

2008 Annual Report

Submitted February, 2009



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INTRODUCTION

The Iowa Child Advocacy Board (ICAB) is an independent board established in Iowa Code Chapter 237, Division II to provide for citizen involvement in child welfare issues. It is composed of nine [members](#) appointed by the Governor of Iowa and confirmed by the Iowa Senate. ICAB is a unit of state government attached to the [Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals](#).

ICAB establishes policies and procedures for two volunteer child advocacy programs: the Court Appointed Special Advocate ([CASA](#)) program and the Foster Care Review Boards ([FCRB](#)) program. Please visit the [ICAB website](#) to learn more about these programs, the services they support for abused and neglected children and their families, and the opportunities they provide for concerned Iowans to serve their communities.

Along with overseeing these programs, ICAB is also required to annually report on issues of concern and to make recommendations regarding the best interests of children in Iowa's child welfare system. The issues and recommendations presented in this year's report, as well as in the reports of previous years, are based on the experience and input from the hundreds of ICAB staff and volunteers working to assess and assist the cases of thousands of children in Iowa's child welfare system. Last year, over 1,400 children had a CASA volunteer monitoring and assisting their case, and local FCRBs held over 4,000 case-level reviews to assess the progress of children in foster care.

ICAB's 2007 Annual Report was issued as four separate e-documents ([Findings, Recommendations to the Iowa General Assembly](#), [Recommendations to the Iowa Judicial Branch](#) and [Recommendations to the Iowa Department of Human Services](#)). ICAB urges the review of these 2007 findings and recommendations. Many of them continue to be of immediate relevancy and will not be repeated in this 2008 report.

This 2008 report was written with the current national and state economic downturn in mind. ICAB could identify many, many areas where additional resources could be targeted to improve results for families and children in the child welfare system. Instead, this report intends to promote opportunities where improvements of major significance to Iowa's child welfare system can be made through increased coordination and communication and the targeting of new policies and practices toward several priority areas of concern. In addition to providing a brief discussion and recommendations related to the impact the current economic downturn is having on Iowa's child welfare system, this report addresses the following three issues:

- **MEETING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**
- **RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT RATES**
- **PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT**

CURRENT FISCAL CONCERNS

Iowa's child welfare system is not immune from the current financial problems faced throughout the nation by governments, local communities, businesses and families. As financial stresses increase for families, so do the needs for the protections and supports that child welfare system programs provide to some of our most vulnerable children and families. Despite the potential for such increased needs, most state and local programs and services that make up the child welfare system are cutting back on their current budgets and planning for even deeper cuts in the months ahead. Similarly, current and proposed [budget reductions for Iowa's Judicial Branch](#) will have a significant impact on the ability of Iowa's Juvenile Courts to carry out the many responsibilities they have in administering and overseeing the many child abuse and neglect cases that come before them.

Reducing funding for courts and child welfare programs means cutting back on the services and case monitoring activities that provide for the safety of children placed under the State's supervision or custody and that are needed to assure that these children's health and educational needs are being met. As this report is being written, the future fiscal health of Iowa's child welfare system is difficult to predict given the unknown impacts that economic stimulus initiatives will have on local and state revenues. What is known, however, is that the need for state government to respond to child abuse and neglect is not going to go away or be diminished in the near future. What is also known is that many of the children in the child welfare system today who do not receive needed protections, services and supports will likely require longer-term and more expensive government interventions and supports in the future.

ICAB RECOMMENDATIONS

- **During the current economic downturn, decision-makers at all levels are urged to view the safety, health and education of all children as a top priority, and to view as paramount the needs of children who have been abused and neglected and placed under the custody or supervision of the State of Iowa.**
- **Support Governor Culver's recommendation to limit the size of FY2010 budget cuts for education, health, human services and public safety, and include in such budget priority considerations all Executive and Judicial Branch activities and programs that provide for the safety, protection and support of abused and neglected children.**

FISCAL CONCERNS -- WHAT IS ICAB DOING?

Reducing expenditures. Like many state agencies in Iowa, ICAB is now dealing with two SFY2009 mandates for budget reductions. A temporary position has been eliminated; another position is not being filled; and, travel and staff training costs are being reduced, as are purchases of office equipment, supplies and operational services. Local ICAB staff in multi-county areas of the state are now covering larger areas than they were six months ago. Ideas for other immediate efficiencies continue to be explored by ICAB and its staff.

The Governor's SFY2010 budget recommendation for ICAB will require significantly greater reductions than are now being made. After SFY2010 budget decisions are made, ICAB will do what it can to support as many CASA and FCRB volunteers as possible to continue assisting the Courts, DHS and others identify and respond to case-specific child safety and welfare short-comings and to identify and respond to system-wide concerns and opportunities for improvements.

Increasing volunteer recruitment. Citizen volunteers are the backbone of ICAB's two programs. In SFY2008, local Foster Care Review Board members and Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers spent over 53,000 hours of their time and traveled over a quarter of a million miles to help the child welfare system meet the needs of abused and neglected children. These volunteers contributed almost \$2.4 million worth of their time and resources to the lives of Iowa children victimized by abuse and neglect. With grant funding from the National CASA Association, ICAB is increasing its volunteer recruitment activities over the next several months, and it hopes to be supporting even more volunteer efforts in the months ahead when other child welfare system resources may be diminishing.

Improving operations. ICAB is now designing and implementing an interactive website to support ICAB staff and volunteer case work activities, to increase electronic communications with other child welfare system officials, to reduce "paper and ink" expenses and to provide information of interest and help to the general public.

Changing practices. With input and support from the Department of Human Services, ICAB has been changing the approach used by local Foster Care Review Boards in some areas of the state to align their case review methods with the case review audits of the federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) process. Case level and aggregate reports are being provided to DHS and the Courts to help them identify areas for improvements in specific cases and to help the State meet the federal performance standards that are tied to Iowa's receipt and use of federal funds.

This report. ICAB can identify many, many areas where additional resources could be targeted to improve results for families and children in the child welfare system. However, this year's report does not recommend any specific spending increases due to the State's current fiscal problems. Rather, ICAB has selected three issues of major significance to Iowa's child welfare system to promote some key opportunities where improvements can be made through increased coordination and communication and the targeting of new policies and practices toward a number of priority areas of concern.

MEETING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Transferring school records when foster children change placements; and, assessing the proficiency or grade level progress of these children when the sending school district has different policies and curricula than the receiving district – these issues present problems that have been talked about, but not fully solved, for many years in Iowa. They are known to cause delays, uncertainties, confusion and frustration for educators, child welfare officials and children in foster care. Other long-standing school/foster care-related issues involve difficulties with the exchanging of child welfare case planning information and school information on attendance, achievement and special needs education plans (IEPs) for school-age children under the Department of Human Service’s (DHS) custody or supervision. The education of many foster children is being affected by the above coordination, communication and priority-setting issues.

Iowa is now working to implement a new federal law, [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#), which requires all states to implement policies and practices so all children removed from their homes can continue attending the school in which they were already enrolled unless it is determined to be against their best interests. When a foster child must be transferred to a different school, states are to assure that they are provided immediate and appropriate enrollment in the new school, with all the educational records of the child provided to the school. While these new federal policies will present challenges to Iowa’s child welfare and school systems, they provide a clear impetus to move forward with solving some long-standing problems faced by many children in foster care.

On December 5, 2008, a “Joint Meeting on Education Needs for Iowa’s Children in Foster Care” was hosted by DHS, the Iowa Department of Education and the Judicial Branch’s Children’s Justice Initiative. The meeting was facilitated by the [American Bar Association’s Legal Center on Education and Foster Care](#). A goal of the meeting was to begin coordinating a number of separate efforts already underway to address the educational needs of foster children. Recommendations or action steps from this joint meeting are forthcoming.

ICAB RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Require the immediate transfer of school records of any child in foster care who has to change schools.**
- **Respond quickly to forthcoming recommendations and plans from the “Joint Meeting on Education Needs for Iowa’s Children in Foster Care.”**
- **Increase communication between the schools and DHS so their separate plans and efforts to address the special needs of children in foster care can be better coordinated to improve their combined benefits to the child.**
- **The Department of Education, Area Education Agencies and local school districts are urged to seek ways of assessing grade level indicators and proficiency levels for foster care children transferred to new schools so their course schedules can be more quickly and accurately determined.**

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE – WHAT IS ICAB DOING?

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). Among their duties, CASA volunteers meet with the child's DHS worker, parents, service providers, teachers and others to find out how each of them are viewing and responding to their assigned child's situation and any special needs of the child. With this information, the CASA volunteer prepares regular reports to the Court that describe how the child's needs are being met and to recommend steps that can be taken to improve the child's safety and well-being. Such recommendations include school-related matters as warranted. This is occurring now and will continue whenever CASA volunteers are assigned to cases involving school-age children. ICAB will be continuing its efforts to make CASA volunteers available for such cases. ICAB will also track the development of any new policies designed to affect the educational success of children in foster care, and steps will be taken to help CASA volunteers understand how the policies are meant to be implemented so they can better assist the Court and other involved parties ensure that such new policies are being followed for the children to whom they are assigned.

Foster Care Review Boards (FCRBs). At regular intervals during a child's placement in foster care, a local FCRB collects information from DHS and others about the child's case plan to review progress and identify any areas of concern. School-related problems and progress are common topics during the board's review hearings, and the child, their parents, DHS, foster care providers and other involved parties are provided with a neutral setting to facilitate communication and problem resolutions. The local board issues recommendations to the Court, DHS and the other parties to the case for child-specific improvements when concerns are identified. These practices will continue. Like CASA volunteers, local board members will be alerted to any new policies developed to improve the educational success of children in foster care, so their review hearings can be adapted to help facilitate and track the implementation of new policies on a case-by-case and area-wide basis.

FCRB Pilot Projects. During the last legislative session, ICAB was given the authority to establish pilot projects through which local review board's statutory protocols can be adjusted to help facilitate improvements in outcomes for children in foster care. Legislative approval to continue such pilot projects is being sought for the coming year. ICAB is interested in pursuing a pilot project that would involve a local board's review of the DHS case plan together with a review of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) plans that schools are required to develop with the parents or guardians for students with special needs. Currently, goals and action steps of these two plans are often separately determined by DHS and the parents in the DHS case plan, and by school officials and the parents of children with special education needs. With cooperation from schools and DHS, it is believed that a local FCRB's process and setting would provide an external and neutral review mechanism that could facilitate increased communication, joint planning and attainment of common goals of benefit to children in foster care with special education needs.

State and Local Improvement Planning. ICAB is represented on the Judicial Branch's Children's Justice State Council, the DHS/Court IV-B Stakeholder Panel, the statutorily created Child Welfare Advisory Committee and the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development, all of which are examining ways to improve the education experience of children in foster care or otherwise work together on such a common goal. The discussion and recommendations offered above are meant to support and promote the goals of these collaborations, and ICAB will continue to provide input and support as their efforts progress. ICAB also will continue to encourage the involvement of ICAB staff as local child welfare planning groups work to plan improvements in the school success of children in foster care.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT RATES

The percentage of African American, Hispanic and Native American children in out-of-home placements in Iowa is much greater than their share of the State's general population. The actual size and nature of such disparity varies from community to community. Most Iowa children being removed from their parents and placed in foster care are Caucasians. In many areas of the State, however, a child who is African American, Native American or Hispanic is much more likely to be removed from their parents and placed in foster care than is a Caucasian child. Similar and related disparities have been reported in school dropout and suspension rates and in the rates of alleged or adjudicated delinquent children placed in detention facilities.

Over the last decade, increased attention has focused on these disparities. Iowa Governor Chester J. Culver has established the Iowa Race and Detention Task Force to examine and impact the overrepresentation of minority children in Iowa's juvenile detention facilities and to oversee the [Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative](#) with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Iowa Department of Education has supported a number of [local school district efforts](#) to reduce achievement gaps. The Iowa Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning has long supported state and local efforts to change disproportionate minority confinement ([DMC](#)) rates. The Iowa Department of Human Services has been focusing on reducing disparity in two Iowa communities through their Minority Youth and Families Initiative (MYFI), and is now embarking on a broader [Help Make No Difference](#) campaign.

Most of the above initiatives involve a cross-section of officials and representatives from state and community service systems. All of these efforts include the support of locally-targeted efforts to reduce disparities, and a diverse set of local collaborations have formed in numerous communities to assess and address disparity in various ways. Progress can be noted in these local efforts, but lasting and more far-reaching results are still being sought.

ICAB RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Improve coordination of state and local efforts to address disparate rates of juvenile detention, placement in foster care, and school achievement.**
- **Respond quickly to recommendations from a forthcoming report from the Governor's Race and Detention Task Force.**
- **Continue efforts to review and revise assessment, case planning and outcome monitoring tools and processes to eliminate bias and enhance systemic cultural competency.**
- **Replicate successful approaches from DHS's Minority Youth and Families Initiative in additional areas of the state.**
- **Continue efforts to increase the use of relative placements and the recruitment of minority family foster care providers.**

DISPARITIES IN FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT RATES – WHAT IS ICAB DOING?

CASA and FCRB Service Availability. Currently, each local FCRB reviews the cases of all foster care children in the counties for which the board is responsible. There is no disparity in the selection of cases to review. However, the selection of children to be assigned CASA volunteers is made by the Court with input from DHS, attorneys in the case, service providers, ICAB staff and others. From a statewide perspective, this case selection process has resulted in a racially and ethnically diverse CASA program caseload that exceeds the racial and ethnic diversity of the general population but is not as diverse as is the population of all children in the child welfare system. ICAB will continue to track this measure and look for remedies to increase the numbers of minority children who are assigned a CASA volunteer.

Staff and Volunteer Training. All ICAB staff and CASA and FCRB volunteers go through a two and one half day training session that includes a section on the issues of bias and raising cultural competencies. The goal of this training is to help staff and volunteers better understand, and effectively interact with, children and adults of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, religions, nationalities, income levels and other personal and cultural backgrounds and perspectives. In addition to this orientation training, volunteers regularly participate in in-service training activities that also address the topics of diversity and cultural competencies. More such training activities would be of benefit to all staff and volunteers.

CASA and FCRB Volunteer Recruitment. As an ongoing duty, all local ICAB program coordinators are expected to plan and implement volunteer recruitment initiatives to increase the diversity of Iowa's pool of CASA and FCRB volunteers. A challenging goal adopted by ICAB is to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of CASA and FCRB volunteers to mirror the diversity of Iowa children adjudicated as children in need of assistance.

FCRB Pilot Projects. During the last legislative session, ICAB was given the authority to establish pilot projects through which local review boards' statutory protocols can be adjusted to help improvement outcomes for children in foster care. Legislative approval to continue such pilot projects is being sought for the coming year. ICAB is now working with DHS to begin a pilot project in one Iowa county to help assess and reduce the disproportionate rate of foster care placements involving minority children. It is hoped that such a pilot project will assist DHS and the Court to eliminate unintended bias by focusing the board's review process on the cultural competencies of case assessment and case planning activities that: 1) determined the need for a child's removal; 2) identified appropriate kinship care alternatives; and, 3) provided for service approaches to reunify families following a child's placement in foster care.

State and Local Improvement Planning. ICAB is represented on the Governor's Race and Detention Task Force, the Iowa Youth Development Collaboration, the DHS/Court IV-B Stakeholder Panel and the Iowa Child Welfare Advisory Committee, all of which provide a setting for the coordination of issues of disparity in foster care placement rates. The discussion and recommendations offered above are meant to support and encourage such efforts by these collaborations. ICAB will continue to provide input and support to them as their efforts impact on children in foster care. ICAB will also continue to encourage the involvement of local ICAB staff as local groups work to reduce disparity in the rates of children removed from their homes and placed in foster care.

PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT

Parental substance abuse is one of the most prevalent and difficult issues facing Iowa's child welfare system. The Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Courts often refer or order parents to receive substance abuse evaluations and treatment. The Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) oversees most aspects of [substance abuse treatment services in Iowa](#). IDPH has a long history of structuring Iowa's substance abuse treatment system using a wide variety of policies and resources, just like DHS has implemented many child welfare programs and policies that change over time.

The extent to which the local practitioners of these two complex systems interact at the case level can vary from place to place and from case to case. The extent to which information is exchanged about their mutual clients' needs and treatment or service plans can vary greatly due to confidentiality concerns, parental disclosure and cooperation, time constraints and more. In many cases, the parents get the help they need, and the child's best interests are met. In other cases, opportunities to more fully engage the parents or to identify other pathways to success may be negatively affected by issues that could be avoided or resolved with increased communication and coordinated service planning between these two service systems.

[HF2310](#), a bill passed by the 82nd Iowa General Assembly in 2008, requires DHS and IDPH to collect and share a variety of data, to develop protocols for serving families involved in both systems, and to address any disincentives to parents seeking substance abuse treatment. An initial report from DHS & IDPH is due in December of 2009.

DHS and IDPH, along with the Judicial Branch's Children's Justice Initiative, are now working together to implement *Parents and Children Together: A Drug Court Initiative*; and, they are also working together and with others on an *In-Depth Technical Assistance Project with the [National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare](#)*. Through the drug court initiative, a number of family drug courts (aka family treatment courts) are receiving federal funding to help them support more intensive court oversight, case management, substance abuse treatment and community supports than are typically available in child welfare cases involving parental substance abuse. An evaluation of these activities is underway. The technical assistance project is designed to identify and promote new coordinated case planning, treatment delivery, service funding, case monitoring and parent support approaches that connect the child welfare and substance abuse service systems.

ICAB RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue all current DHS, IDPH and Court efforts to increase the coordination of Iowa's child welfare and substance abuse service systems; accelerate efforts as resources allow.**
- **Review forthcoming evaluation of Iowa's family drug courts; publicize lessons-learned and replicate successful elements.**
- **Respond quickly to any recommendations developed from the *In-Depth Technical Assistance Project* involving DHS, IDPH and the Court to assist in the implementation of HF2310 and to otherwise improve the substance abuse treatment outcomes for parents with children in Iowa's child welfare system.**

PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT – WHAT IS ICAB DOING?

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). Among their duties, CASA volunteers meet with the child's DHS worker, parents, service providers, teachers and others to find out how each of them are viewing and responding to their assigned child's situation and any special needs of the child. With this information, the CASA volunteer prepares regular reports to the Court that describe how the child's needs are being met and to recommend steps that can be taken to improve the child's safety and well-being. Such recommendations include parental substance abuse matters as warranted. This is occurring now and will continue whenever CASA volunteers are assigned to cases involving parental substance abuse. ICAB will be continuing its efforts to make CASA volunteers available for such cases. ICAB will also track the development of any new approaches designed to improve the coordination of our child welfare and substance abuse service systems, and steps will be taken to help CASA volunteers understand how the new approaches are meant to be implemented so they can better assist the Court and other involved parties ensure that such policies or practices are being followed for the children to whom they are assigned.

Foster Care Review Boards (FCRBs). At regular intervals during a child's placement in foster care, a local FCRB collects information from DHS and others about the child's case plan to review progress and identify any areas of concern. Parental substance abuse and treatment progress are common topics during the board's review hearings, and the child, their parents, DHS, foster care providers and other involved parties are provided with a neutral setting to facilitate communication and problem resolutions. The local board issues recommendations to the Court, DHS and the other parties for case-specific improvements when concerns are identified. These practices will continue. Like CASA volunteers, local board members will be alerted to any new activities designed to improve the success of parental substance abuse treatment so their review hearings can be adapted to help facilitate and track the implementation of new efforts on a case-by-case and area-wide basis.

FCRB Pilot Projects. During the last legislative session, ICAB was given the authority to establish pilot projects through which local review board's statutory protocols can be adjusted to help facilitate improvements in outcomes for children in foster care. Legislative approval to continue such pilot projects is being sought for the coming year. ICAB is now working with a local DHS office and a local substance abuse treatment agency to plan a pilot project that would involve a local FCRB's review of the DHS case plan together with a review of relevant portions of the parent's substance abuse treatment plan. Currently, the goals and action steps of these two plans are often separately determined by DHS and the parent/s in the DHS case plan and by the substance abuse treatment agency and the parent/s in the parent's substance abuse treatment plan. With cooperation from DHS, the substance abuse treatment agency and parents, it is believed that a local FCRB's process and setting would provide an external and neutral mechanism that could facilitate increased communication, joint planning and the attainment of common goals to benefit children in foster care whose parents are undergoing substance abuse evaluation or treatment.

State and Local Improvement Planning. ICAB staff are participants in the *Parents and Children Together: A Drug Court Initiative* and the *In-Depth Technical Assistance Project* of the Judicial Branch's Children's Justice Initiative, DHS and IDPH. The discussion and recommendations offered above are meant to support and promote the goals of these initiatives, and ICAB will continue to provide input and support as their efforts progress. ICAB also will continue to encourage the involvement of ICAB staff as local activities related to these initiatives are underway.