

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Georgia Department of Human Resources (DHR) Division of Children & Family Services (DFCS) Program Improvement Plan First Quarter Report December 2008

#### Introduction

In response to a federal review of Georgia's child welfare outcomes, Georgia developed a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) that was approved by the federal Children's Bureau of the Administration on Children and Families and became effective September 1, 2008.

Georgia has begun work on nearly all of the goals included in this PIP and in on target or ahead of its timelines, having completed 26 of the 111 action steps included in the plan. Following is a brief summary of the progress Georgia has made in implementing each goal through the first quarter of the two-year plan.

#### Strategy I. Develop and Pilot Family-Centered Practice Model (FCPM)

##### Goal A: Develop and pilot a Family-Centered Practice Model in innovation sites (14 action steps; first 2 due Q2; none completed)

A case practice model has been vetted by DHR executive management during high-level meetings. This case practice model has also been presented to all DFCS staff and external partners in large and small meetings. Feedback and comments regarding the case practice model have been solicited and collected via email. Below are four strategies that have been identified as cornerstones to the implementation of family-centered case practice in Georgia.

- 1) Family Team Meetings
- 2) Leadership development
- 3) Timely and positive permanency for youth in care
- 4) Minimum visitation requirements

##### Goal B: Improve and expand the Family Team Meeting practice statewide (9 action steps; first 3 due Q2; none completed)

New Family Team Meeting (FTM) standards have been adopted and are inculcated into training for DFCS staff. A plan for providing a "train-the-trainer" for DFCS providers is in the process of being finalized. This provider training is to ensure consistency and quality of FTMs for all DFCS families. The new FTM standards and required practice are being incorporated into existing policy.

##### Goal C: Promote placement stability and permanency through caseworker-child visit statewide initiative ("Every Child Every Month") (7 action steps; first two due Q1; first 3 completed)

DFCS received assistance from the National Resource Center (NRC) to develop training curricula entitled, "Every Child Every Month" (ECEM). The NRC provided "train-the-trainer" sessions with staff from the DFCS Training Unit ("Professional Excellence" staff) as well as selected state office and regional field staff (Field Program Specialists, Supervisors, Case Managers). A statewide plan to roll out ECEM training in every region has been implemented and a county letter advising field staff of the revised visitation expectation has been disseminated. Draft policy related to the requirements for "Every Child Every Month" has been remitted to leadership for review and approval.

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

### **Goal A: Develop and distribute to intake staff statewide quality screening intake tool (6 action steps; first 2 due Q1; 4 completed)**

Policy revision was approved, updated in the online Social Services manual and disseminated to field staff in February 2008. The purpose of this policy change is to improve DFCS assessment of child maltreatment reports. The changes were designed to clarify the policy explanations and the definitions under which the agency operates, including clarification of a paradigm shift from "investigation" to assessment. The expectation of addressing families holistically and utilizing critical thinking in assessment is clearly defined. Intake questions are designed to elicit more comprehensive knowledge of families and decision trees are designed to guide the correct assignment of intervention and response times.

### **Goal B: Improve ongoing risk and safety assessment tool usage statewide (10 action steps; first due Q2; 1 completed)**

DFCS has requested Technical Assistance from the NRC for Child Protective Services. A focal group comprised of internal and external stakeholders has held two meetings with the NRC this quarter at which they have discussed the "goal" of the PIP relating to risk assessment, clarified the purpose of the group, and ruled out re-inventing a new tool for use. The primary focus is making the usage of the tool more effective and efficient. Current discussions are regarding changing verbiage from "Safety and Risk" to "Present Danger and Impending Danger" and shortening the time frame relating to "foreseeable future" from 12 months to 30-90 days.

### **Goal C: Improve case documentation (2 action steps; first due Q5; none completed)**

DFCS documentation training has been revised. As the agency continues to make progress on its PIP strategies, documentation training will be reviewed and revised to capture any substantive changes.

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

### **Goal A: Support Court Improvement Project (CIP) summits review of courts related to child abuse and neglect cases (2 action steps; 2 due Q1; 2 completed)**

DFCS provided data for 2005 through 2007 to the Georgia Court Improvement Project (CIP) through a contract with Georgia State University. Utilizing this data, the CIP has held multiple summit meetings throughout the state, assessing and informing communities of their performance in relationship to safety and permanency for children and families. During this reporting period, summits were held in Hall, Fulton, Richmond and Troup Counties. DFCS leadership co-presented at each of these summits. Local DFCS leadership and staff participated in the summits and developed, in concert with community partners, action plans designed to improve the community's performance on outcomes for children.

### **Goal B: Support CIP review of courts related to child abuse and neglect cases to address problems of permanency, including adoption and APPLA (3 action steps; first 2 due Q1; 2 completed)**

The agency and the CIP have worked together to identify counties with identified performance issues in adoption as well as counties that have been very successful in achieving adoption outcomes. DFCS has provided case data and identifying information to the CIP, enabling the CIP to conduct case file reviews within identified courts and to assess practice related to adoptions.

There have been three presentations of findings from these reviews (April, June and September), two of

which were facilitated by the NRC. Counties reviewed to date include Barrow, Bartow, Cobb, Colquitt, Douglas, Gwinnett, Polk, Richmond, and Spalding. DFCS meets with the CIP and Office of the Child Advocate at least quarterly.

**Goal C: Support court process to notify parents, foster parents, pre-adoptive parents and relative caregivers regarding their rights related to hearings and case reviews  
(3 action steps; first due Q2; none completed)**

Nothing to report for the first quarter.

**Goal D: Collaborate with federal and state partners to improve permanency outcomes for children  
(3 action steps; first 2 due Q1; first 2 completed)**

DFCS has been approved for Technical Assistance from the NRC on Legal Issues and the American Bar Association. DFCS has developed performance standards for special assistant attorneys general (SAAGs) as well as model orders to be used by SAAGs. These standards and orders have been provided to the NRC for review and input.

**Goal E: Cross-train SAAGs, GALs, parent attorneys, CJ CJ, court staff, child fatality review committees and DFCS  
(2 action steps; first due Q3; 2 completed)**

DFCS worked cooperatively with the CIP and the Georgia Association of Homes and Services for Children (GAHSC) to enable DFCS staff to attend the annual Child Placement Conference. The Child Placement Conference included multiple trainings from the NRCs as well as from DFCS staff. Attendees included representatives from DFCS, SAAGs, GALs, courts, attorneys and other child advocacy agencies. The focus of this conference was permanency. In addition, the CIP has hosted Judicial Summits in Richmond, Fulton, Hall and Troup counties this quarter. Summit attendees included judges, SAAGs, parent attorneys, DFCS leadership, court-appointed special advocates (CASAs) and other community stakeholders.

**Goal F: Increase timely achievement of permanency for children through Permanency Unit Pilot in Region 4  
(2 action steps; first due Q4; none completed)**

The Permanency Unit in Region IV has developed internal baselines and adoption tracking mechanisms for several critical areas of work from the time of termination of parental rights (TPR) to adoption finalization. Proposed baselines are being considered, as well as development of tracking mechanisms related to length of time to complete family assessments, strategic and targeted recruitment. The unit is currently using foster parent support case managers to provide better customer service and support to resource families. Pilot reviews are being conducted with four supervisor teams monthly, with a larger analysis and discussion occurring quarterly with the entire regional permanency unit.

**Goal G: Update and/or develop policies and/or practice to improve permanency outcomes for children based on best practices  
(4 action steps; first due Q1; first completed)**

A concurrent planning/permanency workgroup has been established and is receiving technical assistance from the NRC. The workgroup met in October to discuss barriers in the concurrent planning/permanency case management process. To obtain up more information from front line case managers and supervisors about the barriers they face in working with resource families and birth families on concurrent planning/permanency, focus groups were held in three locations (Lawrenceville, Macon and Tifton) in November.

**Goal H: Train foster care supervisors and staff on best practices for achieving permanency (3 action steps; first due Q2; none completed)**

DFCS has gathered information from its Program Evaluation and Analysis Section (PEAS) as well as its Field Operations Review Guides (FORG) used by county directors related to permanency plans. Information will be provided to county leadership at a meeting to analyze these findings and develop strategies for developing appropriate permanency goals.

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

**Goal A: Individualize services for family members to meet their specific needs as identified in the risk assessment**

**(6 action steps; first due Q4; none completed)**

DFCS is reviewing outcome of PEAS data and assessing current policy and training.

**Goal B: Improve availability of and access to services for families and children (10 action steps; step 4 due Q1; step 4 completed)**

Due to the State's current economic status, the proposed survey to be conducted by the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) and the Governor's Office for Children and Families is being amended. Partners from DFCS, OCA and Governor's Office for Children and Families are meeting with State Partners (Family Connection) to review existing analysis of community services and needs assessment. This group will strategize avenues for completing regional and/or statewide services needs assessment.

DHR "Enterprise" meetings with DFCS and the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases (MHDDAD) were held in August and October, and joint protocols for serving children in crisis were developed.

MHDDAD conducted a "train-the-trainer" in October to facilitate the implementation of Local Interagency Planning Teams (LIPT), which was attended by representatives from MHDDAD, DFCS, the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and Kidsnet. The purpose of LIPTs is to improve and facilitate the coordination of services to children with severe emotional disturbances and addictive diseases and to assure community-based services are available to children and their families in all geographic areas. Rollout of training is currently underway. A total of 34 training sessions were scheduled between December 9, 2008 and February 25, 2009. It is anticipated that a total of 1,190 staff from the various agencies mentioned will be equipped to facilitate LIPT.

**Goal C: Individualize services for youth to meet their specific needs related to education, employment, housing, supportive relationships and health (7 action steps; first 2 due Q1; 2 completed)**

DFCS is receiving Technical Assistance from the NRC for Independent Living and Youth Development. Independent Living Coordinators received training on the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment for youth in July as well as a web-based training in October. A focal group comprised of agency staff, youth, foster parents, and community stakeholders has been convened to assess the Independent Living Program policy and practice.

**Goal D: Incorporate physical health, mental health and educational services for children in case plans as identified in needs assessments (3 action steps; first due Q3; none completed)**

The state PEAS unit is reviewing all cases to evaluate that the provision of appropriate services related to physical health, mental health and educational services is included in case planning and is adequate to meet the child's individualized needs.

**Goal E: Provide training and comprehensive support for foster caregivers through pilots in Region 17 and five additional counties (Fulton, DeKalb, Thomas, Colquitt and Mitchell) (5 action steps; first 2 due Q2; 2 completed)**

DFCS has contracted with the Family Connections Partnership to purchase services from EMBRACE. The focus of these services is to develop strategies and "signature services" for retaining foster parents and developing skilled resources for children in state custody. EMBRACE established a Regional Design Team (RDT) consisting of DFCS regional and county leadership, state DHR/DFCS leadership, and EMBRACE consultants. The role of the RDT is to steer implementation of the regional prototype, support county workgroups, endorse a participatory evaluation of EMBRACE, and support a sustainable strategy for foster parent retention. EMBRACE, together with its regional and county-level partners, developed a core set of signature support strategies for the Region 17 prototype. The five strategies are as follows:

- Foster parent liaison (FPL) services to link foster parents to each other and to community resources and facilitate positive communication between foster parents, caseworkers, and community stakeholders;
- Foster parent mentors (designed for and by foster parents);
- Natural helpers (informal supports identified by foster parents);
- Improved communication (a variety of activities to keep foster parents, partners, and staff informed and connected, and to promote positive relationships);
- Training for newly approved and veteran foster parents.

As of September 30, 2008, the Foster Family Initiatives pilot has concluded and lessons learned are being reviewed with its Resource Development Innovations focal group (see below).

**Goal F: Establish internal foster care recruitment program (7 action steps; first due Q4; none completed)**

Georgia has developed a focal group composed of state and regional office programs, policy and leadership staff, training, quality assurance, county resource development case managers and representatives from the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association to develop a strategic plan for recruitment and to assess current policy/practice. This multi-disciplinary Resource Development Innovations (RDI) Group had a kick-off meeting in November, which provided an orientation for team members on the scope of work, deliverables and schedule.

**Goal: G: Increase paternal family involvement through Outstanding Paternal Involvement pilot (4 action steps; first due Q2; 1 completed)**

Region 16 is tracking data related to paternal family involvement. This data is reviewed at monthly regional meetings to facilitate discussion and identify strategies that have been effective. Trend lines have generally shown a gradual rise in levels of paternal involvement.

Baseline data have been established for FTM/Case Plan participation in both Family Preservation and Permanency cases:

- Paternal Involvement in Family Preservation cases = 40%
- Paternal Involvement in Permanency cases = 19%

Data is tracked on both the county and regional level, including the number of children in both Family Preservation and Permanency cases.