

Child Placement Follow-Up Forum Overview
November 10, 2011
Summary Report

On November 10, 2011, the State Public Affairs Committee of the New Jersey Junior Leagues (SPAC) facilitated a Foster Care Placement Review Forum as a continuation of the Forum that SPAC hosted on May 24, 2011. SPAC advocates for women and children in need on behalf of the 3,000 women that make up the Junior Leagues of New Jersey. SPAC has had a long-standing position of support for programs and policies that benefit children in the state child welfare system. In 1978, New Jersey enacted the Child Placement Review (CPR) Act to provide oversight of children in foster care placement. SPAC, in partnership with Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), were leading advocates for the passage of this law, which required the establishment of a system of citizen review boards in the Family Court in each county. Due to SPAC's history of advocating for children in the foster care system, SPAC hosted the Child Placement Forums. The Forum Overviews reflect the direct comments made by the diverse group of stakeholders present at the forum.

The Spring Child Placement Forum brought together 40 representatives from over 15 different stakeholder/agencies involved with the New Jersey foster care placement system. This representation throughout the forum provided sufficient discussions to address the objectives set forth for the day which were:

- To determine if there is sufficient accountability and oversight in foster care placement.
- Define the optimal role of citizen review within foster care for children in New Jersey.

At the conclusion of the Forum, the many agencies, organizations and concerned citizens are all working to provide a safe environment and a better future for the children in placement, New Jersey does not have sufficient oversight among these groups. There is a need for citizen review in New Jersey; however with the recent clarification of the courts role in reviewing the individual child's placement, it is unclear as to what extent the citizen's role should play. During the non-competitive environment of the forum, it was agreed that additional individual and systemic oversight is needed in our state with Continuous Quality Improvement as a key component. However, due to time constraints the Spring Forum concluded without addressing the 45-day review directive. Please go to www.jlnjspac.org to read the complete Spring Forum overview.

At the Fall Forum 20 representatives from stakeholder organizations came together to further discuss Directive #04-10 as it relates to citizen review and systemic oversight. The following questions were discussed:

- ❖ Does the Directive address priorities identified in the Spring Forum?
- ❖ What happens if the 45-day review deadline is not met?
- ❖ What role will/can the Child Placement Advisory Council (CPAC) assume in systemic oversight?

Does the 45-day review address priorities identified in the Spring Forum?

The attendees of the Fall Forum concluded that many of the questions on the 45-day review questionnaire help to identify the priorities that present themselves with reviewing a child in placement. However, some of the information on the questionnaire coupled with the short 45-day timeframe, present barriers.

In the life of an adult, 45-days is a short period of time and it maybe difficult to provide all of the information required by the directive. Forum participants provided the following examples of

The Junior Leagues of New Jersey State Public Affairs Committee (SPAC) is strictly non-partisan and represents over 3,000 women volunteers across the state. Since 1970, SPAC has successfully advocated on issues of concern to women, children and the environment.

barriers that present themselves; some data requests make people uncomfortable; timing of the team meeting; caseload priorities; and unwillingness of participants to respond to attending the review.

Recommendation: Communication is the key to the success of the 45-day review and placement. If the caseworker could communicate why information is incomplete and the CPR Volunteer could create a follow-up plan, CPR Boards may be able to provide judges with comprehensive files. In addition, CQI/Outcome measurement could be used to identify the effectiveness of 45-day review questionnaire in regards to the necessity of providing timely complete reviews.

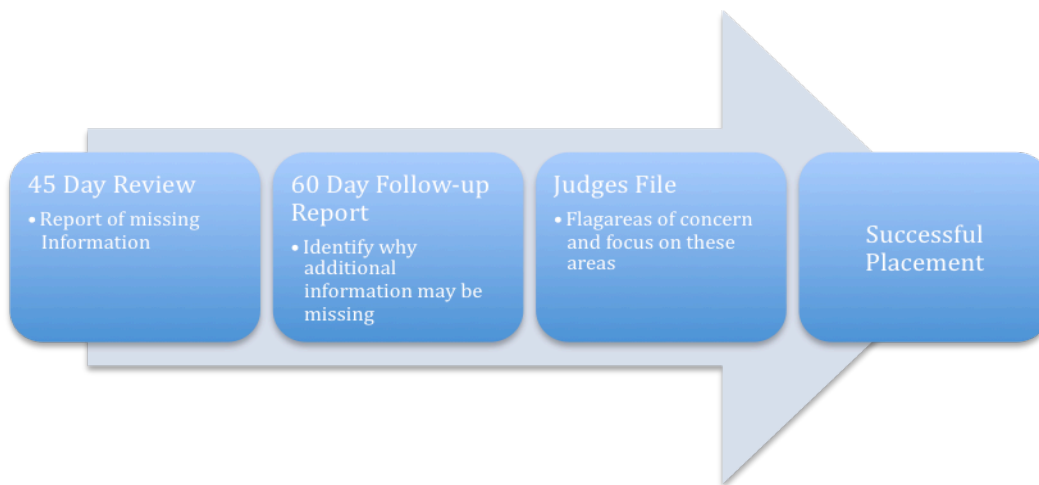
Outcome: Communication will give Judiciary and DYFS an understanding as to why information was not provided and CQI could provide a measurable reason to provide the information in a timely manner, which may reduce the number of cases that are not placed within one year.

What happens if the 45-day review deadline for information collection is not met?

In the life of a child in placement 45-days is a short period of time; the outcomes within the first few months of placement could alter the child's life. Currently, if there are circumstances that curtail the information or attendees from providing a complete 45-day review, CPR volunteers note the information in the file and submit it to the judge. No further report is given to the judiciary, and CPR Boards and DYFS are unaware if the information was put to use.

Recommendation: CPR Boards should be allowed to follow-up on missing information and the report should be given to both the Judiciary and DYFS. The Judiciary should provide feedback that the file was reviewed.

Outcome: Complete information will be provided to the Judiciary; DYFS will be aware that the file was reviewed and information was put to use. Identifying missing information and the reason it is missing may identify problem cases and proactively correct areas of concern. See example below.



Systemic Oversight

The discussion regarding systemic oversight evolved into three areas: training, recruiting and retaining CPR volunteers; enhanced training for judges; and improving communication among stakeholders.

CPR Training: Since Directive #04-10 was promulgated, CPR volunteer attrition has increased, causing concern that the volunteers view the 45-day review as ineffective. Suggestions were made for the AOC to consider training volunteers on the importance of the 45-day review checklist and data availability.

Recommendation: Establish a certification or designation through New Jersey County and/or state colleges after training criteria are met. Include volunteers in the DYFS training.

Outcome: Value would be given to training, which would help the AOC with recruitment and retention. Volunteers would understand barriers DYFS might have with data collection.

Judicial Training: While judges attend Judicial Education Programs, the extent of time spent on Foster Care and Child Placement in particular was unknown to the Forum group. Topics and comments regarding Judicial College centered around: adding more topics at judicial college (is this possible with the tight agenda?) and providing opportunities for judges to attend workshops with stakeholders so the judges could put a face with the name/agency and create a human connection.

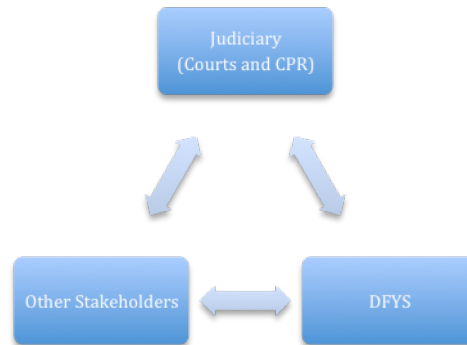
Recommendation: Enhanced Judicial education programs for judges new to Family Court should focus on child placement/ foster care. Judges should be encouraged to attend workshops sponsored by other stakeholders for cross-agency training.

Outcome: Judges and stakeholders would gain thorough knowledge of the changing foster care systems and agencies within New Jersey.

Communication: The discussion on training evolved to the importance of cross stakeholder/agency communication and training. A meaningful collaboration of agencies would result in better communication flow, more accountability and a possible reduction in duplicity as each agency shares a goal – finding the placement that best fits the needs and safety of the child. The topic of funding was discussed and requires further investigation.

Recommendation: It was proposed that ongoing efforts be made by CPAC to host an annual stakeholder/agency conference or round table discussion to increase open communication and collaboration.

Outcome: Increased communication and information sharing will lead to greater accountability.



In conclusion, the consensus of the Fall Forum participants was that communication and data sharing on all levels will create a more effective placement review process. Increased communication between CPR Boards and DYFS would increase the likelihood of obtaining complete information for the 45-day review. Providing the CPR Board with the ability to follow-up on missing information within a certain time frame would provide a more complete file for the Judiciary. Further, on a systemic level, increased communication and training would lead to more accountability throughout foster care stakeholders and agencies.

Attending Organizations: Family Intervention Services, Department of Children and Families, Court Appointed Special Advocate, Children’s Home, CPAC, DYFS, Office of Youth Services Somerset, Regional HHS Office, Schumann Fund, Office of Law Guardian, Former Child Placement Volunteers, The Nicholson Foundation and ACNJ.