



OFFICE OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES BULLETIN

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SUBJECT:

Frequency and Tracking of Caseworker Visits to Children in Federally Defined Foster Care

BY:

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SCOPE

County Children and Youth Agencies
County Juvenile Probation Offices
Private Children and Youth Social Service Agencies
County Children and Youth Fiscal Officers
County Children and Youth Solicitors
Juvenile Court Judges

PURPOSE

The purpose of this bulletin is to inform all programs, both county and private, of visitation and reporting requirements related to mandated monthly caseworker visits, as well as details about the federal funding deadline for submission of required data.

BACKGROUND

On September 28, 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Child and Family Services Improvement Act into law (Public Law [P.L.] 109-288), creating an array of new and enhanced safeguards to promote the safety and well-being of children and families. This bulletin is primarily concerned with one of these safeguards: an additional requirement to Title IV-B, subpart 1, sections 422 and 424 of the Social Security Act (The Act), which required states to submit specific visitation data to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 by October 31, 2007, or risk the loss of Title IV-B, subpart 1 funds for FY 2008. As these funds are part of each county's Needs Based Plan and Budget, non-compliance would have affected both county children and youth and juvenile probation offices. ACF developed a sampling plan that was available to states, and Pennsylvania opted to use this sampling methodology, allowing the visitation data to be reported to ACF later than the original October 31st deadline. The Department of Public Welfare (DPW) will now have until December 31st of each year to submit the data to ACF.

Additionally, in recognition of the negative impact of caseworker turnover rates, the legislation also includes funding set aside under the reauthorization of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program (Title IV-B, subpart 2) to support monthly caseworker visits with children in foster care.

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING THIS BULLETIN SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO:

Regional Directors

Origin: Grace E. Gross, OCYF, P.O. Box 2675, Harrisburg, PA 17105-2675, 717-705-2908, ggross@state.pa.us

Funds will be allotted to states by formula and will require a 25% state match. The focus of these funds is to improve caseworker retention, recruitment and training, especially the ability to access the benefits of technology. A report by the Government Accounting Office in 2003 (GAO-03-357) found that the average tenure of a child welfare worker, which was less than two years, was having significant impact on safety and permanency issues for children in care.

DISCUSSION:

In addressing the visitation issue through this Act, Congress considered findings from Child and Family Service Review (CSFR) data that demonstrated "a strong correlation between frequent caseworker visits with children and positive outcomes for these children, such as timely adherence to permanency and other indicators of child well-being." (P.L.109-288, Section 2. [6]) Monthly visits to children in placement have been a regulatory requirement of DPW's Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) since 1985. A Policy Clarification on visit frequency and face-to-face contact was issued in 2001, reiterating that face-to-face contacts should occur as often as necessary, but no less often than once per month, and could be done through a purchase of service. However, the new federal requirements necessitate not only a further refining of previous policy clarifications, but also the timely submission of documentation to track policy actualization.

Therefore, as part of a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to manage and monitor caseworker visitation, Pennsylvania identified the following key issues:

- Determining who qualifies as the caseworker responsible for monthly face-to-face visits;
- Defining what constitutes a quality contact;
- Reinforcing the Federal definition of qualifying placement types;
- Tracking the percentage of children in foster care for whom these visits are occurring; and
- Calculating the percentage of those visits which occur at the child's residence.

Based on the sample submitted by DPW to ACF for the December 31, 2007 deadline, 77% of Pennsylvania's children in foster care were seen on a monthly basis. The requirement is that 90% of children in foster care are seen on a monthly basis by 2011, with the majority of those visits occurring in the child's residence. As a result, DPW must develop a PIP with percentage increments for each year to bring Pennsylvania from 77% to 90% of children in foster care being seen on a monthly basis. While 77% of children in foster care were seen on a monthly basis, 94% of these visits occurred in the child's primary place of residence.

KEY ISSUE GUIDANCE:

Qualifying caseworker:

Per guidance from ACF, a qualifying caseworker must be a person with case management or case visitation responsibilities for a particular case. 'Case visitation responsibilities' should not be construed to mean responsibility for merely arranging or monitoring family visits between the child and his or her family, duties such as what a case aide might perform. DPW interprets this guidance to mean that monthly visits which, for federal reporting purposes, are face-to-face contacts by a qualifying worker (only one of which must be reported, regardless of whether or not that worker visits the child more than once per month), must be conducted by:

- The county children and youth worker;
- The juvenile probation officer;
- The private provider agency with which the county has an agreement to provide services, including visitation management;
- The foster care facility case manager with global case management responsibilities, including family visitation and service coordination; and/or
- In out-of-state placement cases, a counterpart of these same legal entities.

Individuals who see the child, but who do not have case management or case visitation responsibility, would not qualify for the required monthly face-to-face visit with the child in foster care. That exclusion should not be construed to mean that their contacts with the child and their subsequent input are in any way irrelevant or not to be documented; on the contrary, their services to, and observations about, the child are invaluable. These individuals include:

- General service providers;
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA's);
- Guardians ad litem (GAL's);
- Volunteers;
- Case aides;
- Foster parents;
- Direct care staff within congregate care settings; or
- Anyone without case management or case visitation responsibilities.

Quality of the Contacts:

Part of the language in P.L.109-288 (Section 7) requires that the State standards for visit content must be described in the data submission for visit frequency. Specifically, Congress is looking for an indication that "visits are well-planned and focused on issues pertinent to case planning and service delivery to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children". While regulatory requirements succinctly describe the need to monitor safety and to evaluate services to the child (§§3490.61 and 3490.235 of Chapter 3490, Pa. Code Title 55, relating to protective services), practical guidance for visit content can be found in both the Pennsylvania Standards for Child Welfare Practice, Section III, "Service Delivery Standards", and in the Visitation manual. Both of these documents are currently being revised to incorporate guidance regarding quality visits, and finalized copies will be disseminated when available.

Quality visits should, at a minimum, follow an agenda purposed to further the goals of the Child's Permanency Plan, and should allow time for individual interviews with the child and caretaker or staff. Quality visits should, as well, provide opportunities to evaluate the child's safety and environment, his or her outlook and concerns about visitation with family and significant others, educational and independent living preparation challenges and information about the effectiveness of service delivery. Lastly, to support that quality visits are occurring, workers should be meeting with supervisors to prepare for and to review visitation concerns.

Qualifying Placements:

The federal definition of foster care is 24 hour substitute care for a child placed away from his or her parents or guardians, and for whom the county has placement and care responsibility; for reporting purposes, regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed and whether payments are made by the State or local agency. The types of placements included would be as follows:

- Non-relative foster family homes;
- Kinship foster homes;
- Group homes;
- Emergency shelters;
- Pre-adoptive homes, including non-subsidized;
- Residential facilities (non-Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations [JCAHO], non-Council on Accreditation [COA] or non-Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities [CARF]); and
- Child care institutions, public or private, with no more than 25 beds.

Not included as foster care placements under this federal definition are the following:

- Detention facilities (or those used primarily for the detainment of children who are adjudicated delinquent);
- Secure facilities/secure treatment facilities;
- Psychiatric facilities accredited by JCAHO, COA or CARF;
- General hospitals;
- Youth forestry camps/youth development centers (YDCs); and
- Training schools.

Percentage of Children Visited Monthly:

Instructions for data submission are included in this bulletin, but DPW wishes to emphasize here that, while the requested documentation should demonstrate adherence to at least minimal regulatory requirements for visitation, county agencies are expected to continue best practice by planning visits as often as necessary to meet the individual needs of the child and family. The parameters for the data submission do not, for instance, include reporting visits made during months in which a child was not in care the entire month; however, that directive should not be construed to imply a visit is not needed or should not be documented in the case record.

Percentage of Monthly Visits Occurring at Child's Residence:

The child's residence is considered to be the home or facility where the child is living, whether in-State or out-of-State. The residence may also be the home from which the child was removed, if the child is on a trial home visit, but still considered to be in foster care. Instructions for this data piece are also included. The federally established goal is to have the majority of monthly visits occurring at the child's residence by 2011.

POLICY AND PROCEDURES:

OCYF already requires monthly caseworker visits to dependent and shared case management children under the care and responsibility of the county children and youth agency and juvenile probation office. This policy bulletin will establish further parameters regarding those monthly visits, not only to fulfill the federal reporting requirements, but also to guide both reporting and practice consistency among the cadre of qualifying caseworkers from county children and youth agencies, private provider agencies and county juvenile probation offices.

Again, agencies are strongly encouraged to differentiate between reporting requirements and best practice issues. As always, supervisory staff should be prepared to support workers in determining the needs of an individual case, and in planning a contact schedule that meets those needs through any means, in any setting or with any personnel available. At the same time, and as a separate issue, if necessary, supervisory staff need to insure that workers have at least one visit with a child for each full calendar month the child is in care, preferably, at the child's residence. The agenda for that visit should be articulated to insure that emphasis will be placed on case planning and service delivery issues.

Worker illness, inclement weather, distance of placement and/or case emergencies should not excuse missing a monthly visit; timely rescheduling or visit coverage by the supervisor or another caseworker assigned by the supervisor is expected. Moreover, per recent guidance from ACF in Program Instruction ACYF-CB-PI-08-03, months in which children are on runaway status from a foster care placement are to be counted as visit months: if the worker visits a child in the month that the child runs or returns, that visit 'counts'; if the child remains on run for a full calendar month and the worker has not visited with the child during that month, that month would represent a missed visit. A reasonable corollary is that ACF expects agencies to make more proactive efforts to locate children who are on the run. It is understood that children on runaway status are often unable to be located in order to conduct a required visit, but there is still the expectation that attempts be made to locate these children and visit with them when at all possible.

For children under shared case management of children and youth and juvenile probation, the worker responsible for case planning and visitation is the worker responsible for the monthly visit. Each county needs to determine which agency carries those primary responsibilities; these may change over the life of the case, but at no time should visits be suspended during transition times.

The mandate for monthly visitation pursuant to §3490.61 (c) (2) (relating to supervisory review and child contacts) and §3490.235 (relating to services available through the county agency for children in need of general protective services) continues in effect for those children placed out-of-state. The agency in the other state, engaged through the Interstate Compact Office to provide supervision and visitation, can fulfill the monthly visiting requirement. In keeping with OCYF Bulletin Number 99-08-01 entitled Implementation of Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act (P.L. 109-239), and with the Policy Clarification on §3490.235, issued on September 28, 2001, visits by a caseworker on the staff of the State agency of the State in which the home of the parents of the child is located, or of the State in which the child has been placed, may visit the child in the home or institution and submit a report on the visit to the State agency of the State in which the home of the parents is located.

In order to meet the visitation and reporting requirements of this bulletin, children placed out-of-state must be seen once every six months as per the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY), October 1st – September 30th. This requirement means that one visit must be made between October 1st and March 31st, and a second visit must be made between April 1st and September 30th. The qualifying worker may be the child's primary worker, or another agency worker who has a child placed in the placement setting, as well as a worker from the State in which the child has been placed.

For placements in-state, in which a private provider is contracted to provide services, including monthly visitation, a worker from the county children and youth or juvenile probation agency with care and responsibility for the child must visit the child at least once every six months.

In recognition of the intent to promote continuity of service for children, and of the need to preserve natural resources, as well as to make optimum use of agency personnel and fiscal resources, OCYF suggests that county agencies consider assigning one worker to multiple children placed in homes or facilities, whether in-state or out-of-state, that are located 50 or more miles from the county agency, and for whom there is no private agency worker involvement. If that is not possible, OCYF will permit one worker to be delegated to fulfill the monthly visitation responsibility in cases that meet all of the following criteria:

- There are several same county agency children, with different caseworkers;
- The children are placed at the same home or facility; and
- The home or facility is located more than 50 miles, one way, from the county agency.

This practice may be enacted with the following caveats:

- Each worker must see the child on his or her own caseload at least once every six months, but should consider quarterly visits to provide contact continuity for the child;
- In months when visits are delegated to another worker, each worker must call the child on his or her own caseload to alert the child, give the name of the worker who will visit, and ask the child what is needed or wanted from him or her;
- Each worker should provide to the visiting worker an agenda to cover during the face-to-face visit with the child;
- The child should be assured that any concerns raised during the visit will be reported to his or her own worker; and
- 'Group' visits are not acceptable for reporting purposes; each child must be seen for an individual 'face-to-face' visit for some portion of the home/facility visit.

Clear documentation of visit frequency, agendas, locations and participants should be easily accessible in each child's record for periodic review by regional representatives. Also, to assist them in quickly assessing compliance with the qualifying monthly visitation documentation for federal purposes, it will be helpful to maintain a separate checklist in each child's record that lists the required data elements.

Caseworker Visit Data: Reporting Requirements

The caseworker visitation data, due to ACF by December 31st of each year includes information on caseworker visits for the preceding FFY. To calculate the required percentages, the data must include:

- The aggregate number of children served in foster care;
- The number of children visited each and every calendar month they were in care;
- The total number of visit months for children who were visited each and every month they were in care; and
- The total number of visit months in which at least one child visit occurred in the child's residence.

Per ACF directive, DPW will perform the following calculations to obtain:

- The percentage of children in foster care who were visited during each and every calendar month—determined by dividing the number of children who were visited each and every full calendar month they were reported to be in care, by the number of children served in foster care during the FFY. The quotient is multiplied by 100.
- The percentage of visits that occurred in the residence of the child—determined by dividing the number of visit months that occurred in the child residences by the total number of visit months for children visited each and every full calendar month they were reported in to be in care. This quotient is also multiplied by 100.

The resulting percentages will determine whether Pennsylvania has achieved the yearly improvement target percentages to achieve the 90% rate by October 1, 2011. Agencies must be able to describe how the data was collected (case review, spreadsheets, case sampling, etc.), and the method used to determine the baseline percentages must be used each subsequent year, unless otherwise approved by ACF.

ACF has developed a sampling plan that is available to states that will have difficulty meeting the visitation reporting requirements as outlined above. Pennsylvania opted to use this federally approved sampling methodology, which allows for reporting on a random sample of the eligible population as reported in a state's Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) files, and permitted the visitation data to be reported to ACF later than the original deadline of October 31, 2007. DPW will have until December 31st of each year to submit the data to ACF.

The sample records will be pulled from three different sampling frame files that are created from the federal fiscal year's two AFCARS foster care submissions. The three files consist of 1) children in care on September 30, 2) children that exited care during the AFCARS B period (April 1 – September 30), and 3) children that exited care during the AFCARS A period (October 1 – March 31). The required sample will be based on the total number of children in these three files and will be allocated proportionately among the three sampling frames. For example, if the required sample size were 300 children and there were 10,000 children in the September 30th sampling frame and 5,000 children in each of the two exit sampling frames yielding a total of 20,000 children, then 50% (10,000/20,000) or 150 sample cases (plus a 10% oversample) would be selected

from the September 30th frame and 75 (5,000/20,000) children (plus a 10% oversample) would be selected from each of the two exit frames.

Using the sampling methodology requires the submission of the AFCARS B period to ACF which occurs on or before November 14th of each year. The sample records will be pulled following that submission and will be provided to county children and youth agencies by November 20th of each year.

The information on each of the sample records must be submitted using the form and instructions that accompany this bulletin as Attachment A. Counties are encouraged to track all children eligible to be part of the sample using this form rather than waiting until the sample records are pulled in November of each year. It is imperative that counties provide the data to OCYF by December 15th of each year since ACF will not release a state's IV-B, subpart 1 funds until the visitation data has been received.

OCYF will provide the sample records to each county via e-government. Counties will be required to submit the visitation data on the sample cases to OCYF by December 15th of each year, also using e-government. A primary contact at the county has been identified to receive and submit the data. If there is a change in the primary county contact, a county should provide OCYF with the new contact information using Attachment B of the bulletin. In addition, county administrators will receive notification via email when OCYF sends the sample cases to the primary contact.

Attachment A

Caseworker Visitation Tracking Form Instructions

This report should include visitation information on all children that are part of the sample. Counties are encouraged to use this form to track the federally required visitation information on all children who are eligible to be pulled as part of the sample. Eligible children are those who have been in foster care for at least one full calendar month.

Clarification on which children should be reported:

- Only children who are in foster care on the first day of the calendar month and continue in foster care through the last day of the month should be counted as being in care for a full calendar month;
- Only enter children on the form that have been in foster care for at least one full calendar month during the year;
- Months in which children are on runaway status count as visit months; therefore if you visited a child in the respective month prior to or following their runaway episode, this month should count as one in which a visit occurred. You must continue to count months in which children are on runaway status as long as they continue to be counted in AFCARS.
- Children who are on a trial home visit should be counted for each full calendar month they continue to be reported in AFCARS;
- Children who move from foster care to non-foster care should not be counted for any month in which they are in a non-foster care setting; and
- Children placed out-of-state need to be visited (for these reporting requirements) once in each of the six-month AFCARS periods (Oct-Mar and Apr-Sep). Only enter out-of-state children as being in foster care for the full month in which a visit is being recorded for the purpose of this report. If an out-of-state child does not receive the required six-month visit, you will need to enter the following in order for the form to properly calculate for the child.
 - If the child did not receive a visit for the AFCARS period Oct – Mar, enter a “1” in column D for the month of October.
 - If the child did not receive a visit for the AFCARS period Apr – Sep, enter a “1” in column D for the month of April.

The Excel workbook used for reporting the visitation data contains two worksheets and should be completed as follows:

Sheet 1:

1. Enter county name, county contact information, and federal fiscal year.
2. Complete all fields in spreadsheet as follows:
 - a. *Child's Name*
 - i. Last name.
 - ii. First Name.
 - b. *AFCARS Record #*
 - i. Enter the child's AFCARS identification number.
 - ii. If the child has a temporary number, enter that number.

- iii. When the child obtains an official AFCARS record number, add that number following the temporary number (showing both numbers in the same space separated by a "-"
- iv. Example: 001doj123456-001123456789.
- c. *Months: October through September*
 - i. For column cells labeled D: Enter a "1" if the child was in foster care for the full calendar month; otherwise leave blank.
 - ii. For column cells labeled N1: If the child has a "1" in column D for that month, enter a "1" if the child had a qualifying visit* during the month; otherwise leave it blank.
 - iii. For column cells labeled N2: If the child has a "1" in column N1 for that month, enter a "1" if the child had a qualifying visit in the child's primary place of residence during the month; otherwise leave it blank.

Note – For each month, a child must first be eligible (D = 1) in order to have a qualifying visit (N1) and a child must have a qualifying visit (N1 = 1) in order to be visited in the primary place of residence (N2)

* A qualifying visit is one in which the child was visited by a caseworker with case or visitation responsibilities for the case. Visits must be conducted by the county children and youth worker, the juvenile probation officer, or the private provider agency with which the county has an agreement to provide services, including visitation management. Counterparts of these same legal entities would fulfill the requirement for children in out-of-state foster placements. General Service providers, volunteers, case aides, foster parents, residential workers or anyone without case or visitation responsibilities for a case will not qualify for the required monthly face-to-face visit with the child in foster care.

Note – When printing worksheet 1, first highlight the rows you want to print and then go to File, Print, and print Selection. Otherwise, the entire worksheet will print.

Sheet 2:

1. Notes

- a. *Comments should be made in the Notes Section as necessary to explain/clarify why children were not seen. For example, a county must explain why a child was not visited within the respective month(s) for reasons including, but not limited to the child being on runaway status, worker turnover, a child placed out of state, distance, etc. Please be advised that these comments are not "justifiable explanations", but rather information that will help clarify data being reported.*

Calculated Fields – Sheet 1

The following fields will automatically populate as data are entered into the spreadsheet:

- a. *Totals for D, N1 and N2* = the sum of each of those monthly cells;
- b. *Denominator* = If the child was in foster care at least one full month (Total D > = to 1) this will be "1"; otherwise it will be "0";
- c. *Visits Each Month While In Care* = This field compares the totals for each child for columns Total D and Total N1 to determine if the child received a visit each and every month in which the child was in foster care for a full month (if Total N1 = Total D then this field will be "1"; if not then this field will be "0");
- d. *Visit Months* = This field carries over the total number of visits (cell Total N1) for each child that has been visited each and every month while in foster care. If the child met the criteria of

being visited each and every month, this count will then be used in the calculation for the percentage of visits that occurred in the child's primary place of residence. (If the child met the criteria, then Visit Months = Total N1; if not then Visit Months = 0); and

- e. *Visited In Residence* = This field carries over the number of visits that occurred in the child's primary place of residence (cell Total N2) for those children who met the criteria of being visited each and every month (if Visit Months is not 0, then this number will = Total N2; if Visit Months = 0, then this number will = 0).

Calculated Fields – Sheet 2

- a. *Totals for D, N1 and N2* = the totals of these columns from sheet 1;
- b. *Denominator* = the total for the Denominator column from sheet 1;
- c. *Visits Each Month While In Care* = the total for the Visits Each Month While In Care column from sheet 1;
- d. *Visit Months* = the total for the Visits Months column from sheet 1;
- e. *Visited In Residence* = total for the Visits Months column from sheet 1;
- f. *Measure 1* = Total Children who were Visited Each Month While In Care divided by Total Children Served (Denominator); and
- g. *Measure 2* = Total Children Visited in Residence divided by total Visit Months.

Submission of form to OCYF

Counties should submit the worksheet to OCYF via e-government. The naming convention for submission is: **cvtxxxyyy.xls** where xxx is the county FIPS code and yyyy is the federal fiscal year. Example for Adams County – cvt0012007.xls.

Any questions regarding completion of the form should be directed to the Information and Data Management Unit at 717-787-3984.

Attachment B

Caseworker Visitation County Contact Information

Complete this form and fax to OCYF, Information and Data Management Unit at: 717-346-9663

County: _____

Contact

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

Will you need access to e-government?

_____ NO, I already have access

_____ YES, I currently do not have access

Those who check yes will be contacted by OCYF to arrange for access to e-government.