

**Executive Summary:**

This month marked the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> quarter of implementation of Oklahoma's Pinnacle Plan. DHS is currently meeting the target for worker visits with children and is showing some progress in reducing shelter usage, foster parent recruitment, and improving workloads. These three areas were identified as the top priorities in showing system improvement. Public reporting for the last several months can be found at [www.okdhs.org](http://www.okdhs.org) under the Pinnacle Plan logo.

More children entering the system in 2013 proved to be a challenge to improvement efforts. Currently, there are 11,057 children in out-of-home care which is an increase of over 2000 children from the Plan's development. Casey Family Programs is on-site in Oklahoma conducting a quantitative and qualitative review to better understand the reasons behind the increase. The report will be finalized in February 2014 and includes case reviews and input from focus groups of internal and external stakeholders. The Child Protective Services (CPS) backlog of investigations pending over 60 days was another challenge. Between August-December 2013, the number was reduced from over 3600 cases to slightly over 900 cases. This required a focused effort of CWS staff, at all levels, to ensure children were safe and these cases were completed.

**Pinnacle Point 1 – Foster parent recruitment and reducing shelter usage**

Beginning in August 2013, the Bridge Resource Family Recruitment, Retention, and Support Contracts were awarded. While it will take some time for the programs to be at full capacity, all four providers (Tallgrass, TFI, Angels, and St. Francis) are well underway to building their programs. A few families were approved in 2013, but we are now starting to see larger numbers of families approved this month. All four agencies have accepted placement of children. This effort impacts every other area of the system and is anticipated to, among other things, successfully expand the availability of quality placement options and supports to ensure the safety of children, reduce shelter utilization, improve placement stability, and achieve positive permanency outcomes. Because Child Welfare (CW) staff spends a tremendous amount of time searching for appropriate placement options for children in out of home care, this effort will greatly affect workloads allowing them to spend more time engaging families and helping them work towards achieving safe permanency for their children.

There is a significant reduction in children under the age of 6 years old entering shelters; however, we have been unable to meet this target. There is a special authorization process that occurs before a child in this age category can spend a night in the shelter, with a focus on children under 2 years old which requires Child Welfare Services (CWS) Director's approval. No requests have been made in January for children under 2 years old. Only 11 children under the age of 6 years old were in shelters on January 13, 2014. A few of these children were part of large sibling groups, which is an automatic exception and allowed under the Pinnacle Plan.



**Pinnacle Point 2 – Restructuring Child Welfare Services and creating accountability**

Restructuring of CWS was completed early in the Plan, but efforts continued in 2013 to build stronger accountability in the system and improve communication. The CWS leadership team continues to meet with front-line staff and foster parents to provide updates on the Pinnacle Plan and to hear directly any concerns or challenges. The CWS Summits with front-line CWS staff were held in 2012, 2013, and are scheduled to begin this week in 2014. District directors held foster parent focus groups in December 2013 to provide an update and to offer their support.

**Pinnacle Point 3 – Increase the number, reduce turnover and improve competencies of CWS front-line staff**

Another major success directly impacting the workloads of front line staff is the addition of over 600 positions to CWS in SFY13. Of those positions, 91% were directly involved with serving families and children. Department of Human Services (DHS) is working to better understand the turnover of front-line staff through an in-depth analysis of this problem. The hope is that through this analysis, we can glean a better understanding of the trends and contributing factors related to turnover in order to develop strategies targeted at the specific causes. There was slight improvement in the turnover rates in the first quarter of SFY14.

Competency assessments (HOT testing) and certification are well underway. Before child welfare specialists are assigned a caseload, they must demonstrate certain skills through HOT testing. This requires exhibiting effective interviewing techniques with children and adults; assessing safety; and properly coding information in the KIDS system. Provisional certification of all CWS Supervisors is nearly complete. The first step was a written exam requiring a complete and thorough understanding of effective management skills. The second step is demonstrating the required skills through field observation. The third and final step of certification will require an understanding of practice and effective case supervision skills. Full certification, of over 350 supervisors statewide, will require at least another year to complete. The next level of certification is for lead workers or CWSIII which will require demonstration of mentoring skills along with a practice competency assessment.

*CWS meeting caseload standards has improved even with the increase of children in care.*

- *First quarter SFY14, 25.3% of the workers were meeting caseload standards.*
- *Second quarter SFY14, 31.8% of the workers were meeting caseload standards.*

**Pinnacle Point 4 – Achieving permanency for all children in out-of-home care**

Trauma-informed and systems of care focus, permanency roundtables, and diversion services for children in group homes were the practice changes intended to bring about permanency for specific children. Systems of care focus shifted to Region 4 with services focused on placement stability and crisis services to support relatives and foster parents caring for children in care. CWS staff is encouraged to have these additional services available to support children. Eckerd, a private agency, was awarded a contract to provide services to children to ensure they move



timely from group homes to family homes and to permanency. This contract for OKC and Tulsa is providing services to 40 children at this time. While it's early in the contract, several successes with children moving from group homes to family homes have already occurred. Round 1 of permanency roundtables was held in Fall 2013 impacting over 60 children. Round 2 begins in February 2014 and addresses older youth who will soon transition from the child welfare system (approximately 350 between the ages of 16-18 years old with parental rights terminated). The focus is on achieving permanency for these youth before age 18, making sure connections to support systems are in place, and that no youth leaves the system without the tools and skills necessary for success.

### **Pinnacle Point 5 – Developing and implementing a comprehensive quality assurance program**

The quality assurance plan was presented and approved by the Co-Neutrals. The first pilot sites are scheduled for review in late January through March, 2014. The information and feedback from these sites may lead to some revisions. The quality assurance plan includes engagement of external stakeholders, key partners, and CWS staff at all levels through Quality Circles at the local level.

### **Pinnacle Point 6 – Ensuring safety of children**

The Office of Client Advocacy (OCA) made significant changes in their policies and practices for investigating allegations of child maltreatment in residential settings including group homes and shelters. Changes require OCA staff to meet the same initiation (same day) and completion (30 days) timeframes as CWS. OCA improved coordination with CWS and Child Care Licensing with a renewed focus on the safety of children at the facilities.

### **Pinnacle Point 7 – Strengthening partnerships - we can't do it alone!!**

- Joint response protocols with law enforcement were updated in 2013
- Quarterly meetings with Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDT) and Advocacy Centers started in 2013
- Tribal/State Workgroup meetings continued with a new focus on a strategic plan
- Count Me in 4 KIDS, a faith-based and community led group, was formed in 2013 focusing on supporting children in care and those who care for them.
- A comprehensive report was prepared by Office of Planning and Research (OPRS) to assess possible service and quality gaps for particular districts and regions. This included both surveys and focus groups of internal and external stakeholders and pulled together information from many sources gathered over the past year.
- The Oklahoma Child Welfare Stakeholder Collaboration State Advisory Board for Improving Services, chaired by Judge Richard Kirby, continues to meet quarterly. The first site, Pottawatomie County, completed their assessment and developed a strong community team focused on improving outcomes. They received a generous grant (over \$400,000) from Avedis Foundation to support the group's work. The second site, Lincoln County, is now undergoing a community assessment. The state plan is to select one county per region to expand in 2014.



**What's ahead in 2014?**

- A renewed focus on Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and improving communication with Tribes. As DHS and Tribes improve communication and compliance with ICWA, children and families will benefit from reducing removals and improving permanency and well-being for Indian children. Currently, over 30% of the children in care are Native American.
- DHS, in partnership with the foster care partners, expects to see significant improvement in the foster home recruitment. As progress is made, placement requests will be centralized ensuring improved matches, better communication with providers, and reduced burden on the front-line worker.
- Updated applications are being explored and are in process for front-line staff to access some case information from the field on their smart phones.
- Through the Casey Family Programs case review, DHS will have an improved understanding of what's behind the increased number of children in care. Services and strategies will be aligned with the needs of and focused on ensuring children do not remain in the system longer than necessary for their safety. This will drive down caseloads as children move to permanency.
- Casey Family Programs will continue supporting Oklahoma in conducting permanency roundtables for youth at risk of aging out of the system. We expect to see success stories flow from the ideas generated by these groups.
- Eight LCSW will join us this year to support the field with the trauma-informed screenings, assessments, and working with secondary trauma of CWS staff. The interviews are in process.
- Eckerd, through their specialized work with children in group homes, will continue to assist with moving children to permanency. Again, these are some of the children with the longest stays in group home care and in care overall.
- All Pinnacle Plan positions have been posted and many staff are completing their CORE training and competency assessments (HOT Testing). This will drive down caseloads as more staff are available to work with families and children.
- The quality assurance system will provide valuable feedback on progress and areas needing improvement. Engaging the local communities in finding solutions, either through Quality Circles or the Community Partnership Boards model, will increase the support to front-line staff, foster parents, and families.
- Oklahoma is pursuing the IV-E Waiver – an opportunity to shift funding from “paying for children to be in foster care” to “paying for services to keep children out of foster care”. The application is due in February 2014 and, if approved, would be authorized in September 2014.
- The Shelter Hotline will return if a final agreement can be reached with OJA.
- Last, but definitely not least, the Co-Neutrals will make their first official “Good Faith” finding regarding DHS's progress. This is scheduled to occur in the first half of 2014.

