

IOWA CHILD ADVOCACY BOARD

2006 ANNUAL REPORT

IMPROVING THE WELFARE OF CHILDREN IN IOWA

NOTE: This report was originally prepared and formatted as a six-sectioned tri-fold brochure. The version of the report you are now reading was formatted to accommodate its being distributed electronically, read from a computer screen and easily printed as a multiple page document. The narrative content of this version is identical to that of the version being distributed by the Iowa Child Advocacy Board as a single-sheet, folded brochure.

The Iowa Child Advocacy Board (CAB) is an independent board composed of nine members appointed by the Governor of Iowa and confirmed by the Iowa Senate. The CAB operates two volunteer child advocacy programs: the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program and the Iowa Citizen Foster Care Review Boards program (ICFCRB). The CAB establishes policies and procedures for the administration of its programs, to support the work of its volunteers and to ensure compliance with the Iowa Code, which provides the legal basis for citizen involvement in child welfare issues. See I.C. Chapter 237, Division II.

The CAB is an attached unit within the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals and can be contacted at:
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Volunteer Programs

CASA -- The Iowa Child Advocacy Board oversees the state's Court Appointed Special Advocate program which recruits, trains and supports community volunteers to serve as effective voices in court for abused and neglected children, strengthening efforts to ensure that each child is living in a safe, permanent and nurturing home. CASA volunteers are appointed by the Court to advocate for a specific abused or neglected child. The CASA volunteer serves many roles in a child's court case, including investigation, assessment, facilitation, monitoring and advocacy. CASAs were available in 68 Iowa counties in 2006.



ICFCRB -- The Iowa Child Advocacy Board oversees the Iowa Citizens Foster Care Review Board program which recruits, trains and supports volunteers to review cases, collect data and recommend changes to promote the safety and permanency of children who have been removed from the homes of their families. ICFCRB volunteers are appointed by the Court to serve on local community boards that conduct a review of the case of each child in out-of-home placement in their community once every six months. The ICFCRB volunteers make specific findings and recommendations to the Court and other system officials for each case they review. ICFCRBs were holding regular reviews in 62 Iowa counties in 2006.



Advocating for System Improvements

Another duty of the Iowa Child Advocacy Board is to inform policy makers and others of issues affecting the best interests of abused and neglected children in the state's court, human service and foster care systems. This report presents Board findings and offers a collection of recommendations to improve the safety, well-being and permanency of children in Iowa.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM
THE IOWA CHILD ADVOCACY BOARD

Nine hundred and seventy-three Court Appointed Special Advocates and Citizen Foster Care Review Board volunteers spent over 58,000 hours during FY 2006 working with Iowa's child welfare system to assess the situations of thousands of abused and neglected children and to advocate for these children's best interests. Based upon those experiences, the Iowa Child Advocacy Board presents these findings and recommendations to improve the welfare of children in Iowa.

- ◆ Children's best interests in Iowa have been increasingly met through recent child welfare system redesigns to:
 - promote family team meetings
 - provide assistance to children as they age out of foster care
 - increase the frequency of DHS worker contacts with their clients
 - support community-based prevention services
 - assist parents to receive mental health services for their children
 - develop new practices that promote kinship care for children needing placement away from their parents.

- ◆ Children's best interests in Iowa have been increasingly met through steps taken by the Judicial Branch and its Children's Justice Initiative to implement or promote best practices in child welfare proceedings such as:
 - one-judge/one-child case assignments;
 - having children present at their hearings whenever appropriate
 - reducing the use of informal juvenile court hearingsAlso noteworthy are their efforts to conduct a district by district assessment of the court process in juvenile cases to highlight best practices and develop solutions to processes that need attention.

- ◆ Parental substance abuse, including the abuse of methamphetamine, continues to be a common and serious issue in child abuse and neglect cases. Difficulties with parents successfully accessing or benefiting from treatment are major obstacles to family reunification or other timely permanent placements for the child.

- ◆ The caseload sizes of DHS workers and other system officials continue to have negative effects on the development and implementation of effective case permanency plans.

- ◆ Time spent by children's attorneys/GALs in face-to-face meetings with children or in other pre-hearing case preparation activities continues to be lacking in many cases. State funding supports for court-appointed children's attorneys/GALs are inadequate.

- ◆ In many foster care cases, the frequency of supervised visits between children and their parents is not sufficient for parent-child relationships to be adequately maintained or improved. Transportation to and from services and to and from visitations with their children continues to be a problem for many parents involved in Iowa's child welfare system.

- ◆ Planning for older children in foster care to effectively coordinate the delivery of children and adult services continues to start too late or is otherwise inadequate in many cases.

- ◆ Keeping siblings affected by abuse and neglect together or in contact with each other when they are placed outside of their home is often difficult due to limited placement options or a lack of necessary efforts or resources.

- ◆ The delivery of needed services is being delayed for some children because of the group care waiting list.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE IOWA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- ◆ Appropriate funds requested by CAB to expand the Iowa CASA program statewide.
- ◆ Endorse and support the Judicial Branch's Children's Justice Initiative through appropriations and responses to policy change recommendations as well as through the participation of legislators and legislative staff in cross-branch work groups.
- ◆ Establish the highest possible priority to the availability of substance abuse treatment for court-involved parents with children at risk of placement or continued placement.
- ◆ Eliminate state-approved pay disparities between court-appointed attorneys assigned to child welfare cases and other court-appointed attorneys.
- ◆ Appropriate funds to DHS to be used to reduce the size of DHS child welfare caseloads, to eliminate the waiting list of children to be served through the children's mental health waiver and to eliminate the group care waiting list.
- ◆ Develop policies to assure that child siblings affected by foster care placements are allowed to stay together or remain in direct, frequent contact with each other unless the court determines that such placements or contacts are not in the children's best interests.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE IOWA SUPREME COURT

- ◆ Continue the Children's Justice Initiative and its efforts to implement the recommendations in the PEW Commission on Children in Foster Care report, "Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care."
- ◆ Place special emphasis in the planning and oversight of those aspects of the Children's Justice Initiative that are specifically designed to identify and assist the implementation of best practices for court-appointed attorneys/GALs representing abused and neglected children and other attorneys involved in child in need of assistance proceedings



RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE IOWA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

- ◆ Collaborate with the Department of Public Health to develop procedures that provide for wrap-around child welfare services that include an in-home substance abuse treatment component specifically for court-involved parents with children at risk of removal or continued removal.
- ◆ As new child welfare service contracts are developed, prioritize the availability of resources for supervised visits and case-plan related transportation expenses for parents with children at risk of removal or continued removal.
- ◆ Continue and expand efforts to assist youth aging out of the foster care system.
- ◆ Continue and expand efforts to carry out child welfare case planning through family team meetings.
- ◆ Look for ways to improve how children's services and treatment plans are transitioned when cases are transferred among DHS service units following terminations of parent-child relationships.
- ◆ Continue and expand efforts to: 1) divert families with low-risk child welfare needs to preventive services; and 2) assist families with child mental health service needs to access Medicaid-funded services. However, these efforts should be closely monitored to find out the extent to which such families are subsequently referred to DHS due to abuse and neglect concerns or related unmet needs. Adjustments in these diversion or referral policies and practices should be made as warranted by the best interests of the children affected.



ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Policy makers, child welfare system officials and others are asked to join with the Child Advocacy Board in considering the following questions as issues to be further clarified and examined in the months ahead.

- ◆ How adequate are current efforts to monitor the safety and well-being of abused or neglected children who have been diverted from the foster care/child welfare system by placing them with relatives?
- ◆ Is it possible to reduce the number of abused and neglected children who are not returned home or adopted, but are instead placed into “another planned, permanent living arrangement” (APPLA)?
- ◆ How can case-specific and system-wide long-term impacts of the “delinking” of child welfare services from Medicaid-funded services to children be adequately assessed? Are children and their parents that are in the child welfare system, but not eligible for Medicaid, getting access to the mental health services they need? Will the new child welfare services be adequately funded and appropriately coordinated with any mental health services also being delivered to the client family?
- ◆ How can adequate assessment processes be developed to determine the long-term impacts of recent and forthcoming changes in child welfare service contracting methods and the new relationships they will create among DHS staff, primary providers, subcontracted providers, other community service agencies and child and family clients?
- ◆ Should new approaches for the activities or reports of local foster care review boards be considered in light of recent and planned DHS redesigns, court improvements now underway or other child welfare system developments and issues?
- ◆ Should all CASAs be assigned as guardians ad litem as is now allowed in Iowa Code Sections 232.89 and 232.126?
- ◆ Would it be beneficial to provide for the assigning of CASAs or CASA/GALs in I.C. Chapter 600 adoption proceedings?
- ◆ What can be done to improve the transition planning that needs to be coordinated between the schools and child welfare officials to meet the needs of children returning to their community’s schools following an out-of-community placement setting?

Quick Facts

