



# Iowa Child Advocacy Board



## 2007 Findings

The Iowa Child Advocacy Board (ICAB) is an independent board composed of nine members appointed by the Governor of Iowa and confirmed by the Iowa Senate. ICAB establishes policies and procedures for two volunteer child advocacy programs: the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program and the Iowa Citizen Foster Care Review Boards programs. Along with establishing these programs to support the work of citizen volunteers helping abused and neglected children, Iowa Code Chapter 237, Division II also requires ICAB to report annually its findings on issues affecting the best interests of children in Iowa's child welfare system and to offer recommendations for improvements. This hand-out is one part of the ICAB's 2007 annual reporting. Please contact ICAB (see below) to request additional hand-outs containing ICAB's 2007 recommendations to the Iowa General Assembly, the Iowa Judicial Branch and the Iowa Department of Human Services.

Last year, over 1,000 Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) & Citizen Foster Care Review Board volunteers spent over 55,000 hours working within 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. With input from these caring and committed people from across the state, the Iowa Child Advocacy Board offers the following findings regarding Iowa's child welfare system.

February, 2008

### FINDINGS

#### **DHS PROMOTES BEST PRACTICES**

Children's best interests in Iowa are being increasingly met through recent child welfare system redesigns and other Department of Human Services initiatives that support best practices:

- promoting family team meetings
- increasing assistance to children as they age out of foster care
- increasing the frequency of DHS worker contacts with their clients
- supporting community-based prevention services
- assisting parents receive mental health services for their children
- developing new practices that promote kinship care for children needing placement
- involving parents and children with system experience in system planning discussions
- aligning policies and practices with federal Children and Family Service Review guidelines
- planning improvements for the care of children with mental health treatment needs

#### **JUDICIAL BRANCH LEADERSHIP**

Children's best interests in Iowa are being increasingly met through the Judicial Branch's continuation of its Children's Justice Initiative and other activities to implement or promote:

- county-level assessments of juvenile court processes
- state and judicial district level collaborative activities to identify, plan and implement best practices
- child in need of assistance case process and outcome measurements/reports

Notable accomplishments to date include efforts to promote or ensure one-judge/one-child case assignments, having children present at their hearings whenever appropriate, reducing the use of informal juvenile court hearings; the provision of training to attorneys with juvenile court assignments; and, the securing of federal funds to support and study family drug courts in various parts of the state.

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ICAB is an attached unit within the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals and can be contacted at:  
Child Advocacy Board, 321 E. 12<sup>th</sup> St, Lucas Building, Des Moines, IA 50319; 1-866-448-4608; cab@dia.iowa.gov

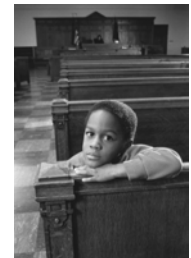
## **SYSTEM REDESIGNS**

Iowa's foster family care and family-centered services are now going through early stages of major redesigns that include:

- new foster parent recruitment and support practices
- new providers and provider expectations
- new family service providers, provider contracts and provider expectation
- new service definitions and case management practices
- new protocols for accessing mental health services for system-involved children
- a new over-arching safety, risk and well-being philosophy to guide case assessments and planning and more.



The progression of these multiple changes are challenging DHS workers, supervisors and administrators, foster parents, contract service providers, court officials, attorneys, families and other interested parties in many ways. Because the changes are still quite new and because anecdotal assessments and case-specific impacts have predictably been both positive and negative, it is difficult to assess the overall progress of the redesign at this time. The inter-relatedness of the redesign's many features also adds to the difficulty of isolating and validating system-wide successes or challenges that may be surfacing at this phase of the redesigns.



## **DECREASING JUVENILE COURT INVOLVEMENT**

Certain elements of recent child welfare system redesigns were structured to achieve greater consistency in responses to child abuse reports; to support new community family assistance services that parents can access voluntarily; and, to increase the extent to which parents can independently access mental health services for their children. It seems likely that these redesign efforts have been major contributors to the reduction Iowa is currently experiencing in the number of new children and families coming before the juvenile court for child in need of assistance (CINA) proceedings and oversight. In 2005, there were 6,619 CINA petitions filed with the courts. For 2007, the number of CINA petitions filed was 4,746 – a 28% reduction over the two year period, most of which occurred in 2007. The sustainability of this rapid change in juvenile court involvement, and its impact on children and families, is not clear.

## **OBSTACLES TO ADDRESS**

Many children in Iowa's child welfare system continue to experience obstacles to reunification or other permanent solutions. Although progress can be noted with efforts to address items listed below, they all continue to surface as obstacles in child welfare cases:

- parental substance abuse and mental health
- parents not successfully accessing or benefiting from services
- large DHS worker caseloads
- families and children experiencing DHS worker turnover
- frequent and regular family team meetings are lacking in many cases
- many children's attorneys/GALs spend too little time in face-to-face meetings with children or in other pre-hearing case preparation activities
- visits between children in foster care and their parents do not happen frequently enough
- transportation to and from services and to and from visitations with their children continues to be a problem for many parents
- adult transition planning for children in foster care starts too late or is otherwise inadequate in many cases
- keeping siblings affected by abuse and neglect together or in contact continues to be difficult
- some children experience too many placements or placements that are too lengthy or too far from their parents due to the lack of a placement in the right part of the state with the ability to meet their special needs
- it is often difficult to locate relatives and other suitable adults to serve as permanent guardians for children for whom neither reunification nor adoption are feasible

