

Ohio Citizen Review Panel Annual Report

Executive Summary

May 15, 2020



Citizen Review Panels are charged with evaluating the impact of child protective services policies and practices upon children and families in the community, providing public outreach and evaluating the extent to which a state is adhering to its CAPTA state plan. This evaluation involves examining policies, practices, and procedures of state child welfare agencies. CRPs then make recommendations via an annual report to the state child welfare agency with the goal of improving the child protection system. Following the submission of these recommendations, the state has six months to respond in writing to the recommendations.

This report is the product of the Ohio CRPs' annual evaluation for the 2020 state fiscal year. For SFY 2020, Ohio operated five CRPs located in different parts of the state:

- The Northwest Ohio CRP meets in Sandusky County
- The Northeast Ohio CRP meets in Stark County
- The Central Ohio CRP meets in Franklin County
- The Southwest Ohio CRP meets in Hamilton County
- The Southeast Ohio CRP meets in Athens County

Each identified panel went through a strategic planning process in March 2019 to select a specific topic for review in the 2019-2020 work year. The following is a brief summary of each panel's topic, data collection methods, and final recommendations to ODJFS.

The Northwest Ohio CRP

The Northwest Ohio CRP focused their work on how public children services agencies (PCSAs) in Ohio communicate, share information, and collaborate with their community partners. The panel gathered information from academic literature and interviews with community collaboration efforts to gain an understanding of this topic. The results of the data analysis from these sources are summarized in the report. Based on the results, the panel developed two specific recommendations for Ohio to better support collaborations between PCSAs and their community partners such as schools, mental health agencies, and others in serving children and families.

Recommendations:

1. ODJFS should develop common evaluation measures of collaboration that are simple and meaningful for use by local youth and family programming. ODJFS should also provide technical assistance around the use of these tools.

The panel found that evaluation of programs focused on collaboration efforts to serve children and families is hard work and resource intensive. Few collaborative efforts interviewed for this project described a plan for evaluating their efforts. Those with dedicated funding are able to carry out more rigorous evaluation than those with limited resources. While it appears these programs are doing great work in their communities, an evaluation of how those programs are influencing outcomes for children and families is needed. The resource intensive nature of evaluation limits the ability for grassroots organized programs to carry out such tasks. ODJFS could provide common evaluation measures for use by youth and family serving programs to ensure that some level of evaluation can be conducted to demonstrate the effectiveness of creative programming in Ohio.

2. ODJFS should develop a statewide standardized release of information form for use by PCSAs and their community partners.

Information sharing was identified as a barrier to successful collaboration among interview participants who deal with client level goals and programming rather than macro or policy issues. Information sharing remains a key component to successful collaboration between PCSAs and their community partners. Although this is a regularly identified problem, it may be addressed with the right support and resources. Overcoming this barrier may be challenging, but it is possible. ODJFS may be able to provide support to local communities to overcome this barrier by developing a standard release of information, similar to the Ohio Department of Medicaid standard authorization form covering the use and disclosure of protected health information (PHI), for use by PCSAs and their partners.

The Northeast Ohio CRP

The Northeast Ohio CRP examined how PCSAs in Ohio collect, communicate, and share information about children who come into custody with potential placements (foster parents, group homes, etc.) and community partners (school, mental health professionals, CASA, etc.) to ensure continuous engagement with services and activities. The panel met with relevant ODJFS stakeholders, conducted a document review of ODJFS/PCSA forms, and reviewed literature about best practices in information sharing. As a result of the evaluation, the panel developed recommendations for improvement.

Recommendations:

1. ODJFS should revise the Child Behavior and Characteristics Checklist to address cultural issues, remove diagnosable conditions, and incorporate positive aspects of children.

The CRP recommends ODJFS review the use of the Child Behavior and Characteristics Checklist. The checklist includes a checkbox for “sexual identify/orientation issues,” and it is unclear what exactly this means. A recent SACWIS build now allows PCSAs to record a child’s sexual orientation in the person profile, so the panel questions the utility of this checkbox in the Child Behavior and Characteristics Checklist identifying sexual orientation as an “issue.” Additionally, ODJFS should consider adding vaping as a concerning behavior for youth, given its high prevalence and negative impact on youth health. The CRP recommends removal of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnosable conditions on the checklist. There are DSM diagnosable conditions on the checklist such as “Autism/Pervasive Developmental Disorders,” “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” and “Reactive Attachment Disorder.” Even if licensed to diagnose, this practice would be outside the scope of work for a child welfare caseworker in Ohio. If any conditions have been diagnosed, they should be recorded in another section of the ICCA with the appropriate diagnosing professional’s signature and/or the professional’s name and contact information. Finally, there are no check boxes for positive child characteristics. This checklist appears inherently negative towards children who have been removed due to a history of certain behaviors, with no balance to consider positive aspects of these children.

2. ODJFS should convene a task force to develop simple and clear guidelines regarding information sharing between PCSAs, schools, and health/mental health entities.

The panel raised questions about the ability for PCSAs to share the ICCA and Med/Ed information with the appropriate partners. ODJFS explained the issue of information sharing is a constant struggle for their agency and community partners. To address this issue in Texas, the Supreme Court of Texas Children’s Commission Foster Care and Education Confidentiality Workgroup developed a guide for use by child welfare workers and school administrators, staff, and teachers to detail what information should be shared about children. The guide to information sharing is easy to read and understand. This document focuses on what information is important to share rather than focusing on what information cannot be shared. The Northeast Ohio CRP recommends a similar document be created for Ohio.

3. Support for the Southwest Ohio CRP recommendation from 2017-2018 Annual Report. ODJFS should consider additions to ORC for mental health services guidelines for children in care, incorporated with the physical health standards in ORC.

The panel’s review of SACWIS tools indicated a gap in recording a child’s current mental health services in SACWIS. Ensuring children receive adequate services related to their mental health is imperative for a child’s well-being. Being able to easily identify this information and share the relevant parts with stakeholders can serve to increase the overall well-being of a child. Similar to Southwest Ohio CRP’s report from 2017-2018, there appears to be a struggle to find information about a child’s screening, assessment, and linkage with mental health services. The Ohio Revised Code includes timelines and standards for the medical care of children who come into the care of a PCSA, yet the mental health standards for these children is absent from the ORC. The panel requests ODJFS consider making movements towards the inclusion of such standards in ORC to improve the mental health services provided to children in care.

The Central Ohio CRP

The Central Ohio CRP explored how Ohio supports kinship caregivers. Specifically, they set out to learn what support is currently available in the field for kinship caregivers and then subsequently highlight the gaps in supportive services for kinship caregivers as identified by providers and/or caregivers themselves. The panel gathered academic literature, ORC information, and ODJFS and PCSAO online resources to get a handle on the resources currently available to this population of caregivers. The panel interviewed stakeholders, mainly OGKC, PCSAs, and kinship caregivers throughout Ohio to grasp how the available resources and supports are used, and subsequently identify what is missing to support their needs. The panel made a number of recommendations to improve the support available for kinship caregivers in Ohio.

Recommendations:

1. ODJFS should provide kinship caregivers access to developmental trauma training. Additionally, ODJFS should conduct thoughtful dissemination of the available training to reach as many kinship caregivers as possible.

While the financial needs of kinship caregivers are apparent, interview participants for this evaluation spoke about the need for more informal emotional and training supports such as developmental trauma training. These types of supports are not systematically offered through PCSAs, and kinship caregivers stated the PCSAs were unaware of any such supports in their community. ODJFS might consider how to use the current infrastructure with IHS and the regional training centers to deliver these trainings. There may be opportunities for ODJFS to work with private foster care networks already providing these trainings to foster parents to open up these opportunities for kinship caregivers.

2. ODJFS must consistently collect data related to the number of children placed with kinship caregivers and level of care at which the children are placed. ODJFS should subsequently use this information to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to fully understand the financial costs that would be incurred by the state if these caregivers were no longer able to assume this role.

This CRP work year highlighted the services kinship caregivers provide to ODJFS, PCSAs, biological families, and children in Ohio is immensely valuable. The panel recommends the State take a stronger stance communicating to kinship caregivers and PCSAs how important they are to the child welfare system. To do this, ODJFS should identify the data which should be collected when a PCSA is working with kinship caregivers, this data should include what the costs incurred are for both the PCSAs and the kinship providers when approving and placing children into kinship care. In addition, in order to accurately conduct a cost-benefit analysis it would need to include the “level of care assessment” and related costs. A level of care assessment is conducted on each child who is placed into foster care through a PCSA. The level of care is an assessment which determines the type of foster home the child can be placed into based on the treatment needs of the child and what level of care the foster home is licensed to provide. Level of care can range from “normal” to “intensive”. If the child is medically fragile, placement costs will be higher based on the child’s individual medical needs and the training and skill level of the foster home required to meet these needs. The higher the level of care the higher the per diem received by the foster parent. These costs need to be taken into account when conducting the cost-benefit analysis. One would assume based just on this information, the PCSAs are spending a significant amount of money utilizing foster care placements versus kinship placements. However, the support and services provided to kinship providers is minimal compared to the support provided to licensed foster homes. Collecting all comparable related data from SACWIS will provide a starting point for how to better provide a supportive and stabilizing system for kinship care moving forward. Consistency in utilizing the “living arrangements” tab, which records a child’s living arrangement/placement when they are not in agency custody or living with their biological parents, will assist in collecting this important data. Currently the “living arrangements” tab is not being used consistently amongst PCSAs across Ohio. Without this practice being made a requirement, the data collection will not be accurate in comparing the costs associated with this recommendation.

3. ODJFS should consider changes in eligibility criteria for social service supports to allow greater access to benefits.

The data suggest the number one challenge for kinship families is financial. Particularly, kinship caregivers may struggle to meet basic needs such as housing, legal services, childcare, and food. The data from PCSAs, kinship caregivers, and other advocacy stakeholders suggest the availability of TANF benefits for kinship families due to the child-only income eligibility is immensely helpful. The panel recommends ODJFS consider advocacy, whether through state or federal legislative partners or waiver applications, to consider options for changes to childcare subsidies, SNAP, and legal assistance programs eligibility criteria to consider child-only income for kinship caregivers.

The Southwest Ohio CRP

Southwest Ohio CRP selected a two-year project and therefore completed an interim report this fiscal year. The panel will submit their annual report with findings and recommendations during the 2020-2021 work year. The goal for this panel was to deliver recommendations to improve Ohio's capacity to provide children in care additional supports for educational success. During this year's work, the panel narrowed their focus to early educational outcomes in Ohio for children in substitute care. The Southwest Ohio CRP will deploy a survey to foster parents in Ohio to understand the rates of participation in early care and education programs for three to five-year-old children in substitute care and the barriers to participation in these program. This report represents the progress toward strategic plan goals completed during the first year of their two-year evaluation.

Next Steps:

The Southwest panel participated in the annual strategic planning with all Ohio CRPs on May 28, 2020. Panel members used this time to solidify their plan for 2020-2021 data collection procedures. The next steps for the Southwest Ohio CRP are summarized here:

- The survey included in Appendix B is open to feedback, edits, and suggestions from ODJFS. Additionally, the panel welcomes any advice from ODJFS and their partners to ensure maximum participation in survey responses.
- Following the finalization of the survey, the OSU CRP team will submit the research protocol and survey tool to the OSU Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- Upon approval by the IRB, the panel can begin distribution of the survey. The survey sampling and distribution plan is detailed in the data section of this report.
- The panel is considering completing focus groups with foster parents to better understand the barriers to child enrollment in Early Care and Education programs in Ohio. Focus groups combined with the survey included here will provide the panel with even more robust data for the 2020-2021 annual report. The panel discussed additional plans for data collection during the annual strategic planning meeting on May 28, 2020.

The Southeast Ohio CRP

The Southeast Ohio CRP sought to understand Ohio's ability to monitor and respond to the experiences of children placed in residential facilities. While recent news articles and feedback from youth who have experienced a placement in a residential or group home facility detail negative experiences, the panel wanted to focus on how ODJFS and PCSAs are able to respond to these experiences. The panel gathered information from stakeholders and academic literature to learn more about the use of residential and group home facilities and the reporting of practices within these facilities. Attempts at primary data collection via survey and focus groups with youth and foster alumni who have experienced placement in a residential and group home facilities were unsuccessful for a number of reasons. The responses to the survey were low, partially due to the onset of COVID-19. The panel placed flyers in the community to recruit survey participants, yet these did not reach the intended audience as libraries and community centers closed when state ordered closures began in March 2020. The panel also attempted recruitment at local youth and family serving agencies, but as these agencies stopped seeing clients in-person recruitment for the survey was further stalled. Additionally, in-person focus groups could not be conducted due to CDC guidance around social distancing. The panel will continue with this topic for the 2020-2021 work year. They will redeploy the survey as community agencies begin opening. The panel will conduct the focus groups either in-person or virtually as guidelines for social distancing allow. The panel is confident they can craft meaningful recommendations for next year's annual report.

Next Steps:

The Southeast panel participated in the annual strategic planning with all Ohio CRPs on May 28, 2020. Panel members used this time to solidify their plan for 2020-2021 data collection procedures. The next steps for the Southeast Ohio CRP 2020-2021 data collection activities include:

- Survey to youth and young adults (18-25) who have experienced a placement in a residential or group home facility
- Focus groups with young adults who experienced a placement in a residential or group home facility
- Gather perspective from PCSAs about the barriers to doing effective work when children are placed in residential or group home facilities. This might include:
 - Review of SACWIS activity logs to assess the quality of face to face visits with youth in these facilities
 - Review of exit interviews to understand children's experiences in residential and group home facilities
 - Survey and/or focus groups with PCSA caseworkers

With an additional year to conduct this evaluation, the Southeast Ohio CRP is confident they will be able to deliver meaningful recommendations next year.

Next Steps

All five Ohio CRPs met virtually for the annual strategic planning session on Thursday, May 28, 2020. During this meeting, members selected topics for the new work year and created a strategic plan to reach their goals for 2020–2021. They brainstormed about the types of data they will need for their evaluation. The data request will be submitted to ODJFS to allow time to gather the information. The annual meeting serves as a wrap up of the 2019–2020 work year. Both the Southwest and Southeast CRPs will continue their evaluation topics from 2019-2020 as summarized in this annual report. The annual meeting provides the panels with the opportunity to discuss the successes and challenges from this year’s evaluation with panel members from other parts of the state.

