

Mr. Lewis H. Spence
Commissioner
Massachusetts Department of Social Services
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210

Dear Mr. Spence:

From June 12 - 17, 2005, staff of the Children's Bureau, ACF Region I, and the Office of Information Services (OIS) conducted an Assessment Review of the Massachusetts' Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). The AFCARS data used for the review was from the report period October 1, 2004 - March 31, 2005 (2005A). I have summarized the major findings from the AFCARS review in this letter. Enclosed please find the full report.

The AFCARS assessment review evaluates two areas: the AFCARS general requirements (reporting populations and technical standards) and the data elements. Information collected on these areas is combined and a rating factor is assigned to the general requirements and each data element. A scale of one (does not meet AFCARS standards) to four (fully meets AFCARS standards) is used to assign a factor to each element.

The State was found to be in full compliance with the adoption population requirements and the technical requirements. The review team found the State to be mostly in compliance with the AFCARS standards. The team identified some technical changes/modifications that are needed to the data entry screens and the program code that extracts the data.

The most significant issue relates to placements. The specific issue relates to children that enter foster care and are placed each night in a different foster home for multiple consecutive nights. The agency staff acknowledged that this was not acceptable practice and that it is working to improve its ability to find suitable foster settings and provide placement stability for a child. Currently, the State does not include these one-night placement stays in the AFCARS report. The State must include all new placement stays in AFCARS. The report and the "finding" matrices provide ACF policy clarification regarding reporting placement settings and the count of placements. Case workers must be instructed to enter each placement setting that a child resides in and the start date of the placement.

The State is not in full compliance with two foster care population standards. These are related to the State incorrectly reporting children that are still in the agency's responsibility for care and placement that have been placed back into their homes as discharged, including youth that are over the State's age of majority. The State must only report those youth over the age of 18 that are still receiving title IV-E funds.

Many of the other findings pertain to the timely and accurate entry of the data into the system so that it represents an accurate picture of the State's child welfare practice. In order to achieve improved data quality, additional training for caseworkers and monitoring by supervisors to

ensure accurate data entry may be necessary. The breakdown of the rating factors for the foster care and adoption elements is listed in the table below.

Rating Factor	Foster Care (66 elements)	Adoption (37 elements)	Full Data Set (103 elements)
4	23 (35%)	22 (59%)	45 (44%)
3	22 (33%)	0	22 (21%)
2	21 (32%)	15 (41%)	36 (35%)
1	0	0	0

You should note that as a result of the technical corrections made to the system, the State’s semi-annual data submission may fail to meet the missing data standard. In order to ensure that the data are complete and accurate, the agency must require workers to enter the data and assess its validity prior to submitting it to ACF. To do so, the State may utilize the management reports created by the agency, as well as the Data Quality Utility and the Frequency Utility posted on the Children’s Bureau’s website.

The enclosed documents include the final report of the on-site review, the final findings of the general requirements and data elements, and the AFCARS Improvement Plan for the data elements. Within 30 calendar days after the receipt of this report and the attached AFCARS Improvement Plan, the State staff must submit the Improvement Plan electronically to the ACF Regional Office and the Children’s Bureau with estimated due dates for completing the tasks identified in the Improvement Plan. An electronic copy of the final matrices will be e-mailed to your staff. The State should provide electronic quarterly updates of its progress to the Regional Office.

Once ACF and the State agree that the quality of the data is acceptable, the AFCARS Improvement Plan will be considered finished, and a letter will be sent to the State from the Children’s Bureau confirming this fact. The letter will include a summary of the actions taken by the State and the completed AFCARS Improvement Plan.

Additionally, the State’s plan for implementing the changes to the system and for caseworker training must be included in the State’s title IV-B Annual Progress and Services Report as part of the information required in 45 CFR 1357.15(t) and 45 CFR 1357.16(a)(5).

The ACF Regional Office will work with the State to determine if technical assistance is needed, and available, to implement the AFCARS Improvement Plan. The State may obtain technical assistance from the Children’s Bureau’s NRC-CWDT. If you wish to request on-site technical assistance from the NRC-CWDT, please contact your ACF Regional Office.

In closing, I would like to thank the staff who participated in the review for their hard work and commitment to collecting accurate and reliable AFCARS data. If you have any questions regarding the report, please contact Angelina Palmiero at (202) 205-7240.

Sincerely,

Susan Orr, Ph.D.
Associate Commissioner
Children's Bureau

Enclosures

cc: Mary Ellen Bennard, Chief Information Officer, and
Rosalyn Walter, Director of Data Management
Hugh Galligan, Regional Administrator, ACF Region I
Paul Hasz, ACF Office of Information Services
Angelina M. Palmiero, M.S.W., AFCARS
Terry Watt, Director, Division of State Systems
Jerry Milner, National Child and Family Services Review Team