome measures in the areas of child safety, permanency and well-being, as well as 22 items related to systems such as the statewide information system, case review system, quality assurance system, training, service array, responsiveness to the community, and foster parent recruitment and retention. As part of its approved PIP, Georgia has committed to specific improvements (to be negotiated with the federal Children's Bureau based on 12-month data as of September 2008) in the following outcomes:

#### Safety:

- Item 1: Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment
- Item 4: Risk of harm to child

#### Permanency:

- Item 7: Permanency goal for the child

#### Well-Being:

- Item 17: Needs and services of child, parents and foster parents
- Item 18: Child and family involvement in case planning
- Item 19: Worker visits with child
- Item 20: Worker visits with parents
- Item 23: Mental health of the child

The full Georgia PIP, including the complete narrative, strategies, goals, actions and appendices, along with other current and historical information, can be viewed at [www.gacfsrPIP.org](http://www.gacfsrPIP.org).