



J B Pritzker, Governor



Marc D Smith, Director

STATE OF ILLINOIS' CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2025



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Message from the Director



Director Marc D. Smith

I am pleased to present the State of Illinois' Child Welfare System Strategic Plan for 2022-2025. This plan is the culmination of a months-long collaboration between DCFS and private agency partner staff; sister state agencies; foster, adoptive and biological parents; community partners, child welfare experts and current and former youth in care to provide a road map for keeping children safe and strengthening and supporting families over the next five years.

The State's Strategic Plan is intended to ground our work in a collective vision. Through the DCFS Division of Quality Assurance, perspectives shared by numerous agency stakeholders in a survey and focus groups supported the vision for the agency's 2022-2025 strategic plan. Stakeholders included: staff from DCFS and private agencies contracted by DCFS, foster and adoptive caregivers, birth parents, current and former youth in care, judges and court personnel, mandated reporters, community-based service providers, as well as personnel from other agencies and universities partnering with DCFS. More than 1,400 stakeholders provided input to the DCFS Strategic Plan through the survey, focus groups, and individual interviews. The insights shared on how to improve Illinois' child welfare system in the years ahead are deeply appreciated.

In this plan, DCFS sets forth goals and strategies which are overarching and aligned with requirements by various external authorities. DCFS has several plans guiding its work, based on accountability to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, federal and state legislation, and consent decrees. All child welfare agencies are required to have a Child and Family Services Plan required by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and complete Program Improvement Plans as required. All states accessing Title IV-E federal funding are required to develop and implement prevention plans under the Family First Prevention Services Act.

A well-developed strategic plan sets forth an ambitious vision for impact, overarching goals that guide the work to achieve the desired impact, and strategies to achieve the vision and goals. Strategic plans are not meant to be written and read at one point in time. Ideally, a strategic plan is a compass or a touchstone to guide our work with children and families. DCFS' Strategic Plan highlights themes and actions that we believe will translate into improved results for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in Illinois.

"Safety First, Safety Always" is the central theme of DCFS' service to Illinois children and families. Each of us contributing to the success of the child welfare system plays a valuable role in promoting a safety culture through every aspect of work: hotline calls, investigations, prevention services, permanency planning, and supports for current and former youth in care. Knowledge obtained through practitioners, those with lived experiences with the child welfare system, as well as researchers, reporters, policy analysts,

trainers and technical assistance providers, and informed others provides essential information to translate “Safety First, Safety Always” principles into an effective safety culture. With the safety of children and families top of mind, along with keeping safe all of those working in the child welfare system as paramount to our success, DCFS marshals a wide array of resources. The State’s Strategic Plan articulates goals and strategies across its programs and services, as well as in all of the essential support functions of workforce development and retention; diversity, equity, and inclusion; technological services, communications, and development of knowledge to guide continuous quality improvement.

Unfortunately, we have not eliminated the need for child welfare services in Illinois.

Throughout the document you will see Goals and Strategies, designated by icons.



Goals are accompanied by Target icon.



Strategies are designated by a Gear/Light bulb icon.

Various forms of child maltreatment – whether neglect or abuse – have persisted. As child welfare systems have evolved, and our technological capacity has improved to be able to use data to understand child welfare outcomes, we can understand Illinois’ progress relative to child welfare systems across the U.S.

DCFS, and the Illinois child welfare system as a whole, has already begun the transformative work described in this plan, but there is much more to be done. This plan invites active participation of all our stakeholders as we identify our priorities, address our challenges and work to realize our vision of an Illinois where children, youth and families thrive.

A blue ink signature of Marc D. Smith.

Marc D. Smith

Director

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Executive Summary

The 2022-2025 State's Strategic Plan includes 30 goals in 11 key areas focused on the principle of "Safety First, Safety Always" in providing strengths-based, family-centered, and trauma-informed services for Illinois children and families. The 11 key areas are:

1. Improving Safety of Children and Youth in Care
2. Preventing Child Maltreatment
3. Increasing Permanency of Children and Youth in Care
4. Supporting Well-being of Children and Youth in Care
5. Boosting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
6. Strengthening Workforce Development and Retention
7. Engaging Stakeholder Voice
8. Utilizing Communications to Achieve our Goals
9. Modernizing Technology
10. Using Data to Inform Decision-making
11. Integrating Continuous Quality Improvement

The vision articulated in State's Strategic Plan is grounded in the input and recommendations of more than 1,300 stakeholders who brought their perspectives to how to develop and improve a proactive system of supports for our state's vulnerable children and families. Multiple social and economic stressors contribute to the context in which children and families live that, in turn, affect the quality of relationships between children, family members, caregivers, and professionals working to serve them. As child welfare practitioners respond to hotline calls, investigations, and casework responsibilities, a broad partnership is required to achieve optimal results with each individual child and family. Since many factors contribute to child maltreatment, many resources must be marshalled to achieve optimal results.

The goals and accompanying strategies articulated in each of the 11 focal areas represent a diligent and thoughtful effort to enact high-impact reform in the state's child welfare system. Each stakeholder engaged in supporting the safety, permanency, and wellbeing of children at-risk for, or involved in, the child welfare system is essential to achieving the goals of safety, permanency, and wellbeing. While every effort has been made to be inclusive and comprehensive, the Strategic Plan is not intended to reflect every service, program, responsibility, and partnership endeavor. The Strategic Plan is a guide to agency priorities and commitments to improve operations, policies, and practices that benefit children, youth, and families. It is meant as a tool for ongoing engagement with all stakeholders invested in better safety, permanency, and wellbeing outcomes among children and youth in care, and at-risk of coming into care.

A short summary of each of the 11 focal areas follows.

Improving Safety of Children and Youth in Care. This section has two central goals: 1) to reduce the rate of recurrence of maltreatment of children brought to DCFS' attention, and 2) reduce the rate of maltreatment for children in DCFS' care. The strategies involve improvement of guidance and supports to child protection specialists, as well as to foster parents, supervisors, permanency staff, and partnership with staff in community-based, private agencies to deliver high-quality casework services, licensing, and accountability practices.

Preventing Child Maltreatment. This section has four goals: 1) extend the outreach to Illinois' youth, families, and constituents through prevention strategies offered by DCFS hotline staff; 2) develop the capacity of child welfare professionals to engage families in evidence-based prevention strategies to support children staying safe at home; 3) engage at-risk children, youth, and families in evidence-based prevention strategies tailored to support children staying safely at home with their parents; and 4) offer supports to staff and community-based partners that ensure high-quality engagement and effective case planning with children and families. The foundational principles of DCFS' approach to prevention are reflected in the Illinois Core Practice model and emphasized in federal requirements of the Family First Prevention Services Act (called "Family First"). In partnership with state sister agencies and community-based providers, Illinois DCFS will continue to increase its capacity to deliver evidence-based services to both children and family members, anticipated to have positive impacts for child safety, permanency, and wellbeing.

Increasing Permanency of Children and Youth in Care. This section has three goals: 1) increase family placements among youth in care by increasing the use of subsidized guardianship as a permanency option, 2) reduce the average length of stay among youth in DCFS' care, and 3) work with stakeholders to address disparate outcomes for marginalized youth and families within the court system. Subsidized guardianship offers a legal pathway for a child to have a permanent placement with a caregiver in his/her kinship network, that does not require termination of parental rights. By increasing procedural knowledge and promoting the use of subsidized guardianship, youth may then have increased likelihood of placement stability, maintain family connectedness, and improve the chances for reunification.

The primary strategies in this area include improving guidance to workers and strengthening the development and usage of knowledge and data that help remove barriers to permanency, particularly for marginalized children and youth. Increasing the implementation of child and family team decision-making to build out support networks and facilitate trauma-informed and strengths-based interventions supports achievement of timely permanency outcomes. Dedicated and consistent relationship-building with partners and stakeholders in the judicial system, as well as from marginalized communities, serves the aim of reducing disparate outcomes for marginalized children and youth in the child welfare system.

Supporting Well-being of Children and Youth in Care. This section has two goals: 1) meet the physical health, emotional well-being, and behavioral health needs of youth in care, and 2) improve educational outcomes among youth in care to support their successful transition to adulthood. Achieving these goals depends upon proactive, effective partnership and service delivery with community-based service providers, healthcare providers in a responsive managed care network, and educators and educational partners. The strategies to achieve these two goals are focused on building out the system of support for the behavioral, emotional, physical, and educational well-being of children and youth in care. DCFS is focused on marshalling the resources of YouthCare care coordinators, as well as leveraging the available resources for therapeutic services and treatment that meaningfully help youth sustain safe and stable living that optimizes their success in education and life.

Health, education, and permanency outcomes are highly interconnected. Without a solid educational foundation, youth in care are at heightened risk for adverse outcomes of homelessness, exposure to violence, justice system involvement, and unemployment. Strategies to improve the educational well-being of youth in care include better supports, guidance, training, and communication with youth, staff, caregivers, and stakeholder partners focused on reducing and eliminating barriers to educational success.

Boosting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This section has two goals: 1) increase cultural competency among all DCFS staff and contracted partner agency staff, and 2) increase the diversity of DCFS and contracted agency staff to reflect the diversity of children and families we serve. By honoring and valuing diversity through a welcoming and supportive

organizational culture, DCFS can effectively mobilize its resources and collaborate with others to meet the needs of children and families. We cannot effectively serve Illinois' diverse children and families without practicing inclusive and equity-focused communication, leadership, casework, and programming. Strategies to achieve the desired goals include using assessment data to guide programs and activities designed to increase cultural competency of individuals working in the Illinois child welfare workforce. Additionally, a robust communications and marketing effort will be used to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion among DCFS and contracted agency staff, as well as build an organizational culture focused on culturally-competent communication and service delivery.

Strengthening Workforce Development and Retention. This section has four goals: 1) reduce staffing vacancies through enhanced recruitment efforts supported by DCFS work with ongoing and new partnerships, 2) create a streamlined onboarding and workforce management system to hire the most qualified candidates for each open position and support improved retention, 3) expand professional development supports for staff, so that they gradually become more knowledgeable, proficient, and confident in their positions and less likely to leave the child welfare field, and 4) develop robust systems of support (feedback, training, follow-up, supportive supervision) that effectively build worker skills and confidence and motivate staff persistence through difficult tasks and situations. Substantially improving recruitment and retention in the state child welfare system requires creative, strong leadership from all levels, stakeholders, and partners. Strategies to achieve desired goals include: 1) strengthening the breadth and efficiency of recruitment and staff selection efforts, 2) improving the efficiency and motivational support in information delivery and administrative processes for new and existing staff, 3) supporting and retaining qualified staff and supervisors through multiple, dedicated partnerships, 4) reinforcing good field practice to engage effectively with families and youth, and 5) equipping staff with the basic knowledge to avoid and appropriately respond to potentially dangerous situations in the execution of their daily duties.

Engaging Stakeholder Voice. This section has two goals, which are to: 1) utilize stakeholder voice to guide service improvements and expansion of operational plans, initiatives, and policy changes, and 2) provide meaningful opportunities for youth to voice their perspectives and concerns, and utilize youth voice to guide service delivery and program expansion, particularly youth with specialized needs. The child welfare system is varied and complex, requiring a wide range of input and contribution from many different stakeholders to achieve desired results. Each stakeholder group has different interests, and DCFS works to provide time and opportunity for each stakeholder to express perspectives, concerns, experiences, and recommendations through different venues. Strategies for improving stakeholder engagement include identification and implementation of multiple avenues for consistent, transparent communication and input, integral to agency-wide continuous quality improvement.

Utilizing Communications to Achieve Our Goals. This section has two goals, which are to: 1) communicate key priorities, policies, and information through timely, accessible strategies, and 2) lead information campaigns that build and maintain trust and transparency with all stakeholders. Input from stakeholders through surveys and focus groups emphasized how important communications efforts are to fostering a collaborative and high-performing child welfare system that is optimally impactful with children and families. Strategies for improving the system of communications and information campaigns involve marshalling knowledge, tools, technology, and resources in creative and effective ways.

Modernizing Technology. Upgrades to technological tools and systems helps to improve the experiences of everyone interacting with Illinois' child welfare services – youth, families, staff, and partner agencies. This section has four goals, which are to: 1) build a transformational, modern, and innovative technology eco-system for Illinois' child welfare services; 2) reduce the vulnerability associated with use of modern technological tools through the development of a “hardened information security system;” 3) provide a data management and analysis platform, and 4) enhance employee and partner service experiences to better serve the people of Illinois.

Maximizing the benefits of technological resources and tools in the child welfare system requires a systemic and thoughtful approach to modernization. Technological innovations supporting the mission and operations of child welfare systems have expanded, and DCFS embeds innovations throughout programs and initiatives. Strategies to achieve the desired goals are numerous and complex – reflecting the balance of focus on improving the efficiency and quality of service delivery, while protecting the security and confidentiality of sensitive information. Systematic upgrades to the technological system includes management of a process to facilitate adoption of new practices in data use, management, and security, along with engagement and training in the use of technological tools and systems by staff and stakeholders. Innovations in DCFS’ use of technology will be guided by a product-centric approach, which designates a knowledgeable and stable team to provide stewardship of a design process that facilitates the utility of new technological tools to achieve desired efficiencies and goals.

Using Data to Inform Decision-making. This section has two goals, which are to: 1) implement a functional data governance to provide authority, oversight, and shared decision-making over management of data; 2) increase data and technology literacy and usage across the department to make data-driven decisions.

A functional data governance structure defines, approves, and oversees principles and best practices for data management. In turn, the best data management practices result in the creation of high quality and accessible data on which practice and policy decisions can be made. Implementation of a data governance workgroup to manage data needs, data utilization, and data-related standards provides the necessary management for data-informed decision-making to have maximum impact.

Data reporting and visualizations provide essential tools to manage performance, guide programmatic and service improvements, assist in illustrating progress towards goals, and highlight areas for further development. Accurate and high-quality data support decision makers and practitioners to trust knowledge generated from the data in order to make informed and knowledgeable decisions. DCFS will continue to use both internal and external resources for data analysis, knowledge creation, and knowledge utilization to guide improvements, inform decisions, track progress, and identify gaps. To improve agency effectiveness in serving marginalized groups, collecting quality and timely information will guide assessment of needs, development of service improvements, and track progress towards desired outcomes.

Integrating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). This section has 2 goals which are to: 1) improve and strengthen the integrated statewide DCFS and private agency CQI system to effectively use quantitative and qualitative data to actively support system priorities, goals, and outcomes, and 2) enhance the quality of social work practice and outcomes with children and families, using improved program monitoring and supports.

The “Plan, Do, Check, Act” (PDCA) is the foundation of continuous quality improvement. DCFS integrates the PDCA cycle throughout its administration, policy review, service delivery, and program improvement efforts. Through planning and data review meetings as well as online communication, DCFS embeds: a) intentional use of data to identify problems and their root causes, b) evidence-based improvement strategies, c) research-based solutions to implement small tests of change, and d) use of implementation feedback to adjust as needed and scale-up effective strategies in systematic ways.

Illinois DCFS Mission, Vision and Values



PROTECTING CHILDREN, STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Mission

Protecting children and strengthening families by offering preventative and supportive services in homes in neighborhoods and communities across Illinois. By focusing on safety first, prevention, permanency and the well-being of the children and families we serve, we will create a child and family welfare agency that improves access and outcomes for children and families served.

Vision

A child welfare system that supports the safety and well-being of children and families through a streamlined system of care that results in positive outcomes for families and children of Illinois.

Values

Safety First, Safety Always
Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice
Responsive Interactions
Empathy
Respect
Trust
Accountability

—

Summary of Strategic Plan Survey, Focus Groups, and Interviews

The DCFS Division of Quality Assurance invited input and guidance to the agency's strategic plan from a wide range of stakeholders including staff from DCFS and private agencies contracted by DCFS, foster and adoptive caregivers, birth parents, current and former youth in care, judges and court personnel, mandated reporters, community-based service providers, as well as personnel from other agencies and universities partnering with DCFS. First, DCFS disseminated a survey in July 2021, followed by focus groups with stakeholders. Individual interviews were conducted with birth parents, current youth in care, and former youth in care to protect confidentiality and provide a welcoming space for input. The survey reflects input from 1,303 stakeholders. Survey respondents were invited to sign-up for a one-time focus group, and 38% (500) indicated willingness to participate. From 200 stakeholders that registered for focus groups, 98 participants attended focus groups and interviews held on August 17-19, 2021.

Survey Results

Among total survey respondents, the top five areas indicated as "most important for DCFS to better support and serve the children and families of Illinois" were:

1. Make sure children are safe/protected from being hurt physically, sexually, mentally, or emotionally (71.5%)
2. Make sure there are services and supports in place for families to prevent children from being hurt and possibly removed from their parent(s) care. (52.7%)
3. Make sure there are enough foster homes, treatment facilities, counselors, and community agencies (51.2%)
4. Make sure children do not remain in foster care for a long time (children return home to their parent(s), are adopted, or have guardianship by another caregiver) (46.7%)
5. Make sure child welfare professionals are given the best information and training/education on how to support and serve children and families (35%)

Additional areas of priority were for DCFS to: work together with other community agencies or state agencies that serve children and families (25.4%), maintain accurate records/data and be able to use and share that information to make the best decisions (16.4%), and provide the latest technology (computers/software/smart phones) to support the work being done by caseworkers and investigators (8.5%).

The number of survey responses varied by group: DCFS staff (n=385), contracted private agency staff (n=385), foster/adoptive caregivers (n=255), juvenile court personnel (n=106), community service provider (n=56), mandated reporters (n=51), other state agency staff (n=22), university partner/academia/consultant (n=19), advisory group member/other (n=9), birth parent (n=5), former youth in care (n=5), youth in care (n=3). Comments from each of these groups were summarized into narratives.

DCFS staff highlighted desire for expanded leadership for biological parents, foster parents, and youth in care, as well as desire for additional worker supports (lower caseloads, faster hiring process, investments in worker retention, supportive supervision, and improved staff safety procedures). In addition to reporting the need for lower caseloads and supervisory supports, contracted private agency staff emphasized the need to close the gap between DCFS and private partner salaries to improve worker retention, provide quality training for both new and experienced staff, provide additional supports for staff and court personnel to improve permanency hearings, and strengthen consistency of collaboration, expectations, and resources to improve organizational cultures that support worker retention.

Foster caregivers, mandated reporters, and community service providers emphasized the need for keeping the needs of children as the top priority, greater efficiency in communication and service delivery, reducing worker stress, and providing workers with training/supports on trauma-informed care. Youth in care desired support for having their own technology, clothes, and belongings that reflect who they are, and broader advertising on educational resources available. Along with greater timeliness with service planning, birth parents recommended better communication and support for helping them stay connected to events in their children's lives (school and special events, appointments, birthdays, etc.). Other stakeholders also emphasized the need to reduce the disproportionate involvement of African-Americans in the child welfare system and implement a systemic effort to eliminate maltreatment for children in care.

Focus Group/Interview Results

Stakeholders in the focus groups (n=98) valued the opportunity to share their perspectives and recommended that DCFS convene ongoing focus groups (e.g., quarterly) to stay abreast of issues of concern and areas for problem-solving. Engaging stakeholder voice throughout child welfare operations and casework, and providing multiple avenues to contribute to agency leadership is an essential effort to improving services to youth and families.



A prevalent theme is the need to address communication, policies, and practices to demonstrate value and support foster parents, increase timely service delivery to youth, and improve collaboration and transparent communication between DCFS and community-based providers. Focus group participants reported few, if any, supports to male youth in care who are parenting; excessive delays in various services (obtaining medical cards, legal screenings, hearings, foster home licensing); and lack of a centralized, up-to-date informational resource (e.g., clearinghouse) for housing and residential facilities.

Improved relations between child welfare staff and judicial staff would help timely resolution of proceedings for youth and families. During the pandemic, stakeholders appreciated the timely, direct, and adaptive communication from DCFS. Using technological resources and communication channels to achieve frequent, transparent, and consistent communication to all stakeholders is greatly needed across the agency, not only for pandemic-related issues. Modernizing technology to improve two-way communication, timely service delivery, quality of casework, and mobilization of scarce resources is necessary to achieve desired outcomes in child welfare.

Concluding Thoughts

Opinions and comments shared in both the survey and focus groups contributed to the emphasis of each of the key elements in the DCFS Strategic Plan. Stakeholders reinforced the central mission of “Safety First, Safety Always” through

recommendation of strategies, supports, and operations that improve the safety, permanency, and wellbeing of children and youth at-risk of coming into care, and those already in care. Stakeholders raised the call to action for addressing race disparities in child welfare outcomes, and promoting efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion that would reduce impact of systemic racism.

Efforts to reduce staff turnover, especially for direct service workers, and provide additional supports for worker safety, are paramount to the success of achieving desired outcomes with children and families. Ongoing stakeholder engagement is the bedrock of any strategic plan. By upgrading communications, technology, and data management practices, DCFS and community-based service providers can strengthen the system of support for optimal results in child and worker safety.

Improving Safety of Children and Youth in Care

DCFS' Division of Child Protection is responsible for responding to all reports of suspected child maltreatment. Child protection investigators are first responders to reports of abuse or neglect. Our Child Protection Specialists are responsible for conducting timely and thorough safety assessments. The Child Protection Specialist can conduct this assessment and ensure the safety of the children by gathering all the critical elements to the investigation including: 1) the current situation brought to our attention, 2) the total environment of the child, and when applicable, 3) the complete picture of the department's history of involvement with the family.

After a timely and thorough assessment of safety, the DCFS Child Protection team works to secure a safe environment for the child. Most often, the family remains intact, with DCFS providing timely connection to the supportive services needed by the family during this time of crisis, and to mitigate the risk of harm. For some cases, DCFS staff create a short-term voluntary safety plan with the parent/caregiver to place the child in a safe space, while additional information and assessment occurs. When necessary, the department brings child(ren) into our care to ensure their safety and petitions the court for temporary custody.



Goal #1: Reduce the rate of recurrence of maltreatment of children brought to the attention of the department.

Maltreatment recurrence is the leading performance indicator in child welfare systems used to measure child safety. When a maltreatment report has been substantiated or indicated through a DCFS investigation following a prior substantiated report that involves the same child or family, there is a maltreatment recurrence. Maltreatment recurrence is measured among: 1) children with substantiated reports, 2) children served in Intact Family Services, 3) children with substantiated reports who have not received services, and 4) children in substitute care.

To reduce the recurrence of maltreatment and ensure the continued safety of the children brought to our attention, we must be timely in our work. Timeliness is imperative not only for the completion of our investigative activity, but also for our work to connect family members to critical supportive services at the time of crisis. The DCFS Child Protection team engages in four primary steps: 1) thorough assessment and review of a family's prior history before commencement of the investigation, 2) use of multidisciplinary teams to support problem-solving and solution-finding throughout the life of a case (e.g., legal, medical/clinical, advocacy), 3) early identification and linkage of families to Intact Family Services, and 4) timely completion of investigations within the 60-day statutory timeframe. These strategies support timely and thorough investigations to support children to be safe from maltreatment.



Strategies:

- a. Provide clear procedural guidance to child protection specialists on critical activities that equip them to complete timely and thorough assessments of safety including use of: 1) prior history of involvement, 2) the multidisciplinary approach (e.g., professionals in child welfare, nursing, medicine, clinical treatment, law enforcement, advocacy); and 3) the new safety decision tool.
- b. Engage youth and caregivers in safety planning and monitoring, which reinforces the Youth Bill of Rights. One primary mechanism is through regularly scheduled Administrative Case Review (ACR) meetings to include youth. Tracking youth involvement in ACR meetings is an essential part of the quality of contacts with the beneficiaries of our service delivery.
- c. Guide investigators to front-end investigative management skills including: 1) reducing the number of reports that require investigative work beyond the 60-day statutory limit and, 2) reducing the number of days from when a child/family comes to the attention of child protection to when the Intact Family Services case is opened and assigned to an Intact Family Child Welfare Specialist.
- d. Continue to review and improve quantitative measures of quality investigative service delivery. DCFS Division of Child Protection currently utilizes five Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of Safety. KPI results are shared and addressed statewide, regionally, sub-regionally, within sites, within teams, and with individual workers. By sharing and discussing performance on a common set of performance indicators, the Division can focus improvement efforts exactly where they are needed. The performance indicators are used to reinforce and champion excellent performers on the KPIs of Safety and build an agency culture focused on achieving these goals with children and families.

Substitute care entry rates have increased over the past five years, and maltreatment of youth in substitute care has simultaneously increased. While the rate of maltreatment for youth in substitute care was increasing prior to the pandemic, stressors associated with the pandemic exacerbated rising maltreatment rates for youth in DCFS care. Monthly visits to foster parent and relatives' homes by public and private caseworkers provide the ongoing assessment and interventions necessary to ensure child safety. Without these in-home visits every month, children in DCFS care are exposed to heightened risk of recurring maltreatment. As DCFS and private staff work to ensure that face-to-face monthly visits happen for every child in State care, the visits prompt referrals to clinical and other specialty services, focused on maintaining child safety. DCFS calls upon available resources from community-based agencies and resources of other state agencies to help reduce safety threats to children in DCFS' care.



Goal #2: Reduce the rates of recurrence of maltreatment for children in DCFS care.



Strategies:

- a. Support supervisors and case staff to conduct monthly in-home visits for every child in DCFS care, using a thorough assessment and referral process.
- b. Increase availability of support services for foster parents, and the number of caregivers who are engaging in recommended services to mitigate safety threats and risks of maltreatment.

- c. Investigate risks of maltreatment for youth in care with additional research and data analysis of licensed foster homes, unlicensed foster homes, homes of relatives, and other permanency situations, to determine high-impact strategies reducing recurring maltreatment among youth in care.

Preventing Child Maltreatment

Illinois DCFS envisions a transformed child welfare system through its overall prevention strategy. Through its prevention services, DCFS offers services grounded in understanding past and present trauma, as well as racial and structural inequities, experienced by children and family members. DCFS works to build cohesive communities by providing supportive resources to families, minimizing barriers to participation, and ensuring effective staff preparation to assist families in accomplishing their goals. Our prevention strategies are focused on meeting children and families where they are, and then tailoring appropriate and effective parenting education and support services, so that children remain safe and supported at home. As family members experience the stressors associated with poverty, substance abuse, and mental health disorders – and increased risks of child maltreatment are present – DCFS works to partner with community providers, sister agencies, kinship networks, and others to help.

The Illinois Core Practice Model provides an overarching framework and sets forth the vision and values for the Illinois child welfare system. The Illinois Core Practice Model outlines the importance of nine core practices that are emphasized and reinforced through three components: Family-centered, Trauma-informed, Strengths-based (FTS) practice; Model of Supervisory Practice (MoSP); and Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings (CFTM).

Prevention begins with each staff member applying the principles and actions of the Core Practice Model to their work with children, youth, and families. This model calls upon all of us to conduct our work – assessments, service planning, case-work, linkage to resources – in a family-centered, trauma-informed, and strengths-based manner. By using the nine core FTS practices with families, our staff and partners help family members to ensure safety, support permanency, and promote well-being. DCFS provides Intact Family Services to enable children to remain safely at home and avoid separation and/or placement of the children into substitute care. To ensure the safety, wellbeing, and continued healthy development of children, the primary components of the performance driven program include:

- a. professional assessment of family issues that lead to the department's involvement;
- b. short-term arrangement of appropriate safety plans, if necessary;
- c. provision of direct intervention and linkage to community services;
- d. implementation of protective actions when appropriate.

DCFS' leadership coordinates its overall prevention strategy in our Family First plan, which was developed in context of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). Through federal legislation, Family First galvanizes states to define populations most at-risk of entry into foster care and provide services with established effectiveness focused on keeping children safe at home with their families. Precursors for children entering substitute care most often relate to lack of parental education, the need for mental health services for parents or children themselves and need for substance abuse treatment. With these risk factors in mind, Family First calls for states to establish an array of evidence-based interventions

(EBIs) designed to reduce the need for substitute care. Aligned with the vision of this legislation, Illinois is building a continuum of care that provides comprehensive and coordinated support to families with children most at-risk of foster care entry, in addition to families with children already in care.



Goal #3: Extend the outreach to Illinois' youth, families, and constituents through prevention strategies offered by DCFS Hotline staff.

DCFS engages in prevention throughout its contacts with constituents across Illinois. The DCFS Hotline is a central mechanism for gathering information from any constituent in the state regarding child abuse and neglect. Oftentimes, individuals have their first contact with DCFS through the hotline, and prevention-focused referrals are part of hotline staffing practice. The DCFS Hotline fields more than 250,000 calls per year on average (based on FY2015 – FY2019 years). Prevention efforts of the DCFS Hotline are an important part of the department's comprehensive approach to supporting prevention of child maltreatment statewide.



Strategies:

- a. Strengthen the use of the SPIDER (Service Provider Identification and Explorative Resources) database during hotline reports to refer callers to agencies and community-based resources to assist with prevention services.
- b. As part of DCFS' efforts to expand safe permanency options for youth, increase referrals to the Extended Family Support Program (EFSP) for relatives, fictive kin, or potential guardians. The EFSP provides counseling, benefits, educational and medical advocacy, housing supports, and referrals to legal services.
- c. Continue to improve rates of completion of prevention strategies used by DCFS Hotline staff, including:
 1. When hotline callers raise concerns about school absences or truancy, continue to send Educational Neglect notifications to the education officials and the local truancy officer.
 2. For hotline reports on open cases in the department, continue to send informational notices to caseworkers to support prevention of further maltreatment.
 3. For hotline calls related to risks of placement disruption for youth in adoptive homes, continue to offer adoption preservation services to promote safety, permanency, and wellbeing for youth.
 4. To address risk factors to youth safety who have run away from placements, continue to refer runaway youth to supports offered by the Child Intake Recovery Unit (CIRU) helpline.
 5. To support prevention needs among youth with significant behavioral needs (i.e., minors requiring authoritative intervention), continue referrals to comprehensive, community-based youth services.
 6. To protect unwanted babies from being hurt, killed, or abandoned, continue to manage relinquishments of infants under the HAVEN law.



Goal #4: Develop the capacity of child welfare professionals to engage families in evidence-based prevention services to support children staying safe at home.



Strategies:

- a. Support staff to utilize high-quality, thorough assessments to identify the unique needs of children and families.
- b. Increase child welfare professionals' knowledge and utilization of recommended, evidence-based interventions for families served by Intact and Child Welfare Services (CWS).
- c. Encourage caseworkers' use of evidence-based interventions to empower and encourage families to partner with them in developing plans and goals to ensure child safety at home.
- d. Implement and monitor the progress of engaging families in effective EBIs.
- e. Strengthen linkages with community providers and sister agencies to deliver prevention services with children and families, building upon their protective factors and strengths.
- f. Integrate care coordination of prevention services through Child and Family team meetings as routine practice in casework with families, to provide tailored supports to optimize child and family well-being in safe and supportive homes.



Goal #5: Engage at-risk children, youth, and families in evidence-based prevention services tailored to support children in staying safely at home with their parents.



Strategies:

- a. Conduct comprehensive assessments with children and family members that result in identified service needs and linkage to available local community resources, focused upon remedying problems which may result in neglect or abuse to a child.
- b. Utilize Motivational Interviewing to support enhanced engagement in interventions needed to achieve case plan outcomes and meet identified needs of children and family members.
- c. Ensure the safety and wellbeing of involved children while services are being delivered.
- d. Enable families to resolve minor to moderate challenges and needs that contribute to safety threats for children at home.
- e. Equip families to effectively utilize their own strengths and community resources to ensure the safety of their children.

Sister Agency Partners

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Goal #6: Offer supports to staff and community-based partners that ensure high-quality engagement and effective case planning with children and families.



Strategies:

- a. Provide training and support to supervisors to use the Model of Supervisory Practice as the vehicle to coach their casework staff in providing quality services to children and families, aligned with the Core Practice Model.
- b. Support child welfare professionals to become proficient in using Motivational Interviewing, as an evidence-based strategy for family engagement.
- c. Increase supervisors and caseworkers' use of Child and Family team meetings as a platform for care coordination with youth and families.

Increasing Permanency of Children and Youth in Care

One of the central aims of DCFS is to help stabilize family situations and cultivate safe and permanent homes for children that come to the attention of the department. Children deserve to have a home environment that promotes safety, family connectivity, and a legal designation that gives them a permanent family status. Many youths in care are placed in foster home setting with family members or with individuals with family connections (fictive kin). Family placements provide a sense of security and family connectedness and are associated with better outcomes for children and youth.

Reunification remains the primary expectation for children who enter the child welfare system. When reunification is not possible, adoption and Subsidized Guardianship are options. Subsidized Guardianship allows for the youth in care to achieve a permanent legal designation with their committed and licensed caregiver. This permanency option also allows the family to make a choice that promotes and maintains existing family connections and relationships. Subsidized Guardianship is a legal process like adoption but does not require termination of parental rights. In some instances, adoption is the preferred goal for children, and DCFS pursues adoption when in the best interest of child(ren).

DCFS engages with an extensive network of public and private partners to create and sustain safe, permanent homes for each youth in care. Key stakeholders include: the court system, public and private partner agencies, community supports, and a robust support network to help youth in care with family reunification, subsidized guardianship, and adoption options.



Goal #7: Increase long-term family placements among youth in care by increasing the use of Subsidized Guardianship as a permanency option.

While Illinois was the first state to provide subsidized guardianship as a permanency option back in 1997, this option is rarely used in recent years. Historically, use of subsidized guardianship has been limited across states due to lower levels of federal financial assistance to guardianship families compared to adoptive families (see: Brief History of Guardianship, <http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/guardianship/history.htm>). DCFS is working to understand barriers to the use of Subsidized Guardianship through research with Illinois families on their experiences with permanency planning. The department has strengthened its collaboration with private providers and community stakeholders to increase the usage of Subsidized Guardianship to support youth in safe and stable placements.



Strategies:

- a. Implement a comprehensive Subsidized Guardianship Work Plan and System Reform plan to analyze and address root causes, system barriers, and create solutions that increase the number of family and kin utilizing Subsidized Guardianship as a permanency option for youth.
- b. Increase licensure rates for homes of relatives (HMR) and fictive kin by providing early attention, support, and tracking of individual progress toward completion of licensure requirements.
- c. Develop data tracking tools to support program managers and supervisors in guiding permanency staff in locating individuals in youth's kinship networks and conducting effective, concurrent permanency planning that helps youth accelerate their timeline to permanency.
- d. Update agency rules, procedures, and training to provide simplified, stream-lined guidance to permanency teams, to facilitate ease of completion of subsidized guardianship arrangements.
- e. Develop operational procedures and training aligned with legislative changes outlined in HB 1068 (Public Act 102-0193) which clarifies the selection of a permanency goal and includes guardianship as a consideration.



Goal #8: Reduce the average length of stay among youth in DCFS care to 24 months.

Over the past 15 years, Illinois' average length of stay among youth in DCFS care has been consistent, between 32 and 34 months (Children and Family Research Center, BH Monitoring Report, FY2021). Agency staff have engaged in substantive changes to reduce the average length of stay among youth in care, which are reflected in the strategies below. The average length of stay in care varies by child age, in that older youth have longer median stays in care than youth in younger age groups.



Strategies:

- a. Building upon existing agency policies and procedures that relate to family reunification, create user-friendly tools and guides to support staff decision-making and action when considering reunification as a permanency option.
- b. Complete intense review of cases with a goal of adoption or guardianship, especially among youth who have been in care for 24 months or more. Intense review involves a systematic process to address known barriers and identify next steps for timely decision-making to achieve the permanency goal. Intense reviews help guide workers to weigh advantages of each option while youth maintain kinship and family connections.
- c. Provide key information to youth, family members, foster caregivers, and others on the permanency process, and supports the identification of specific barriers and next steps for all cases with the goal of Adoption or Guardianship.
- d. Utilize real time data to identify system issues that hinder and promote permanency with the goal of streamlining processes.
- e. Increase the use of Child and Family Team meetings to mobilize the family and the DCFS network to increase timely completion of permanency arrangements.
- f. With an expansion of search through youth's kinship networks, increase the use of Subsidized Guardianship to reduce the length of stay of children in care.

Average length of stay in DCFS care varies by child race and ethnicity, in that White children have shorter lengths of stay than African American and Latino children. Relative to the proportion of African-American and Latino children residing in Illinois, African-American children are over-represented at every key decision point in the child welfare system over the past several years, and Hispanic children are under-represented¹. Child welfare decision points include: 1) investigations, 2) protective custodies, 3) indicated maltreatment reports, 4) substitute care entries, 5) engagement in Intact Family Services, and 6) remaining in care longer than 36 months. Reducing racial disproportionality is important at every child welfare decision point, and most importantly, in the length of time that youth remain in substitute care.

While Native-American children and families are a small fraction of the Illinois population, culturally responsive practices aligned with the Indian Child Welfare Act must be applied in work with Native American families to reduce disproportionate child welfare outcomes. Children, youth, and family members whose primary language is not English (e.g., Spanish-speaking) require specialized resources and supports to accommodate fair and equitable services throughout engagement with the child welfare system.

¹ Fuller, T., Landa, C., Wakita, S., Adams, K. A. (2021). Racial disproportionality in the Illinois child welfare system. FY 2021 Report. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. https://cfr.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20211021_FY2021DisproportionalityReport.pdf



Goal #9: Work collaboratively with stakeholders to address disparate outcomes for marginalized youth and families within the court system.



Strategies:

- a. Develop a work group with juvenile court stakeholders from each Judicial District to make improvements to ensure the court system supports equity for all children and families in Illinois with the goal of improving timely and safe permanency outcomes.
- b. Facilitate dialogue and partnership in the development of proposed changes in legislation by hosting regular online forums with stakeholder groups.
- c. Work collaboratively with stakeholder groups to enhance the development of Spanish-speaking and Native-American placement resources, gain knowledge from subject-matter experts, improve policies, procedures, and service delivery for children and families covered by the Burgos Consent Decree and Indian Child Welfare Act.
- d. Share policy and procedure changes, as well as department priorities with stakeholder groups and the court system through comprehensive and targeted communication strategies.

Supporting Well-being of Children and Youth in Care

Each youth in care requires support from caregivers and agency staff to support their physical, emotional, and behavioral wellness; educational success; and productive transition to adulthood. When the health and educational needs of youth in care are being met with assistance from community, healthcare, and school district partners, youth are more likely to have safety and permanency. Likewise, when youth live in safe and stable homes, they are more likely to succeed in school and in their transition to adulthood.



Goal #10: Increase options to decrease youth in care who are beyond medical necessity.

DCFS recognizes that youth in its care who have emotional and behavioral health needs and require psychiatric hospitalization sometimes remain in the hospital longer than medically necessary (i.e., “beyond medical necessity” or “BMN”) because there is no safe and appropriate discharge option. In order to accurately understand the issue of youth in care who are BMN, however, it is essential to understand the following two points: (1) most youth in care who require psychiatric hospitalization do not remain in the hospital beyond medical necessity; and (2) the number of youth in care who require psychiatric hospitalization is a small percentage of the total number of youth in care.

While the issue of youth in care who are BMN may seem straightforward, its causes are multi-faceted and its solutions are neither immediate nor absolute. The lack of community-based programs and service providers in Illinois means that the kinds of services and supports that would allow youth to be safely and appropriately cared for by their families and in their communities are too often unavailable. In some instances, families feel they have no better option than to relinquish custody of their children to DCFS with the hope that DCFS can find the services their children need. In other instances, the needs of these youth are so highly complex and unique that the youth must remain in the psychiatric hospital beyond medical necessity because of the time needed to develop and secure a program to meet their needs.

The Department's work is focused on driving changes in the mental health and child welfare systems to reduce and, ideally, eliminate the number of youth in care who are BMN. Further, the number of youth in care who are BMN consistently includes youth who entered DCFS care only after they were psychiatrically hospitalized and BMN. As compared to youth who were already in DCFS care when they were hospitalized, this subset of BMN youth in care tend to experience higher numbers of BMN days prior to their discharge from the hospital.



Strategies

- a. DCFS has adopted best practice guidance from an Informational Bulletin issued jointly by CMS and SAMHSA (Mann & Hyde, 2013). The Bulletin is based on evidence from major federal demonstration projects designed to identify which services, when provided in conjunction with traditional mental health services, were most helpful at maintaining youth successfully in their home communities. The demonstration projects also looked at youth who would otherwise be in residential treatment centers, group homes, or psychiatric hospitals (e.g., youth with significant emotional, behavioral and mental health needs). In addition to traditional mental health services, these projects identified eight categories of service (known as the "SAMHSA 8") that the Department uses to categorize a service array needed to support youth in care with emotional and behavioral health needs.
- b. While the federal Family First Prevention Services Act emphasizes maintaining youth safely with their families and avoiding the traumatic experience of entering foster care, it also provides for Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTP) to serve youth with emotional and behavioral health needs. As part of its efforts and obligations related to Family First, DCFS built out a robust network of Qualified Residential Treatment Programs. Family First emphasizes residential treatment as an intervention, not a placement. More specifically, the QRTP model means that residential care is a time-limited, intensive treatment intervention within a continuum of behavioral health services..
- c. The Department understands that it is critical to expand current community-based services that have shown positive outcomes. Specific priorities for the Department are intensive in-home services; services designed to support relative caregivers (where most youth in care live); and leveraging, expanding, and innovating existing or new DCFS programs and supports that are specifically designed to support youth in care with significant emotional and behavioral health needs (e.g., intensive placement stabilization services, wraparound and care coordination, flex funds). As important, the Department is working closely with HFS and YouthCare to determine the extent to which HFS and/or YouthCare will develop, organize, and provide these services to youth in care – including an effective and robust mobile crisis response system.
- d. In the context of the workforce crisis and increasing need for mental health treatment for youth, the new approach to building a responsive service delivery system includes strategies to support recruitment and retention of social service professionals. Effective March 1, 2022, the Department increased wages for private-sector service providers in Illinois – a response focused on making child welfare jobs in the private sector more competitive as the job market continues to grow increasingly tight. These salary increases affect professionals such as residential child care workers, case managers, permanency and intact workers, and supervisors. Further, in order to address this crisis, the Department has increased funding for the private sector across the board, including an increase in funding of more than 58% to institutional providers based on the FY23 introduced budget. The Department also has worked

closely with the private sector to attract and retain staff by putting in place additional flexibility for staff credentials and more flexible hiring practices.



Goal #11: Meet the physical health, emotional well-being, and behavioral health needs of youth in care.

Community-based services are the bedrock to establishing a continuum of care and support for youth with behavioral and emotional health needs. To meet the needs of children in care and improve their outcomes, DCFS builds a comprehensive array of resources to support youth so that they can eventually have a stable placement with family or caregiver.

These placement supports include community-based living arrangements, therapeutic foster care services, emergency interventions, and in-home services. Timely transitions to needed treatment are essential while helping youth find and sustain a safe and stable home environment.

The development of a managed care network exclusive to youth in care, i.e., YouthCare HealthChoice Illinois provides a responsive system of support for youth to access needed health and specialty services. YouthCare's care coordinators connect youth to managed care network supports, which include behavioral health and medical care, as well as specialty services. Caseworkers working with each youth in care partner with care coordinators in our managed care provider network.



Strategies:

- a. Maximize the use of the YouthCare care coordinators to bolster youth access and utilization of community based medical and mental health services, which helps increase opportunities for youth stabilization in foster care placements as well as supports youth transitioning out of Quality Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs).
- b. Increase the number of emergency placements available to temporarily care for and stabilize youth in crisis by: 1) collaborating with residential and shelter providers to promote the need for shelter services in all regions of the state, and; 2) partnering with emergency, professional and specialized foster care programs about expanding programming for youth with mental and behavioral health needs, specialized medical care, and sibling group placement.
- c. Improve utilization of therapeutic residential placements by: 1) developing a regional level project focused on the development of a comprehensive discharge plan identifying community-based resources for youth in residential treatment, and; 2) collaborating with providers around the need for diagnostic and treatment programs for specific youth disorders including autism, medically complex, sexually problematic, intellectually disabled, eating disorders and pyromania.
- d. Increase and enhance training for foster parents to better prepare them to meet the needs of youth with serious emotional and behavioral health needs by: 1) collaborate with private agency partners and community agencies on recruitment of specialized foster care providers, and; 2) developing an administrative system to review "internal step-ups" (need for more intensive care) and review of youth's continued need for ongoing specialized foster care, with enhanced focus on providers accepting new specialized youth into their programming.
- e. Develop support and funding mechanism to allow foster parents to become and remain involved with youth in need of residential care.

- f. Utilize technology to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the placement referral process in order to ensure youth are placed in clinically appropriate settings with greater sense of urgency and timeliness by: 1) collaborating with DCFS Information Technology to develop and implement an electronic platform to create, manage and track placement referrals, and; 2) engaging with the Department of Innovation and Technology (DoIT) to allow read only access to provider intake staff which would give them the ability to review critical referral documents directly in SACWIS.
- g. Expand access to community-based resources for youth to improve child and family centered interventions, as well as preventative engagement, by: 1) collaborating with YouthCare on the development of community based mental and behavioral health services that support families, youth and caregivers, and; 2) partnering with public and private partners to ensure sustained service provision to youth in care and enhance family preservation.



Goal #12: Improve educational outcomes among youth in care to support their successful transition to adulthood.

Among youth in care, each year represents an academic opportunity. Exposure to trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACES) contributes to increased risk for children to fall behind educationally. Early childhood providers and K-12 educators are not universally equipped to provide trauma-informed approaches to educational service delivery to help children and youth stay educationally on-track. However, a positive PK-12 education experience has the potential to be a powerful counterweight to the abuse, separation, impermanence, and other barriers these vulnerable students experience.

Stability in educational settings and in residential placements are associated with better educational outcomes. Likewise, a higher number of placement moves and school changes are associated with lower rates of educational success. Each year of schooling is a step toward on-time high school graduation, and lays the foundation for college access and success, as well as longer-term labor market outcomes. Without a solid educational foundation, youth in care are at heightened risk for adverse outcomes of homelessness, exposure to violence, justice system involvement, and unemployment.

One of the central aims of DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services (OETS) is engage in partnership with Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), school districts, and educational support providers to offer youth in care sufficient supports and opportunities for high school completion, postsecondary education, vocational training, and independent living. One key partner to improving educational outcomes for youth in care are foster care district liaisons, established by Illinois legislation in 2017-18 school year. The DCFS OETS team plans several strategies to meet annual educational needs of children and youth in care to increase the proportion of youth who are educationally on-track toward their path to high school graduation, postsecondary education, and careers. Supporting independent and successful transition to adulthood involves development of safe, loving, and permanent homes, as well as the educational well-being of every child that comes to the attention of the department.



Strategies:

- a. Increase supports to increase the educational stability of youth in care, by developing policies, procedures, and training to support caseworkers and educators in advocating for youth in care in Best Interest Determination meetings.

- b. Through collaboration with Clinical and Child Services, Permanency and Monitoring Divisions, engage DCFS education team staff to address the educational stability of youth during the permanency planning process, and at the beginning of emergency placement decisions.
- c. Establish resources that support caregivers and youth to improve educational outcomes, including communication campaigns, resource toolkits, tiered interventions by education advisors, professional development/training opportunities, and academic support partnerships (e.g., tutoring).
- d. Implement regular communication with foster care district liaisons, in partnership with ISBE, to support coordinated and data-informed service delivery to youth in care regarding academic performance, attendance, and specialized educational needs.
- e. Provide training and support for community-based partners, staff involved with Countdown to 21 meetings, and permanency caseworkers to maximize youth participation in available supports for high school completion, post-secondary education, vocational training, and independent living supports.
- f. Develop partnerships with community-based providers that strengthen supports for workforce readiness among youth transitioning out of residential care, as well as for dually-involved youth (i.e., involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare system).
- g. Improve programming and training among staff in Independent Living and Transitional Living programs (ILO/TLP) to strengthen the independent living skills, workforce readiness, and financial literacy of youth transitioning out of State care.

Boosting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Creating a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion remains a priority focus and goal for the department. DCFS works to create a safe, diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization in which all employees, children, and families are respected and valued, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identification, age, disability, citizenship status, income, education, arrest record or veteran status. By honoring and valuing diversity through a welcoming and supportive organizational culture, DCFS can effectively mobilize its resources and collaborate with others to meet the needs of children and families. We cannot effectively serve Illinois' diverse children and families without practicing inclusive and equity-focused communication, leadership, casework, and programming.

While DCFS is the legal guardian for youth in substitute care, our staff also seek out the perspectives and preferences of children and youth themselves in decisions that affect them. Agency staff and partners are resources for children, biological parents, and caregivers to offer the safest stable home possible for each youth to promote their optimal well-being. Younger children rely on adults to be thoughtful stewards of their care. As youth become older and better able to communicate their needs, preferences, and aspirations, DCFS is committed to ensuring a forum for youth to have a safe space to celebrate, collaborate, and initiate a call to action focusing on support, education, and advocacy. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team creates a more diverse and inclusive workplace through collaborations with African American Services, Latino Services, Asian American Services, LGBTQI Services, Indian Child Welfare Specialist and Human Rights Services.

DCFS' Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan offers detailed strategies and information to guide collaborative planning among all staff and stakeholder groups. Through marketing and communications, all clients, employees, community-based

partners, advisory boards, stakeholders, and members of the community at large have opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation of the department's plan for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.



Goal #13: Increase cultural competency among all DCFS staff and contracted partner agency staff.



Strategies:

- a. Conduct an organizational assessment of cultural competency of DCFS staff and community-based partner staff serving children and families.
- b. Using assessment information, develop programming to enhance cultural competency of all staff working with DCFS-involved children and families.
- c. Monitor the effectiveness of programs and activities designed to increase cultural competency among individuals in the Illinois child welfare workforce.
- d. Support DCFS and partner staff in gathering data related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE), and in using SOGIE data to tailor supportive services to youth, family members, and caregivers.
- e. Engage in communications and marketing to educate all clients, employees, community-based partners, advisory boards, stakeholders, and members of the community at large about SOGIE data collection and supports for LGBTQ+ youth.



Goal #14: Increase the diversity of DCFS and contracted agency staff to reflect the diversity of children and families we serve.



Strategies:

- a. Use multiple communication strategies and expansive marketing to strengthen outreach and recruitment efforts through the DCFS DEI Team, Office of Employee Services, university, and community partners.
- b. Engage staff from under-represented and under-utilized groups in outreach and recruitment efforts, using multiple communication methods and partnership strategies.
- c. Gather performance data on the effectiveness of outreach and communication efforts used to recruit individuals from under-represented groups and use data and best practices to improve results in hiring diverse staff.

Strengthening Workforce Development and Retention

Workforce development and retention have been a focus of the department as it is truly the nexus that connects public state agency with the community-based provider community, schools of social work and human services, courts, and the larger child welfare community in a systemwide, outcome-focused change effort. The goals and strategies for workforce development and retention are intended to provide avenues to increase qualified applicants and reduce turnover in direct service roles. Through the workforce development lens, the department's priority on *Safety First, Safety Always* maintains the attention on front-line staff and supervisors on the importance of the safety and development of our public and private workforce.

To systematically improve child safety, permanency, and well-being among children and youth, we need a knowledgeable and stable workforce. Our efforts to build a highly qualified, well-trained, supervised, and supported workforce include work to: 1) strengthen breadth and efficiency of recruitment and staff selection efforts; 2) improve efficiency and motivational support in information delivery and administrative processes for new and existing staff; 3) support and retain qualified staff and supervisors; 4) reinforce good field practice to engage effectively with families and youth, and; 5) equip staff with the basic knowledge to avoid and appropriately respond to potentially dangerous situations in the execution of their daily duties.

Reducing staff turnover increases the chances of stability for families and permanency for children, improves the timeliness of investigations, ensures greater contact between children in care and their families, and supports effective service delivery. Workforce stability facilitates a child welfare system that supports families and provides resources that help restore family functioning and promote child and family well-being. Strategies for successful workforce development and retention must be intentional and coalesce the vision and partnerships of numerous partners and stakeholders.



Goal #15: Reduce staffing vacancies through enhanced recruitment efforts supported by DCFS work with ongoing and new partnerships.



Strategies:

- a. Develop and maintain partnerships and recruitment opportunities throughout the state with community partners, professional networks, public relations with both public and private organizations, officials, colleges and universities, and other state agencies to increase applicants for all open positions.
- b. Expand the hiring pool through streamlined recruitment efforts with an emphasis on broadening diversity, equity, and inclusion of under-represented groups in direct service roles. This involves working with established networks and partners to promote recruiting events, new vacancies, and job postings to help reach the most qualified, available applicants for each vacant position.
- c. Through partnership efforts, increase the number of university students who participate in job shadowing, academic internships, and university partner-ship programs. As the department and private sector agencies meaningfully engage and interest interns in child welfare work, our field can expand the number of applicants for open positions.
- d. Expand the private sector Educational Stipend program to support junior and senior students, as well as full and part-time Master's students, in offsetting the cost of their education with a work payback commitment upon working in a direct service position in a private sector child welfare agency.

- e. Expand the list of accepted degrees required for direct service and residential staff and supervisors, and allow more flexibility for community-based agencies to promote staff into roles of leadership that have years of experience, but may not have the desired degree.
- f. Provide qualified candidates with multiple pathways to apply for staff and leadership positions within DCFS and community-based provider agencies.

One of the central aspects of a strong workforce development and management system is to ensure that communications and management structures are efficient, timely, motivational, and responsive to candidates, new hires, existing staff, and hiring managers. When there are extensive lags in communication, decision making, feedback, and data collection, the department increases the risk of losing top candidates to other employers. Using technological tools to improve efficiencies in onboarding, hiring, and managerial practices can optimize and streamline timeframes for hiring, employee and managerial support. Personalized recognition of staff helps staff feel valued and appreciated for their work, and helps staff feel connected to the DCFS community.



Goal #16: Create a streamlined onboarding and workforce management system to hire the most qualified candidates for each open position and support improved retention.



Strategies:

- a. Perform operational efficiency analyses to determine areas where hiring and onboarding processes may be improved, and/or methods created to shorten time required to complete onboarding or hire most qualified candidates for DCFS positions.
- b. Implement efficiencies in the DCFS hiring process to reduce the number of candidates that are lost to competitors.
- c. Continue to develop mentoring, training, recognition, and process improvement systems that support improved retention among new and existing DCFS staff, which involves:
 - Quarterly management meetings to address questions from DCFS Office of Employment Services (OES) and labor relations to address staff and partner agency information needs.
 - Continue development of a New Hire Orientation and a Mentoring New Hire six-month program among new and experienced personnel, that includes monthly evaluations and feedback.
 - Provide a welcome packet for all new hires, including a Welcome Letter from the Director.
 - Provide motivational recognition from the Director for DCFS staff birthdays and work anniversaries via email, and recognition on D-Net for all new hires and promotions.
 - Collaborate with DCFS hiring managers to anticipate needed skills and knowledge required for new and open positions, as well as improve timeliness of information delivery that supports efficient hiring of most qualified candidates.
- d. Develop and implement an online onboarding and offboarding system to facilitate ease of information transfer between and within DCFS Divisions.
- e. Develop and update a website of resources for DCFS employees and candidates to find information and obtain necessary forms for completion.

As workers continue in their positions over time, they are able to deepen their understanding of how to implement the agency Core Practice model with families, and effectively engage with children, youth, and families. The best results are achieved through a knowledgeable and dedicated relationship between workers and clients. Staff completion of timely and accurate assessments especially provide a foundation for successful casework with children and families. Assessments inform logical conclusions based on the evidence presented and allow staff to make the appropriate decisions to control of immediate safety threats and reduce risks.



Goal #17: Expand professional development supports for staff, so that they gradually become more knowledgeable, proficient, and confident in their positions and less likely to leave the child welfare field.



Strategies:

- a. Provide ease of access for department staff to offset costs to attend ongoing professional development workshops, conferences, and additional college-level courses.
- b. Develop and implement post-Foundations field-based learning plans for Permanency, Intact, and Child Protection staff – with the goals of 1) ensuring communication with staff so that they understand the training (and have the necessary equipment), as well as 2) supporting staff to implement and apply the foundational learning in their work with families.
- c. Develop multi-disciplinary training (judges and attorneys as trainers) for caseworkers on testifying and court procedures to improve their knowledge of court process, expectations and building relationships with court stakeholders, designed to improve communication and caseworker retention.
- d. Supplementing the use of simulations in Child Protection staff training, expand the use of simulation-based training with direct service staff in Intact Family Services and Permanency to bolster worker skills and confidence.
- e. Continue to develop an infrastructure of support in the Office of Learning and Professional Development by investing the necessary resources to build its capacity to meet DCFS' need for continuous learning and professional development.

Workers, supervisors, and staff in child welfare agencies are faced with demanding and high case loads. They are often tasked with making decisions about safety and risk, traumatic stress, and public oversight and scrutiny. Staff turnover, which is sometimes as high as 40 percent a year, is more than a fiscal issue for an agency; it has a direct impact on case outcomes and to the safety, permanence, and well-being of children and families. The success of these strategies is reliant on a cross-agency, multi-disciplinary child welfare community to ensure an environment of accountability that also nurtures the professional development and growth of career entrants within a learning community.



Goal #18: Develop robust systems of support (feedback, training follow-up, supportive supervision) that effectively builds worker skills and confidence and motivates staff persistence through difficult tasks and situations.



Strategies:

- a. To help ease staff administrative burdens, promote the use of mobile applications and information technology solutions that make communication between caseworkers, youth, and family members easier and more efficient.
- b. Create structure for ongoing, regular feedback between staff and supervisors so that staff concerns may be addressed as they occur, and timely solutions may be developed focused on staff retention.
- c. Support workforce retention through the training of managers and supervisors to build a supportive climate, focused on effective practices and ongoing learning and professional development through the full implementation of the DCFS Model of Supervisory Practice.
- d. Improve implementation of supportive supervision between supervisors and direct service staff, which promotes staff retention by affirming the ideas offered by staff for improved efficiency and quality, as well as facilitates staff contributions to improvements in team performance.
- e. Improve implementation support focused on elements of the DCFS Core Practice Model across the system, with the intention of shifting system culture toward recognizing families as the experts on their strengths and needs.
- f. Create an infrastructure of support within the child protective division of DCFS by developing triage centers/intake hubs to allow child protection investigators to perform their duties in a safe and supportive environment, as well as provide needed resources for children entering the child welfare system.

Engaging Stakeholder Voice

DCFS relies upon its employees, contracted private agencies, the court system, the various mandated reporter groups, and community providers to ensure the safety of children and provide needed services to help strengthen families. The success of a child welfare system depends upon collaboration across interdependent entities and organizations.

A stakeholder consists of an individual or group with a vested interest in the outcome of an organization's actions. Child welfare stakeholder groups include staff in public and private sector agencies, employees working in child welfare, the court system, foster parents, advisory groups, law makers, as well as youth, biological parents, and former youth in care. Each of these stakeholder groups have different interests, and DCFS works to provide time and opportunity for each stakeholder to express perspectives, concerns, experiences, and recommendations through different venues.

One of the key practices in the Illinois Core Practice Model is teaming and care coordination. DCFS is engaged in efforts to improve the flow of information between and across its child welfare advisory groups. These goals build upon that foundation of communication.



Goal #19: Utilize stakeholder voice to guide service improvements and expansion of operational plans, initiatives, and policy changes.

The child welfare system is a network of entities, which work in tandem to provide services for Illinois youth and their families. Providing opportunities for communication with stakeholder groups to share suggestions for change, express concerns, and receive information on proposed changes within the department will help in the development of higher quality services for recipients and enhance community confidence.



Strategies:

- a. Enhance the development of collaborative relationships between DCFS and stakeholder groups by inviting feedback in a way that is systematic, structured, inclusive, and responsive.
- b. Cultivate opportunities for youth, biological families, foster families, and former youth in care to share their experiences and directly contribute to policy and program development by offering surveys and hosting focus groups.
- c. Develop a formal, responsive process by which the department receives and responds to recommendations from statutory and non-statutory advisory groups.



Goal #20: Provide meaningful opportunities for youth to voice their perspectives and concerns and utilize youth voice to guide service delivery and program expansion, particularly youth with specialized needs.

DCFS serves a diverse group of youth and families, including youth and families with very specialized needs. As the state's child protection agency, DCFS' priority is to attend to the concerns and needs of children and youth who come to the attention of the department. DCFS works to provide multiple opportunities for youth in care to express their concerns, needs, experiences, and recommendations.

The department's Clinical Division accepts referrals to provide consultation for specialized services. DCFS has developed specialized procedures, such as Procedure 302, Appendix C for Human Trafficking Victims, Appendix K for LGBTQ+, and Appendix N for Transition Planning for Developmentally Delayed Youth. Each of these populations – LGBTQ+ youth, human trafficking victims, and youth with developmental delays – have important, specialized needs that require tailored support and service delivery.



Strategies:

- a. Engage with DCFS Youth Advisory Boards and Youth Affinity Groups (such as for LGBTQ+ youth, African-American youth, Latino-American youth, and Asian-American youth) to understand the needs, perspectives, concerns, and recommendations of youth, particularly those with specialized needs and concerns.
- b. Collaborate with stakeholder groups with specialized knowledge to best support LGBTQ+ youth, developmentally delayed youth, and victims of human trafficking by inviting feedback in structured, systematic ways.
- c. Expand the continuum of care to meet the needs of Illinois families and youth, particularly those with specialized needs and concerns, by increasing collaboration across state human service agencies.
- d. Improve the delivery of culturally responsive services to Illinois families and youth by engaging in formal discussions with stakeholder groups.

Utilizing Communications to Achieve Our Goals

DCFS is leading transformative change in practice with its partners in numerous ways: to champion “Safety First, Safety Always” and build a strong safety culture for children, families, and workers. Communications is the bedrock by which workforce development and retention goals are achieved. The quality of partnership building and collaboration among DCFS and contracted, private agency providers, the court system, other sister agencies, and various stakeholders is guided by agency leadership in Communications. Systems for engaging stakeholder voice, collecting and using data for decision-making, and modernizing the use of technological tools are necessary to effective communication campaigns. As DCFS expands its work to mobilize community and state resources to prevent recurrence of child maltreatment, communications activities generate momentum for necessary shifts in practice.

The DCFS Communications team plays an integral role in ensuring that the department’s mission, vision, and activities are effectively and positively communicated to key stakeholders, including the public, partners, media, elected officials, employees, and other organizations. Agency communications and marketing efforts promote messaging to various audiences focused on protecting Illinois’ vulnerable children and families. Agency communication strategies help to raise awareness and support implementation of the many aspects of operating a high-quality system of care for children and families.

DCFS Communications supports each of the agency’s divisions to achieve their goals. To effectively build trust with the public and stakeholders, DCFS emphasizes transparent communication to support open, collaborative partnership building. DCFS works to provide accurate and timely information to the media, elected officials, stakeholders, public, and employees to convey priorities, and policy/practice changes. Multiple communication strategies with agency stakeholders that are reinforced over time help to deepen the reach and impact of agency efforts to improve results with children and families.



Goal #21: Communicate key priorities, policies, and information needs aligned with DCFS’ mission through timely, accessible strategies.

DCFS Communications develops and disseminates information through multiple formats (print, media, electronic communication, social media, etc.) to Illinois’ stakeholders on a regular basis. Several questions frame the development of target communications:

1. What do we want people to know?
2. Who needs to know?
3. Who does this impact and how?
4. What is the timeline for disseminating this information?
5. What is the best way to deliver the message?



Strategies:

- a. Proactively engage with media organizations through press releases, social media posts, and printed materials focused on prevention of child maltreatment and agency goals protecting and serving children, youth, and families of Illinois.

- b. Respond to all media inquiries on a timely basis.
- c. Manage flow of information with agency stakeholders and partners to support coordinated and transparent planning and service delivery.



Goal #22: Lead information campaigns that build and maintain trust and transparency with all stakeholders.



Strategies:

- a. Develop and implement comprehensive communication campaigns to reinforce information messaging objectives to each group of stakeholders with timely, honest, and accurate information.
- b. Provide proactive messaging on a consistent basis.
- c. Conduct reactive messaging with quick, appropriate communication delivery. Determine the most appropriate delivery methods for each message and communication campaign.

Modernizing Technology

DCFS uses technological tools in every facet of its work to serve children, youth, and families. Electronic communication technologies support staff in building relationships and documenting progress toward desired goals with youth and families. Online data systems facilitate case management work, as well as data-informed decision-making among child welfare stakeholders. DCFS Office of Information and Technology Services (OITS) also works to ensure data security, especially for personally identifiable information of individuals involved in the child welfare system. As communication through social media and mobile applications become part of everyday living, DCFS utilizes these platforms and technologies to expand its outreach with youth, caregivers, and family members. Technological innovations supporting the mission and operations of child welfare systems have expanded, and DCFS embeds technological innovations throughout various programs and initiatives.





Goal #23: Build a transformational, modern, and innovative technology eco-system for Illinois' child welfare services.

The technological needs and expectations of child welfare staff and the public have taken an irreversible step forward. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reinforces the critical nature of supporting state child welfare agencies to utilize modern technology in service delivery (e.g., software platforms, advanced data management systems, artificial intelligence, machine learning, advanced tools for communication and collaboration). Technological innovation is becoming standard operating practice in child welfare systems. OITS will support DCFS staff in understanding and utilizing modern, innovative technology more effectively in all facets of child welfare practice.



Strategies:

- a. Continue updating and replacing aging systems to provide the most efficient, intuitive, and effective technology to the department.
- b. Develop and grow the use of a Technology Adoption Program, which maximizes the value of new technologies introduced to achieve department goals and objectives of safety, permanency, wellbeing, and prevention.
- c. Research and introduce technological innovations to the department that provide enhanced capabilities in serving the people of Illinois. The Family First Prevention Services Act, for example, has incentivized the use of technological tools that reduce administrative overhead for caseworkers, improve collaborations that increase engagement of children and families in support services/networks, and support data-mining activities for improved decision-making.
- d. Leverage the availability of federal matching funds to implement, enhance, and replace technological systems and tools that advance improved outcomes in child welfare operations and services.



Goal #24: Reduce the vulnerability associated with use of modern technological tools through the development of a "hardened information security system."

Security threats challenge any organization's usage of technological applications, information systems, as well as technological hardware and software. Mitigating cyber-attacks and security risks are an essential part of any organization's work. Organizations use system hardening processes to adopt procedures and system configurations that reduce IT-based vulnerabilities and security risks.

A hardened information security system protects the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of timely, reliable data to support essential child welfare work functions.

Confidentiality procedures work to ensure that information is only accessible to authorized users for authorized purposes. Practices to ensure data integrity work to safeguard the accuracy and completeness of data and processing methods. Promotion of data availability ensures that authorized users have access to data and associated information resources when required.



Strategies:

- a. Establish a continuous, iteratively improving regimen of planning, building, and running security solutions that are aligned with business requirements. Leveraging the security solutions of DoIT and solutions built into new DCFS IT systems provides protection from known and unknown attack methods.
- b. Train and educate current DoIT@DCFS staff with security competencies to mitigate extreme challenge of hiring security talent in a highly competitive job market.
- c. Prepare for inevitable security breaches through systemic improvements in communications, safeguards, preventions, and procedures. Strengthening disaster recovery and business continuity plans will continue, as part of the DCFS Cyber-Security Playbook.



Goal #25: Provide a data management and analysis platform.

Having high-quality trusted data is critical to transforming DCFS' service delivery to advance improved outcomes for the children and families we serve. DCFS is a data-driven organization, focused upon taking pragmatic and targeted actions to provide staff with advanced data analysis and management capabilities.



Strategies:

- a. Improve support and subject-matter expertise on the technologies underlying agency data management practice. As the department utilizes data to guide decision-making with greater frequency across Divisions, OITS will provide expertise to support new ways in using the data.
- b. Enhance data services available to the department staff to provide easier and better controlled access to the DCFS data. Controlling access to data allows the agency to provide as much data as appropriate to all staff and partners.
- c. Continue implementation of data governance and quality tools. Data governance and quality tools provide a mechanism for data stewards within the department to monitor and control DCFS data. These tools also provide data stewards with the ability to investigate data quality and be automatically alerted if data quality issues arise.
- d. Deploy artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, machine learning, and other advanced data technologies for the use of DCFS staff and partners. These tools and technology are showing promise in providing better understanding of the child welfare system.



Goal #26: Enhance employee and partner service experiences to better serve the people of Illinois.

The goals of the Illinois DCFS require the agency to deliver services more efficiently and effectively. Upgrades to technological tools and systems help to improve the experiences of everyone interacting with Illinois' child welfare services – youth, families, staff, and partner agencies. With technology-supported improvements to employee and partner work and task functions, the Illinois child welfare system would be better equipped to recruit and retain its workforce.



Strategies:

- a. Increase consistency of use of technological tools by employees and agency partners by making them easy-to-use, efficient, and helpful in automating administrative tasks (as possible). Technological tools provide the user with important information where and when needed to increase engagement in child welfare service delivery.
- b. Build new systems which allow the agency to adapt the technology to agency needs with minimal engagement of IT. The adoption of low-cost and “no-coding required” data management platforms provides technological capacity to achieve operational efficiencies in faster timeframes. Online data management platforms that are easy-to-use by child welfare staff, coupled with strong product management, reduces both time and costs involved in adopting a new practice (e.g., to replace manual tracking approaches to tasks).
- c. Improve employee and partner experiences through continuous, quick modifications to systems across the agency by establishing product-centric IT delivery (contrasted from “project-centric” IT delivery). A product-centric approach better aligns, improves the speed of, and places agency persons in control of changes to systems to provide support for changes in the child welfare practice. The assignment of a stable IT team to an agency product manager for each area provides for exact prioritization of work and ensures alignment to the area’s goals and strategies.

Using Data to Inform Decision-Making

Data-related strategic goals are critical to moving the Department towards data-informed and evidence-based decision making as well as enhanced accountability in the Illinois child welfare system. Evidence-based decision making can move the system toward increased safety for children served and relevant information made available at the right time to staff can ensure greater safety for workers as they serve children and families. The goals below support several critical system-level



initiatives as well as monitoring of the Department’s primary functions and responsibilities within and across multiple Divisions. Data enable more efficient processes and effective decisions, provided that information is available, timely, relevant, valid, and reliable. Successful achievement of the goals will be measured by greater availability of clear and relevant data reports, fewer data quality concerns, as well as greater user trust in and utilization of data.



Goal #27: Implement a functional data governance structure to provide authority, oversight, and shared decision-making over management of data.

Deriving the most value from the data requires that data are governed and managed carefully, intentionally, and with commitment. Having functional data governance means that the department employs shared decision-making through cross-divisional collaboration to make strategic decisions on the types of data that are needed for operational, financial, resource management, and other types of needs as well as employs the best strategy to achieve relevant goals. A functional data governance structure defines, approves, and oversees principles and best practices for data management. In turn, the best data management practices result in the creation of high quality and accessible data on which practice and policy decisions can be made. A functional data governance structure also sets standards and processes to define value of data and improve organizational efficacy, efficiency, transparency, trust, and compliance.



Strategy:

Create a data governing group to work with internal relevant parties to provide direction and decision-making on (1) department's data needs and strategy, (2) data quality, (3) data access, sharing, and acquisition, (4) data related policy and standards, (5) data projects and asset valuation.



Goal #28: Increase data and technology literacy and usage across the department to make data-driven decisions.

Availability and timeliness of relevant data reports will enable decision-making process to be data-informed. Data literacy is another key element necessary to increase the value of data and analytics. Literacy in data and technology is a new second language for many, therefore, it is important to build learning processes for different level users with appropriate training, resources, and support.



Strategies:

- a. Increase availability and timeliness of data reports for different level of users using reliable technology and trustable databases.
- b. Utilize university partners to enhance understanding of our data and support increased use of data-informed and evidence-based decision-making. This may involve collaboration on predictive analyses, experimental and evaluative work, and training DCFS staff to increase internal capacity in related work.
- c. Work collaboratively across divisions and with outside partners to provide training and learning opportunities related to data.
- d. Provide tools and information necessary to enhance understanding and usage of data visualizations and analyses.

Integrating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

A coordinated and well-functioning Quality Assurance system is essential for consistently identifying, understanding, and improving safety, services and outcomes for children and families served, as well as supporting the most effective use of resources. As service interventions evolve, CQI can make sure that delivered services are relevant and contributing to positive results. The agency's support infrastructure for quality assurance and continuous quality



improvement includes ongoing work by the Strategic Plan Implementation Communication Exchange Committee (SPICE) and the Stakeholder Collaborative. Broad engagement in CQI conversations is necessary to ensure responsive and effective service delivery among internal and external partners –that includes executive leadership, staff in DCFS and private agency partners, youth and families served, and other system stakeholders such as community members, service providers, and judiciary personnel.

The “Plan, Do, Check, Act” (PDCA) is the foundation of continuous quality improvement. DCFS integrates the PDCA cycle throughout its administration, policy review, service delivery, and program improvement efforts. Through planning and data review meetings as well as online communication, DCFS embeds: a) intentional use of data to identify problems and their root causes; b) evidence-based improvement strategies; c) research-based solutions to implement small tests of change; and d) use of implementation feedback to adjust as needed and scale-up effective strategies in systematic ways.

Through application of the PDCA cycle in CQI efforts, transformations in policies and practices occur over time to achieve our desired goals and results.



Goal #29: Improve and strengthen the integrated statewide DCFS and Private Agency CQI system to effectively use quantitative and qualitative data to actively support achievement of system priorities, goals, and outcomes.



Strategies:

- a. Across all divisions and child welfare staff, cultivate the development of a “learning culture,” and implementation of change management techniques that integrate CQI throughout planning, service delivery, and monitoring efforts.
- b. Internalize (within DCFS) the cycle of improvement spelled out in the state’s CQI Plan, “PDCA” (or Plan, Do, Check, Act), and embed the principles of implementation science into all CQI Teams and structures (e.g., local and regional meetings, Stakeholder Collaborative, SPICE, etc.).

- c. Align DCFS CQI and monitoring entities² so that each has clearly defined roles and data collection tools. CQI roles and tools are complementary, but not duplicative, within a coordinated system of data-informed decision-making.
- d. Among CQI entities in DCFS and private agency partners, define and monitor performance benchmarks with system stakeholders that reduce barriers to, and support the achievement of, desired goals and objectives in the Strategic Plan (for example, through the use of data dashboards).



Goal #30: Enhance the quality of social work practice and desired outcomes with children and families, using improved program monitoring and supports.

The department's Monitoring Unit collaborates with Quality Assurance to strengthen the use of CQI practices throughout agency initiatives. DCFS' Monitoring guides agency staff and private providers in using data to improve service delivery focused on achieving the objectives of the Strategic Plan. Case record reviews, program assessments, and dashboards are data tools used to support individual coaching with program staff.



Strategies:

- a. Update case record review tools that guide improvements to social work practice with children and families, including supervision, the quality of contacts, implementation of Child and Family Team meetings, educational supports, and parent education and engagement.
- b. Update the department's Program Performance Dashboard to address all relevant performance expectations in DCFS' Strategic Plan (i.e., safety, permanency, wellbeing, prevention).
- c. Restructure DCFS Regions under the umbrella of Performance Monitoring efforts to improve social work practice, outcomes, and performance.
- d. Utilize Performance Monitors to coach caseworkers and enhance caseworkers' skills in utilizing Child and Family Teams as a critical casework process to empower families and build their respective support networks.

² DCFS CQI and monitoring entities include Quality Enhancement, Administrative Case Review and Performance Monitoring and Execution.

Acknowledgements

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Julie Barbosa
Dagené Brown
Jennifer Cleveland
James C. Daugherty
Kevin L. Gordon
Derek Hobson
Michelle D. Jackson
Deborah Kennedy
Tracey D. King, Project Lead
Kimberly Mann
Bill McCaffrey
Lina S. Millett
Steven Minter
Cynthia Richter-Jackson
Timothy Snowden
Jassen Strokosch
Tierney Stutz
Jill Tichenor
Lori Welcher-Miles
Monico Whittington-Eskridge
Monica Mosley-Cantrell
Kara Hamilton
Maria Miller

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