

**STATE OF ALABAMA
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES**

**2020-2024 Child and Family Service Report
Final Report**



**State of Alabama
Department of Human Resources
June 30, 2024**

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I. General Information

State Agency

The Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) is designated by the Governor as the Agency to administer the Social Services Block Grant (Title XX), Title IV-B, and Title IV-E programs. DHR administers the IV-B subpart two, Promoting Safe and Stable Families plan and supervises services provided by the Department and purchased through community service providers.

The Children and Family Services Division (FSD), with oversight from the Deputy Commissioner for Children and Family Services, has primary responsibility for the social service component of the Title IV-E plan and programs that include Independent Living Services, the Title IV-B plans and programs for children and their families through the Social Services block grant, and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). There is additional involvement from other key offices within the Department. The Quality Assurance Division (QAD) has a lead role in promoting and ensuring Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) in DHR's child welfare programs. The Resource Management Division (RMD) negotiates, manages, and monitors the Department's social service contracts and provides oversight, technical assistance, and support services to the public, contractors, state departments, and Department of Human Resources county and states offices/divisions. The population served by DHR includes dependent children, youth, and their families, as well as in-home children, youth, and their families receiving prevention and intervention services to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being.

Central to the organizational structure within the Family Services Division and Quality Assurance Divisions are two management teams comprised of managers and supervisors from each of the offices in the respective divisions. These two teams of staff members serve as the leadership body of each division and have responsibility for carrying out the overall vision through ownership of the goals, priorities, and desired outcomes.

The Organizational charts are in the attachments.

VISION STATEMENT

The Department of Human Resources (DHR), as the designated Title IV-E Agency, administers this plan based on the philosophy that children should be protected from abuse and neglect and, whenever possible, families should be preserved and strengthened in order to nurture and raise children in safe, healthy, and stable environments. Service interventions are to be based on a set of beliefs about outcome-based practice that is both strengths-based and family focused and underscore the importance of comprehensive assessments and individualized planning on behalf of the children and families that come to the attention of the Department. At the core of these beliefs are the following tenets:

- Children belong with their families whenever they can safely live at home
- Child maltreatment is an expression of an underlying, unmet need
- Most parents love their children and want to care for them
- All individuals have worth, deserve respect, and are capable of change
- All children need to experience permanency in their lives; and when children cannot continue to live at home, they still need their families as well as meaningful relationships and enduring community connections

The Child Welfare Mission Statement is as follows: "The Alabama Department of Human Resources will help families receive the least disruptive services they need, when they need them, and for only as long as they need them in order to maintain children in – or return them to – a safe, stable home." The state Child and Family Services Plan for abused, neglected, and at-risk children and their families is intended to operationalize beliefs through developing goal-directed services that are individualized and needs-based and designed with the following desired outcomes in mind:

- Treat families as partners in parenting and protecting their children
- Respect parents and their children and focus on the family and on the family's strengths
- Services are matched to meet identified needs and vary in levels of intensity needed to keep children safe and assure their well-being

- Services are coordinated between service provider and agencies to meet the multiple needs of children and their families
- Services are delivered in culturally sensitive ways
- Services are accessible to children and families
- Address systemic barriers to accessing needed services
- Support families through services and to strengthen families so they may safely care for their children

PRINCIPLES OF OPERATION AND PRACTICE MODEL

The Department and its Family Services and Quality Assurance Divisions are responsible for developing, operating, monitoring, and sustaining a system of child welfare services in accordance with its goals and principles:

- Children will be protected from abuse and neglect
- Children will live with their families whenever possible and when that cannot be achieved through the provision of services, children will live near their homes in the least restrictive environment that can meet their needs
- Children will achieve stability and permanency in their living situations
- Children will achieve success in school and become stable, gainfully employed adults

INDIVIDUALIZED SERVICE PLANNING (ISP) PROCESS

Central to practice in Alabama is the Individualized Service Plan (ISP). The ISP is developed as a partnership between the Department, children, families, and stakeholders. This planning team works together to develop a plan that is directed toward achieving the goals of the Consolidated Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP). The ISP is to be based on an assessment of strengths and needs within the family as well as the behavioral and environmental conditions that need to be changed in order for children to remain safely with their family, to be safely reunited, or to be provided a permanent, safe, and stable living situation. The effective use of these collaborative planning processes can result in partnerships in parenting/ protecting children and reforms in all levels of child welfare practice (state and county) in accordance with the Department’s goals and principles.

PRACTICE MODEL

The Department’s **Child Welfare Practice Model** sets forth the following “Guiding Principles” for, and Desired Outcomes of the work done with children.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

1. Safety & Protection

Children’s safety is first and foremost. DHR shall promote prompt, effective intervention, and freedom from maltreatment.

2. Permanency, Stability, & Self-Sufficiency

DHR shall promote the timely achievement of permanency for children so that they may live with their birth/relative family, and if that is not possible, have enduring relationships living with a permanent family that preserves birth family and other significant connections, and provides commitment, stability, belonging, and smooth, successful transitions into adulthood.

3. Well-Being & Development

Appropriate planning promotes children experiencing love and belonging along with consistent, balanced nurturing and structure in a family environment, in order for children to experience educational, emotional, physical, and developmental growth and well-being.

4. Family-Centered & Culturally Responsive

Parental/child perspectives and expert knowledge of the strengths and needs of their family are valued, encouraged, and used in a family-centered, culturally responsive approach that involves birth families as partners in planning, shapes all aspects of agency involvement with the family and seeks to strengthen parental capacities to care for their children.

5. Individualization of Services

Children and families are best enabled to grow, change their behavior, and overcome challenges when they are engaged, understood, and treated with respect as individuals with their own unique strengths, needs, and cultural identity, and receive strengths-based, individualized services and supports accordingly.

6. Community Collaboration

Ongoing collaboration with the community is valued and cultivated in order to have a continuum of services and resources that are comprehensive, seamless, readily accessible, responsive to individual, unique, and differing levels of need, provided in the least restrictive, most normalized environment and adequately supports parents in raising their children.

7. Professional/Organizational Competence

Child welfare practice should be provided by well-trained and empathetic professional staff, who respect the dignity and worth of every individual, receive skilled supervision, are adequately trained, have appropriate caseloads, and are supported by an effectively managed child welfare agency.

Desired Outcomes:

1. Contact is promptly initiated with children who are reported to be experiencing maltreatment or an impending danger threat and immediate safety is assessed/provided
2. Children with whom the Department is involved are safety and safety threats do not exist or are effectively controlled/managed (either within or outside of the birth family's home).
3. Permanency is achieved in a timely, appropriate manner and stability for children in their living situations is maintained
4. The significant (family, relative, community, educational, faith, and cultural) connections for children and their families are consistently preserved
5. Families have enhanced capacities to provide for their children's needs
6. Children in the care/custody of the Department are achieving success in school and, where necessary, are effectively supported in successfully transitioning into adulthood where they become stable, gainfully employed adults
7. Children in the care/custody of the Department are experiencing healthy emotional and physical growth and development

POSTING OF/ CONTACT PERSON FOR THE APSR

Upon approval by the Children's Bureau, Alabama's Final Report of the 2020-2024 CFSP will be posted on the DHR website, where it can be accessed as shown below.

<https://dhr.alabama.gov/child-protective-services/consolidated-child-family-services-plan/>

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Collaboration

C 1.

Alabama DHR continues to incorporate internal and external stakeholders in the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) process. The collaborations that are planned/ongoing between the agency and various community partners. It is our belief that these collaborations lead to better outcomes for families and children as they help address a number of critical areas of practice, including prevention of child abuse, well-being of children, placement stability and timely achievement of permanency.

Internal Collaboration:

The Department works collaboratively across units and divisions to improve the safety, well-being, and permanency for families and children. The Office of Foster Care, the Office of Independent Living and Recruitment/Home Care Support continues its partnership with the Office of Quality Assurance and the Office of Resource Management around the issues of placement stability and support. We are confident that this level of collaboration is contributing to better outcomes. We meet regularly to plan strategies and review progress on initiatives in safety, permanency, and well-being.

External Collaboration:

The department works collaboratively with many partners to improve safety, well-being and permanency for the families and children served. One of Alabama's partner agencies is The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (ADCANP) whose mission is to secure resources to fund evidenced-based community programs committed to the prevention of child maltreatment. Alabama DHR staff works closely with the Administrative Office of Courts (AOC) staff to address policies and practices of both the court system and the child welfare system. The Children's Justice Task Force (CJTF) continues to complete a needs assessment for the state in partnership with the department.

iCAN county teams, comprised of DHR and Court staff, are now meeting in 24 of our 67 counties. The iCAN meeting is a collaboration between juvenile judges, local attorneys, GALs, and child welfare staff that is designed to identify and address barriers to safety and permanency and develop strategies to improve systematic issues when identified. Alabama DHR sponsors the Child Welfare/Judicial summit annually. Our mission is to promote competence in the judiciary and child welfare through conveying information, facilitating interaction, and changing institutional culture to remove obstacles in safety, well-being, and permanency. We pursue our goal through facilitating judicial and child welfare collaboration and the nimble use of data to inform solid practice and foster shared outcomes. Our work includes a joint review of local county child welfare and judicial data, an examination of data trends, and thoughtful dialogue about strategic solutions. Every county is encouraged to participate by sending the Juvenile court judge, the county director a county supervisor and a GAL or parent's attorney. County iCAN teams decide on a goal for their team and discuss the outcomes at each meeting. Many of the goals are the same as the goals set for the CFSP 2020-2024. Family (particularly paternal relatives) engagement through the ISP process is frequently discussed and strategized. Some Juvenile courts have implemented an automatic order for paternity testing at the 72-hour hearing to begin that process as early as possible in cases in which a father is noted but not legally established.

A Deputy Director of Family and Children's Services continues to meet quarterly with the Alabama Foster/Adoptive Parent Association (AFAPA) board of directors to discuss any concerns, give and receive updates, plan any collaborative trainings, and coordinate any recruitment events. At every meeting, strategies to complete the CFSP 2020-2024 goal of increased foster parent recruitment is discussed with data provided per county that includes the number of children in care and the number of approved foster homes; also frequently discussed are the number of approved co-trainers from the AFAPA who assist counties in the initial training for foster family homes.

The Department participates in an annual in person meeting with the Poarch Indian Tribe to facilitate planning of joint training as well as consultation and collaboration as it pertains to the creation of goals and objectives for the next CFSP. The county in which the reservation is located meets more often with tribe leadership to partner in working cases. The department maintains an MOU with the tribe to set out the collaborative work.

Alabama DHR works in partnership with the Universities in the state to recruit foster homes, to facilitate trainings and to review psychotropic medication prescribed to Alabama's foster children. Included in these collaborative efforts are the University of Alabama, Auburn University, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Troy University, and Alabama State University. Through the negotiation process, the need to recruit foster/adoptive parents statewide is discussed as a part of the recruitment plan with the universities. The psychotropic medication review team works with the department toward the achievement of the CFPR 2020-2024 goal of the department to services provision and to meet the physical, mental, and behavioral needs of children under DHR's care and supervision.

Each of these interactions contribute to the evaluation of goals for the current APSR.

Collaboration Through Joint Planning

Alabama has participated in multiple meetings with the Children’s Bureau, both virtual and on site. In December 2023, the Children’s Bureau and the Capacity Building Center for States completed an onsite visit to discuss ways to strengthen the APSR and planning the CFSP for 2025-2029. February’s meetings took place on site and virtually. The February on-site visits/ was held February 1st and 2nd, 2024. During this visit, DHR and the Children’s Bureau spoke about three focus areas: Chafee, CAPTA, and Assessments, and the dates for submitting the APSR and CFSP. Alabama’s Diligent Recruitment Plan was the focus of the virtual meeting held on February 20, 2024.

Alabama had a virtual check in with the Children’s Bureau on March 8, 2024. During this meeting CB shared the Tribal APSR attachment H as a template to report on requirements for Tribes. CB also shared a document from Virginia to provide an example of how one document could be used to update performance on the CFSP goals. Alabama shared the ongoing progress of the APSR and CFSP. A tentative agenda which included reviewing a draft of the APSR was discussed with CB for the next on-site visit scheduled for April 3, 2024.

On March 27, 2024 , the Department hosted a round table discussion with our current and former Lived Experience youth to address how the Department can improve housing and placements for our older youth. The youth present at the round table discussion were in Transitional Living and Independent Living Programs. Children’s Aid Society staff participated in person and Capacity Building Center for States staff members participated via TEAMS. Youth expressed their experiences, positive and negative, in both ILP and TLP placements. The youths were able to provide the Department with thoughts on how to improve these programs to better benefit youth before they age of care.

April 3, 2024, was originally scheduled to be an on-site visit with the CB; however, this meeting was changed to virtual. During this visit, Alabama shared a draft of the APSR with the CB to review and provide feedback. There was discussion about the CAPTA requirement of CRPs. Alabama reported that Quality Assurance will no longer be a part of the Citizen Review Panels (CRPs). The CB noted the QA report highlights the safety discussion earlier for a broad safety goal in the CFSP. Alabama also shared potential CFSP goals. A draft of the CFSP was requested to be submitted to the CB on May 6, 2024, so the document can be reviewed and feedback can be provided to the department during the next scheduled virtual meeting on May 10, 2024.

During the virtual meeting with the CB on May 10, 2024, the CB provided the Department with feedback of the CFSP document.

II. UPDATE TO ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PERFORMANCE

C 2. ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PERFORMANCE

Where OSRI data is used, the measurement percentages reflect the frequency with which a given item was rated a STRENGTH in OSRIs completed as a component of district QA reviews. The percentages shown for FY20 are those from the first three measurement periods (MP) of Alabama’s Round 3 PIP and those shown for FY21 are from MP 4-6. **Percentages shown for FY 2022 are from MP 7-9.**

SAFETY Outcome 1 Children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect

CFSR Statewide Data Indicators shows that Alabama’s performance on Maltreatment in foster care is worse than the national performance. Alabama’s risk standardized performance rating was 11.61 compared to the national performance of 9.07. However, Alabama’s risk standardized performance ratings of 6.9% regarding recurrence of maltreatment was better than the national performance of 9.7%. Repeat maltreatment is monitored throughout the year through ERD reports and quarterly queries that are provided to county and state administration.

2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	First 2Q 2024
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4.60%	4.80%	4.40%	4.70%	4.20%	4.13%
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These percentages are derived from calculating all children with and INDICATED CA/N who has also had a previous INDICATED CA/N within the past 12 months.

Item 1: Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Child safety is paramount for the Alabama child welfare system. The Department’s policy requires an immediate response (within 12 hours but as soon as possible after a report is received) or a 5-day response time (within 5 days but as soon as possible after a report is received) for contacting children and families based on the vulnerability of the child, access to the child by the alleged perpetrator and the severity of the report. This is tracked by the FACTS system down to the minute for first in person contact with the child victim. Being a dual response state, Alabama set in policy that children who are reported to be at risk of abuse/neglect will be seen and assessed within the 5-day response time frames established by Alabama law and Department policy. This area is a strength for Alabama.

In FY 2023, Alabama's Electronic Report Distribution (ERD) showed First Victim Contacts were 85.97% in timeliness. This is a slight decrease from FY 2022 which showed 87.23% timely contacts statewide. Though the exact reasons for the drop in timeliness of contact are not currently known, it is suspected that errors in report tracking, human error in entering timely information, or a decrease in staff across the state are all contributing factors. However, ERD report INVS 218A currently shows that for FY 2024 the Department is at 83.16 % for initial timely contacts for the state. The Quality Assurance Division's case record reviews around safety assessment were completed in four counties October-December 2023 which reflected an area of strength for three counties. Of the counties reviewed, three had a rating above 90% with one being at 100%.

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

GOAL:

Children reported to be at risk of abuse/neglect will be seen and assessed within the time frames established by Alabama law and DHR policy.

Strategies:

- Intake staff will gather all available information upon receipt of the report
- The Office of Child Protective Services initiated random weekly record reviews of CAN assessments as they are submitted for Due Process. Program specialists utilize the review tool already in use of the Safety Assessment conducted in counties as part of regular on-site QA reviews. This tool includes a section around Intake.
- County offices will have access to training opportunities through SDHR which are designed to enhance worker competence in collecting and analyzing information at Intake.

2024 Update:

- For 2023, 38/67 counties had over 100% timely contacts and 13/67 were above 86%

with the statewide average being almost 96%. This data is tracked through the CCWIS system and reported on monthly via Alabama's Electronic Report Distribution system reports.

- OSR reviews show that information taken at intake is still lacking in some counties but not to the point that it impacts timeliness of contacts.

SAFETY Outcome 2 Children are Safely Maintained in Their Homes Whenever Possible and Appropriate

Item 2. Services to family to protect child(ren) in the home and prevent removal or re-entry into foster care

Item 3. Risk and Safety Assessment and Management

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

SAFETY OUTCOME 2

INCLUDES 2024 UPDATES

Child safety is the essential focus for the CPS intervention and is the primary concern throughout the case process. The assessment process begins at the point a report is made and continues throughout the life of the case to identify current and impending danger.

Alabama is a dual response state and can accept referrals as either a report of child abuse/neglect or a prevention. When a prevention is accepted, the state can and does assess safety and the need for services to prevent a child from entering out of home care and remain in their own home or the home of a relative/friend safely. In FY 23, Alabama accepted 9,484 preventions. Alabama further has 4,168 open cases providing services to 8,092 children to prevent their entry into care. Alabama uses a safety plan to place children with friends or relatives during the assessment period and the beginning of service delivery. As of September 30, 2023, there were 404 safety plans in place providing a plan for safety for children with an identified safety risk but that is managed by the use of a safety plan.

QRI data provides the following insight on applicable cases reviewed for Items 2 and 3.

YEARS	2021	2022	2023
Item 2 applicable cases	109	146	145
Strength #	102	142	139
ANI #	7	4	6
% Strength	94%	97%	96%

Item 3 applicable cases	169	222	219
Strength #	154	202	204
ANI #	15	20	15
% Strength	91%	91%	93%

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

GOAL:

Children and families are engaged, assessed, and treated with respect as individuals with their own unique strengths, needs, and cultural identity.

Strategies

1. Staff will continuously and thoroughly assess and address present and impending danger threats to children in their present/anticipated living situations. Safety assessments that are completed as part of the record reviews in counties will determine if the completed assessments examined more than the specific allegations. Feedback will then be given to county staff accordingly.
2. The SDHR Resource Management Division continues to provide support and guidance to county offices in the identification and provision of supportive services for individuals with developmental/intellectual challenges. This strategy has been initiated.
3. SDHR and the Children's Justice Task Force continue to provide Substance Abuse Training for staff with an emphasis on current treatment modalities and the connection between active addiction and the risk of harm. More training is scheduled for 2023 including a Family Violence Assessment and Safety in Child Protective Services Training.

4. County office management teams will request specialized trainings as needed through the Office of Field Administration. Localized trainings are provided by the SDHR Office of CPS.

Strengths noted over this review period are that: appropriate in-home and/or community-based services are being provided to families and children to preserve the family unit. Other pertinent information is being gathered through forensic interviews, law enforcement contacts, medical providers, and other partner agencies as needed. In the FY 2023 OSRIs, 60 % (12 of the 20 applicable cases) were rated a strength regarding Item 2 and 60% (26 of the 43) applicable cases were rated a Strength regarding Item 3.

Challenges that have been noted over this reporting period: assessments are at times focused only on the initial allegation received, frontline staff and supervisors are often inexperienced, although services provided are appropriate there may be a need for more services to address underlying conditions. Collateral contacts that can offer supports are not always identified and utilized to provide safety and supports. A lack of services available for substance abuse and mental illness can be issues in some rural areas. In the FY 2023 OSRIs, 40 % (8 of the 20 applicable cases) were rated a strength regarding Item 2 and 40 % (17 of the 43) applicable cases were rated a Strength regarding Item 3.

One service used by Alabama is family preservation which is comprised of intensive, in-home, or wrap around services. There are currently 661 IHHS slots statewide. Slots are filled based on referrals from county offices and can be made statewide. There are currently no wait lists for this service. More information on Intensive In-Home Services can be found in the Family Preservation section of the document. Family preservation can be comprised of a variety of services such as: teaching parenting skills and child development instruction, assistance with emotional well-being, financial assistance, teaching budgeting skills, crisis intervention, providing “hard services” such as payment for utilities or provision of food through the utilization of flex funding, respite care, or medical services.

Parental/caretaker substance abuse continues to be a leading reason for departmental involvement with families as well as being an entry reason into out of home care. For FY 2023, 1,307 referrals were received with allegations of substance abuse with 1,448 children involved in the investigations. There were 1,634 entries to foster care due to substance abuse. Approximately 840 of children under the age of five at the time of entry, entered care with at least one entry to care reason of parental substance abuse (drugs or alcohol) in FY 2023.

Jefferson County Family Wellness Court

SDHR contributes \$256, 216 to the Jefferson County Family Wellness Court. Of that amount, \$164,022.00 is targeted for personnel costs and the rest is earmarked for miscellaneous expenses to include travel, training, supplies/printing, and indirect costs. The Program serves parents with Substance Abuse Disorder who have either lost their children or are at risk of having them removed. The Program provides case management services, peer recovery supports, and substance abuse assessments and interventions. There have been no changes to this program or to the ways in which it is administered.

The following Safety Assessment trainings were completed during 2023 by the Office of Child Protective Services.

1/30/23	Intake & CA/N	Blount, Cherokee, Etowah,	Calhoun, Dekalb,	All CW staff	34
1/31/23	Safety assessment	Blount, Cherokee, Etowah, Marshall	Calhoun, Dekalb,	All CW staff	30
2/2/23	Intake & CA/N	Blount, Cherokee, Etowah, Marshall	Calhoun, Dekalb,	All CW staff	38

2/3/23	Safety assessment		All CW staff	35
9/13/23	Intake & CA/N	Baldwin, Clarke, Mobile	Escambia, CW staff	20
9/14/23	Safety assessment	Baldwin, Clarke, Mobile	Escambia, CW staff	16
9/20/23	Intake & CA/N	Baldwin, Washington, Mobile	Escambia, CW staff	12
9/21/23	Safety assessment	Baldwin, Washington, Mobile	Escambia, CW staff	18

PERMANENCY Outcome 1 Children have permanency and stability in their living situations

Item 4 Stability of Foster Care Placements

Item 5 Permanency goal for child

Item 6 Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or APPLA

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS/DATA PERMANENCY OUTCOME 1 Includes 2024 Updates

Alabama has successfully completed its PIP and continues to utilize many strategies to ensure that successful permanency achievement for children continues to trend in an upward direction.

Stability of foster care placements is an area of focus for the Department. Children in the State’s care as of 09/30/2023 experienced an average of 4.59 placement moves over the span of their time in care. The most recent QA site reviews (September 2022 through March 2023) show that 8 out of the 10 counties reviewed were determined to have a Strength in stability of placement for foster children.

Information gathered from FACTS queries.

	Sep-20	Sep-21	Sep-22	Sep-23	Jun-24
Average # of placements for children in care	3.98	4.16	4.21	4.38	4.75

While we acknowledge that moves can be traumatic on children, sometimes the moves are positive and based on successes. Alabama has continued to focus on reducing the number of children in foster care and reducing the number of children in congregate care settings; both of which require a move.

In an effort to keep our youngest children out of group home settings, there are certain placement levels that require special approval to make the placement. They include children 12 years old and under for a basic residential facility, children 5 years old and under for a TFC or moderate placement, children 12 years old and younger for an intensive placement and all out of state placements. If the ISP team recommends placement in a basic residential facility for a child 12 and under, the county must request and gain approval from the Deputy Commissioner of Quality, the Deputy Commissioner of Family and Children’s Services and the Special Assistant to the Commissioner. If the county has a recommendation and concurrence of the ISP team for a therapeutic placement for child who is 5 years old or younger,

the county must request and gain approval for the placement from the foster care program specialist, the program manager for foster care and the Director of Family and Children Services. If the county has a provider who recommends an intensive placement for a child under the age of 12, the ISP team must meet and concur and the county must then request and gain approval for that placement from the Deputy Commissioner of Quality, the Deputy Commissioner of Family and Children’s Services and the Special Assistant to the Commissioner. If the county has requested a placement through the Resource Management Division and a placement within the state cannot be located that can meet the needs of the child, the county can request and must gain approval for out of state placement from the deputy director of Resource Management, the Director of Quality, and the Director of Family Services.

QRI data provides the following insight on applicable cases reviewed for Items 4, 5, and 6.

YEARS	2021	2022	2023
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Item 4 applicable cases	118	142	143
Strength #	104	127	129
ANI #	14	15	14
% Strength	88%	89%	90%

Item 5 applicable cases	117	142	143
Strength #	93	120	122
ANI #	24	22	21
% Strength	79%	85%	85%

Item 6 applicable cases	118	142	143
Strength #	95	120	119
ANI #	23	22	24
% Strength	81%	85%	83%

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

GOAL:

State DHR will assist all 67 counties in their foster parent recruitment statewide, which would help with the increased demand of foster homes and provide stability for children and youths in foster care.

Strategies:

1. State DHR developed the Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support in January 2022. This unit is comprised of a Deputy Director and two Program Specialist. The function of this unit is to work hand in hand with counties to help recruit and retain foster and adoptive parents. This unit provides recruitment specific training at conferences as well as quarterly consultation with all 67 counties.
2. Each county submits an annual foster/adoptive home recruitment plan that is discussed and monitored with the assigned Specialist for that county from the Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support. County Recruitment plans are reviewed quarterly with the specialist and county resource staff to ensure plans are practical, functional, and being implemented according to the submitted plan. Although submitted formally yearly, plans are fluid and subject to revisions.

3. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support discusses the number of current and new foster homes per county during quarterly TEAM calls to include reports from Data Management and QA. This helps to ensure there are adequate homes based upon the number of children in care per county as well as document trends and needs. It will also strengthen collaborative efforts within the counties and state office.
4. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support has recently added an additional pilot county which brings the current total to seven. This unit provides added support to ensure through follow up and tracking is completed when inquiring families want to foster and/or adopt. Individual contact is made within the week of the inquiry. Those interested in starting a class will be mailed or e-mailed an application and timely communication is facilitated between State DHR and county staff to get individuals and families in training classes expeditiously. Those wishing to be put on a wait list for various reasons are contacted at sixty- and ninety-day intervals.

Updates for 2024:

Efforts related to targeted recruitment, statewide recruiting campaigns, and education and support are being strengthened to meet the ever-changing needs of our children and the families who serve them. Over the past reporting period, new marketing strategies have been implemented to include digital media campaigns and new recruitment strategies statewide at sporting events. Not only are we engaging with attendees at the events at our tabling's and boots on the ground techniques, but we are also being interviewed on the radio at sporting events to get our message out regarding the need for foster and adoptive homes. The Department has invested in advertising for a statewide billboard campaign to promote our need for foster and adoptive homes. The Department has 35 billboard posters and 15 billboard bulletins across the entire state. Each Alabama county line is represented.

For Fiscal year 2022 there were 2,304 inquiries from potential foster/adoptive providers. Fiscal year 2023 there were 2,714 inquiries. According to our data our DHR website maintains the highest traffic for initial interest. Additionally, the resource unit has launched a QR code that allows potential foster parents the opportunity to complete an initial inquiry form online which has also streamlined the application process.

The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support (RHCS) continues track and collaborate the seven-county recruitment pilot project. Those current counties are Autauga, Dallas, Elmore, Jefferson, Lowndes, Macon, and Montgomery. When people are interested in becoming a foster/adoptive parent, they call an 800 number, and their information is gathered and placed on the FITT list. These individuals are contacted and if interested in being licensed, provided an application as well as invited to the next training opportunity either in their home county or a neighboring county depending on which location has the earliest availability. These families are also registered in our FACTS database by the assigned RHCS specialist and tracked with assigned staff in the residing county. Current data is being tracked to determine the timeline from the point a family inquires to final licensure. These strategies are ongoing.

GOAL:

State DHR will provide statewide training for the child welfare workforce on permanency and concurrent planning to ensure permanency is achieved timely within ASFA guidelines and the needs of our children and families are met through effective Individual Service Plans (ISP).

Strategies:

1. The Office of FC will provide trainings addressing permanency timeliness, such as establishing paternity timely, assessing paternal relatives, relative placements, kinship, etc., at annual supervisor and permanency conferences.
2. Supervisors continue to meet with their workers monthly to staff cases and review the permanency/concurrent plan and ISPs which will be evidenced by appropriate documentation in FACTS.
3. ERD reports are available to counties that list all data regarding ISPs.
4. County workers are required to invite all necessary parties to ISPs by letter.

5. Alabama will, through continued partnership with the Administrative Office of Courts, expand the initiatives, such as iCAN meetings, which bring court and DHR county and state staff together to discuss barriers to timely permanency and work toward solutions of problems.
6. Alabama conducts permanency staffings monthly within many counties to mentor and coach front line staff and supervisors in case review and problem solving in specific cases.
7. Alabama continues to utilize the kinship navigator site to provide support and answer questions for kin providing care for children in Alabama.
8. State DHR has made dashboards available with real-time data to all staff that list all data regarding child well-being, individualized service plans, and safety.
9. In FY 2023, the Placement Staffing team staffed a total of 5 cases which yielded the following outcomes: 2 children placed in therapeutic foster homes, 2 children placed in an in-state residential program, 1 child placed in an out-of-state residential program. The Office of FC will continue to hold placement staffing meetings to assess placement needs for children.
10. The Office of FC completed two conflict resolutions team meetings this FY 2023. The Office of FC will continue to work with AFAPA to address foster parent issues as part of the Conflict Resolution Team.
11. In FY 2023, the Office of FC assisted counties with seeking traditional statewide placements on 385 foster children. The Office of FC will continue to assist counties with assessing appropriate placement types for children to reduce placement changes. The OFC will continue to seek traditional statewide foster homes for children in foster care.
12. The Office of FC will continue to encourage counties to seek maternal and paternal relatives within the first 30 days of the child entering foster care and recommend Accurant searches to also be completed within 30 days of case opening.

2024 Updates:

Permanency Goal for Child

The continual assessment of appropriate permanency goals for children in out-of-home care has positively contributed to the trends toward shorter times spent out-of-home. Supervisors and workers are closely monitoring goals and making positive placement moves in a timelier manner and developing and managing concurrent plans, which are leading to more timely permanency achievement. Note trends below which reflect the length of times in continuous foster care (based on the most recent admission to FC). Data, from Alabama's CCWIS system, is point in time for children in care at the end of the fiscal year and reflects data for the most recent foster care episode:

- FY 2021 22.64 Months (approximate)
- FY 2022 21.20 Months (approximate)
- FY 2023 20.20 Months (approximate)

Some barriers related to reducing the length of time in care for these children are:

- External stakeholders in some areas report that they are not always invited to ISP meetings or that all of the appropriate parties are not at the ISP meetings.
- Permanency goals need to be reassessed once it is determined that the initial permanency goal is not feasible.
- ISP steps are not behavioral in nature
- Staff turnover

Some noted strengths related to reducing the time in care for these children are:

- Numbers of youth in care have continued to decrease in recent years since FY 2020.

- FY 2023 there were 5953 children in foster care
- FY 2022 there were 5,665 children in foster care
- FY 2021 there were 5931 youth in care
- FY 2020 there were 6168 youth in care
- The Office of Foster Care continues to support permanency best practice in working with counties. Consultants continue to make available the Parents of Children in Foster Care (ASFA timeline pamphlet) produced in cooperation with the Alabama Administrative Office of the Courts. The pamphlet is available in both English and Spanish. These strategies are ongoing.
- CFSR Round 4 Statewide Data Indicators shows that Alabama’s performance on in achieving permanency within 12 months for children entering foster care and for children who have been in foster care for 12 to 23 months are better than the national performance.

	Alabama’s Standardized Performance	Risk	National Performance
Permanency in 12 months for children entering foster care	43.7%		35.2%
Permanency in 12 months for children in foster care 12 to 23 months	47.6%		43.8%
Permanency in 12 months for children in foster care 24 months or more	36.5%		37.3%
Reentry to foster care in 12 months	5.9%		5.6%

Information from CFSR Round 4 Statewide Data Indicators Workbook, April 2024

GOAL:

The Office of Foster Care will provide support, program specific policy implementation and county improvement plan assistance to each county across the state of Alabama.

Strategy:

1. County recruitment activities/follow-up plans: Counties continue to submit yearly recruitment plans. These plans are fluid but are reviewed and discussed with Program Specialist from both QA and the ORHCS at least quarterly.
2. Kinship Guardianship case assessment: The Office of Foster Care continues to educate our staff on the importance of placements and to choose this permanency plan immediately when appropriate. Some counties have most recently led a KINSHIP ONLY TIPS class to meet the unique needs of relatives. There continues however to be those relatives that are not interested in the formal TIPS training and choose to proceed without DHR involvement. State Office continues to assist counties with assigning Retired State Employees to teach Deciding Together families to expedite provisional placements.
3. The Office of FC will provide policy trainings annually during conferences for workers and supervisors.
4. The Office of FC will attend permanency staffings (i.e., ages 4-10 in PIP counties, CIPs, full perm staffing’s in some counties) when requested.
5. The Office of FC Specialists will continue to provide support to their assigned counties regarding policy (such as locating policy and memos).
6. While attending permanency and case staffings, the Office of FC will assess policy implementation and address it when necessary.

7. The Office of FC will provide new worker trainings when necessary to discuss policy.
8. The Office of FC will continue to train staff on Foster Parent Bill of Rights when requested.
9. The Office of FC will continue to train new staff on policy and procedures when requested.
10. The Office of FC trained two supervisors on time management skills during FY 2023. The Office of FC will continue to train supervisors on policy, procedures, and skills when requested.

2024 Update:

Staff from the AOC and State DHR partnered with local DHR staff and judicial partners in support of improved permanency outcomes

- Local permanency review processes are continuing, whereby barriers to permanency and proposed solutions are discussed/implemented
- Recruitment, training, and approval or foster/adoptive parents continues, with monitoring and evaluation activities in place as well

Our DHR website continues to be our largest source for inquiries. Our data continues to increase yearly regarding sharing individual county inquiries and providing follow-up calls and e-mails to interested individuals and families from our Website. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support continues to assist seven pilot counties with in-person and on-site community recruitment. This office also provides INTAKE, DT and TIPS training. This pilot project has yielded additional homes for those counties.

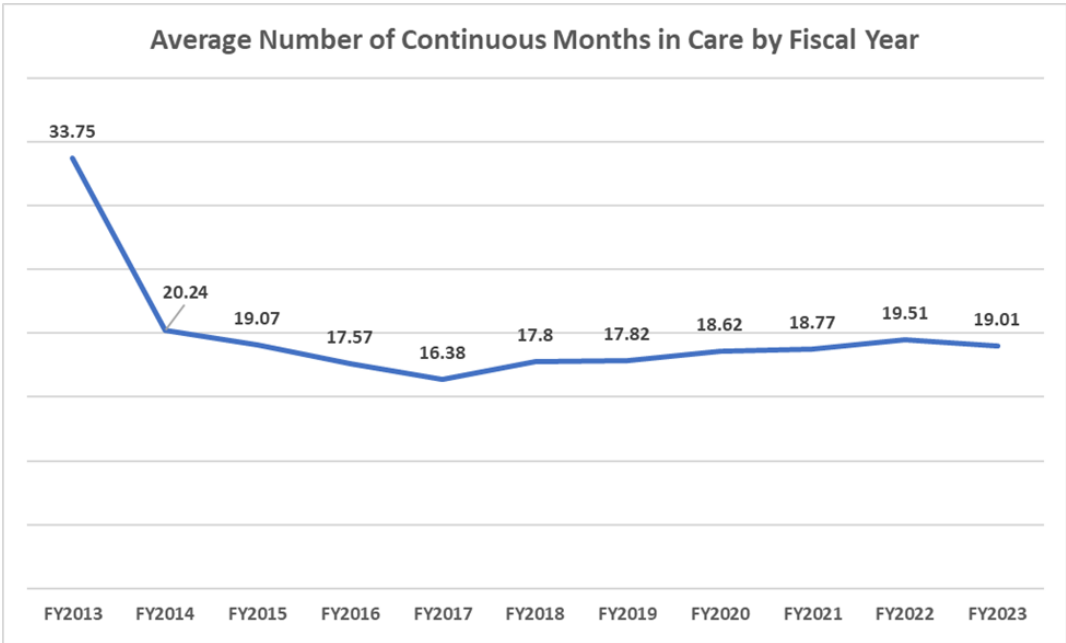
Length of Continuous Time in Foster Care for Children Discharged in FY 2023

The below table captures the length of time until discharge to the respective permanency goals for FY 2023.

Data Source for charts and data listed below: Alabama DHR CCWIS System

Time to permanency for federally recognized discharge reasons	Average Days in Care	Average Months in Care
Adoption	1009	34
Kinship Guardianship	623	21
Return to Parent	344	11
Relative Placement	292	10

Length of Continuous Time in Foster Care for Children Discharged



DATA & SERVICES – Total Finalized Adoptions:

FY 2022	770
FY 2023	741

Adoptions – No Identified Resource (ANIR)

FY 2022: 77
FY 2023: 104

These are specifically ANIR adoptions. Children whose goal was adoption with no identified resource. The Office of Adoptions (Adoption Recruitment and Placement) is working to ensure children receive permanency timely.

There has been an emphasis and a great deal of success in the area of adoptions by current foster parents. Per data found on Alabama’s FACTS system, there were approximately 658 adoptions by foster parents in FY 2023. This is not data that has been reported on in past APSR submissions though with the emphasis on foster parent adoptions, this data will be relevant for future reports. One limitation to this data is that it is only as accurate as what is entered into the FACTS system.

Achieving Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption, or APPLA

In the 27-foster care OSRIs reviewed in 2023, the permanency and concurrent goals were:

- Reunification: 2 (7.4%)
- Guardianship: 2 (7.4%)
- Adoption: 7 (25.9%)
- APPLA: 3 (11.1%)
- Reunification and Guardianship: 9 (33%)
- Reunification and Adoption: 2 (7.4%)
- Reunification and APPLA: 0 (0%)
- Adoption and Guardianship: 1 (3.7%)
- Guardianship and APPLA: 1 (3.7%)
- Adoption and APPLA: 0 (0%)

Some noted strengths were:

- Timely filing of TPR petitions in 9 out of 12 foster care OSRIs,
- Timely judicial reviews and permanency hearings, and
- More documented efforts at locating maternal and paternal relatives to achieve Guardianship

- Increased use of Kinship Guardianship to facilitate permanency

Some noted barriers were:

- Limited case planning with parents regarding permanency and concurrent plans,
- Locating transient parents
- Arranging reunification services for parents in a timely manner

Children < Age Five: Reducing Length of Stay/Providing Developmentally Appropriate Services for Children in FC and Receiving In-Home Services

In FY 2023, 1496 children under the age of five at the time of removal, entered the foster care system. This represents a 9.03% decrease from FY 2022 (1372) children. Approximately 56.14% of children under the age of five at the time of entry, entered care with at least one entry to care reason of parental substance abuse (drugs or alcohol) in FY 2023, compared to 55.69% in FY 2022, and 62.30% in FY 2021. This group remained in care longer than under 5 youth exiting care in the previous 2 fiscal years, 14.01 months in FY 2023, compared to 13.76 months in FY 2022, and 13.31 months in FY 2021, and 13.49 months in FY 2020. In FY 2023, 1226 youth under 5 years of age left foster care compared to 1601 youth in FY 2022 and 1406 in FY 2021.

Services to Support OPPLA (APPLA)

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement is typically used as a permanency plan for youth who are older than 16 who cannot be safely returned to their biological families and do not wish to be adopted. The primary goal for this group of youth is to develop systems of support and improve skills to ensure successful transitions, with additional emphasis for both the youth and the professionals who serve them to focus on long-term connections to birth families, formal, and informal networks of support. County child welfare staff, foster parents, and vendor providers have been trained to encourage the development of natural mentor relationship, improve social worker-child relationships, and keep safe connections with birth families and siblings as strategies to improve positive permanency outcomes.

Alabama continues many partnerships with providers across the state related to Independent Living services for older youth. An emphasis continues to be stable housing for youth in and out of the Department's custody.

Inter-Country Adoptions

The Department tracks and reports only those children adopted from other countries who enter state custody. Alabama has three privately licensed child placing agencies that have received Hague accreditation status. These agencies provide adoption services in inter-country adoption cases involving the United States and Hague convention countries. The Inter-Country Adoption Act (ICAA) of 2000 (P.L. 106-279) was signed into law October 6, 2000. These children make up a very small portion of Alabama's foster children as there were zero children who were adopted from other countries and who entered into state custody in FY 2023.

For international adoptees, Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections served seven participants with free services for adoptive families during this reporting period. There is not a waiting list. The families are seen by a counselor as soon as the counselor can schedule them. DHR families receive priority.

Services to Support Adoption

Currently, adoption services are provided by the Department of Human Resources through the Office of Adoption Recruitment and Placement and the Office of Adoption Subsidies and Supports on behalf of children in permanent custody who cannot return to their biological family and need a permanent adoptive family. These services include: recruitment and preparation of prospective adoptive families, placement of children, supervision of children in placement and other post-placement services, legal services, administering the state and federal adoption subsidy programs, clearing Petitions to Adopt, acknowledging the receipt of the petition and documenting the findings in an acknowledgement letter to the

% Strength	78%	80%	88%
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Item 10 applicable cases	108	123	128
Strength #	89	108	117
ANI #	19	15	11
% Strength	82%	88%	91%

Item 11 applicable cases	97	103	101
Strength #	77	87	82
ANI #	20	16	19
% Strength	79%	84%	81%

Item 7

Placement with Siblings

- As of the end of 2023, 643 (51.2%) sibling groups were placed together, and 613 (48.8) sibling groups were not placed together. Common issues reported by Counties in their bi-annual County Self-Assessments for separation of siblings included:
 - Behavioral or medical issues of one or more children requiring specialized treatment,
 - Safety concerns between the siblings,
 - Paternal relatives unwilling to accept placement for children who have a different biological or alleged father
 - Lack of foster homes willing/able to accept large sibling groups, and
 - Lack of foster homes willing to foster sibling groups with large age gaps
- Alabama pays an enhanced payment to a family who will take a sibling group of 4 or more children.
- In FY 2023, Alabama had 1267 sibling groups in care, 50.70% were placed together.
- In 2023, OSRI Item 7 was rated in 15 foster care cases.
 - 14 (93.33%) were rated Strength
 - 1 (6.67%) was rated ANI

Based on these 15 OSRIs, the target child was placed with all siblings in foster care during the PUR in 7 OSRIs. In 7 of the remaining 8 OSRIs in which the target child was placed separately from siblings in care, reasons for separation included:

- Conflict between the children which could not be managed with services
- Permanency needs of one of the siblings
- Subsequent birth of target child’s sibling(s) after the target child had entered care
- Lack of foster homes capable of accommodating a sibling group of 3 children.

The overall 2023 rating of Item 7 is higher than the initial PIP baseline rating of 76% as well as the measurement periods during CFSR Round 3.

Item 8 and 9

Visiting with Parents and Siblings in Foster Care Preserving Connections

As it relates to visits with parents and siblings in foster care and preserving connections, the following points are noted for this review period:

- Item 8 was a Strength in 40% (10 out of 25) of OSRIs completed in 2023. This represents an improvement over the PIP baseline (25%) established in CFSR Round 3 and higher than 6 out of 12 Measurement Periods during CFSR Round 3. The following observations were made in the Practice Performance Report

- Concerted efforts were made to support visitation between siblings with sufficient frequency and quality in 50% (4 out of 8) of applicable OSRIs. There were no reported instances in which siblings never had any visits. Visitation was less than weekly in 6 out of the 8 OSRIs.
- Concerted efforts were made to support quality visitation between the target child and mother in 68.42% (13 out of 19) of applicable OSRIs.
- Concerted efforts were made to ensure the frequency of visitation between the target child and mother in 54.55% (12 out of 22) of applicable OSRIs. There were 3 OSRIs in which the birth mother did not have any visitation. The most likely pattern of visitation for mothers was less than once per month.
- Concerted efforts were made to support quality visitation between the target child and father in 66.67% (4 out of 6) of applicable OSRIs.
- Concerted efforts were made to ensure the frequency of visitation between the target child and mother in 40% (4 out of 10) of applicable OSRIs. There were 4 OSRIs in which the target child did not have any visitation with a known father. The most likely pattern of visitation for fathers was less than once per month.
- Item 9 was a Strength in 66.67% (18 out of 27) of OSRIs completed in 2023. This too exceeded the PIP baseline as well as each Measurement Period during CFSR Round 3.
 - Among the 9 OSRIs rated an ANI, concerns included:
 - Lack of contact with known extended relatives and siblings not in care
 - Absence of support by the agency to facilitate contact between relatives and children.
 - A general lack of discussion with age-appropriate children regarding their important connections.
 - Observed strengths in the OSRIs included:
 - Maintaining children in their community of origin and school system
 - Involvement of maternal and paternal relatives in visitation
 - Visitation with siblings who are not in care
- Sibling visits are able to be tracked in the FACTS system, however many of them are not being logged.

Item 10

Relative Placement

- As of 10/01/2023, 731 children in care had a permanency goal of relative placement. This did not include Kinship Guardianship.
- In FY 2023, there were 295 children with a permanency plan of Kinship Guardianship, 706 children with permanency plan of permanent relative placement with transfer of custody to the relative, and 25 children with a permanency plan of permanent relative placement with DHR retaining custody.
- In FY 2023, 854 (25.7%) of children were discharged to relatives and spent an average of 9.72 months in care. This does not include kinship.
- In FY 2023, a total of 573 providers were receiving Kinship subsidy payments for 1,160 children
- During the FY 2023 reporting period, 854 children exited foster care to placement with relatives, which represents 25.69% of children discharged that fiscal year.

Kinship Guardianship

Alabama DHR continues to focus on bringing awareness and education to families regarding the Kinship Guardianship process. Family and Children’s Services continue to employ 5 part time Retired State Employees to train provisionally approved homes who are seeking Kinship Guardianship to expedite and individualize their training. As a result of these efforts, we have seen an increase of the use of the Kinship Guardianship Program. Per the chart above the number of young people receiving Kinship Guardianship payments has increased by 10% during the reporting period of FY 2023

REPORTING PERIOD	NUMBER OF CHILDREN RECEIVING GAP*	NUMBER OF PROVIDERS (FAMILIES)*
FY 2022	958	473

FY 2023	1,058	531
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Point in time, not cumulative for the entire reporting period; Data Source: Alabama’s FACTS system.

FY 2023 Kinship Navigator Funding:

Kinship Navigator Program continues to be implemented directly as a program under the Family Service Division of Alabama Department of Human Resources. A dedicated Kinship Program Specialist is in place and is a part of the Recruitment and Home Support unit. This continues to be a full-time position within the Department of Human Resources that is instrumental in the development of policy and provision of consultation and training to county offices. This Program Specialist serves as the Kinship lead for the State of Alabama. The Program Specialist also collaborates with targeted populations to assure consistent service delivery for all families.

The state used FY23 funds to cover ongoing maintenance of our navigator website as well as personnel cost for retired staff that are responsible for training and supporting kin families throughout the state. Funds were also used to engage and support kin resources from initial contact through Kinship Guardianship - a supported permanency option available to children to exit DHR’s legal custody with fully approved relative foster parents.

Kinship caregivers are made aware of kinship navigator programs and resources by visiting or website-Navigator.alabama.gov or by calling (844) 4ALA-KIN. We have dedicated staff that answers both website inquires and hotline calls. We have also developed a laminated Kinship Guardianship Desktop Tool that has been shared with all 67 counties as well as local community partners. We have ordered additional Kinship brochures, presented at annual conferences this year as well as shared these resources with (LEA’s) Local School Associations, community and faith-based organizations, Judges, 211 call centers, Family Resources Centers, and Juvenile Probation Officers. Direct referrals from local county office child welfare and family assistance program staff are also made.

Alabama applied and secured funding to continue to participate in the title IV-E kinship navigator program and plans to hire additional part-time staff to expedite the approval process and service delivery of concrete supports for Kinship families.

Well-Being Outcome 1 Families have enhanced capacity to provide for children’s needs

Item 12. Needs/Services of child, parents, and foster parents

Item 13. Child/Family involvement in case planning

Item 14. Worker visits with child

Item 15. Worker visits with parents

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA	WELL-BEING OUTCOME 1	Includes 2024 Updates
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Item 12

Needs/Services of child, parents, and foster parents

- In 18 applicable in-home cases, documentation reflected an adequate assessment of children’s needs in 11/18 cases (61%).
- In 21 applicable in-home cases, there was an assessment of ongoing service needs in 13/21 cases (62%).
- In 26 applicable foster care cases, there was an assessment of ongoing service needs in 17/26 cases (65%).

For QCWP case reviews completed statewide from October 2022-June 2023, the findings are as follows:

- In 19 applicable in-home cases, there was documentation that parents were engaged in the ISP process in 11/19 cases (58%).

The above QCWP data closely resembles ORSI data from 2022: Sub Item 12a: Needs Assessment and Services to children averaged at 67%, Item 16: Educational Needs of the Child averaged at 72%, Item 17: Physical Needs of the Child averaged at 72%. There is a disparity in the findings for Item 18: Mental/Behavioral Health of the Child averaged at 46%. Different tools were used to identify the findings, but the agency will explore reasons for the disparity for this reporting period.

Item 13

Child/Family Involvement in Case Planning

GOAL:

The Department will ensure the increased efforts to involve parents, caregivers, and age-appropriate children in the ISP process.

Strategies:

- The Office of FC will continue to support counties with trainings on ISPs when requested.

In 24 applicable foster care cases, there was documentation that parents were engaged in the ISP process in 16/24 cases (67%).

Item 14

Caseworker Visits with Child

Alabama requires visits with children in foster care to occur at least monthly, and for children in certain placements, bimonthly. In OSRIs completed from September 2022 until March 2023, it was identified that caseworker visits are typically happening on a monthly basis and at times more often. The OSRIs have identified that caseworker visits with children are not always private and individual, but in a group setting with other family members. The Department captures caseworker visits using FACTS. Workers are required to enter their contacts with children in out-of-home care every month. The information captured on FACTS relative to children in out-of-home care is used to report information to HHS/ACF in the AFCARS report. A Caseworker Visit report is submitted each year. Alabama standards for Meaningful Caseworker Visits include children in foster care, homes of relatives, residential facilities, childcare institutions, pre-adoptive homes, and children in ICPC placements.

The data are as follows:

	Measure 1 Percentage of Worker to Child Visits	
	Target	Actual
FY 2021	95%	96%
FY 2022	95%	95%

***Data source: Alabama’s CCWIS System**

QCWP reviews were completed statewide from October 2022-June 2023 with the following findings:

- In 21 applicable In-home cases, safety and well-being were monitored during monthly visits in 17/21 cases (81%).
- In 26 applicable foster care cases, safety and well-being were monitored during monthly visits in 24/26 cases (92%).
- In 21 applicable in-home cases, children perceived their well-being as a priority during visits in 14/21 cases (67%)
- In 26 applicable foster care cases, children perceived their well-being as a priority during visits in 24/26 cases (92%).

In the 45 OSRIs completed in 2023, Item 14: Caseworker Visits with Child had a 69% Strength Rating.

Item 15

Caseworker Visit with Parents

The primary focus of caseworkers is to work with the child and caregiver, and to have meaningful caseworker visits each month to monitor progress on ISP goals. Visits to parents and caretakers may also occur in other settings outside of the home, however these types of visits in no way take the place of the required face-to-face, in-home, monthly visits. When the goal is Reunification, the workers continue to visit parents and caretakers monthly at their place of residence. The OSRIs have identified there is a significant difference in caseworker visits with the father of the children.

In the 34 applicable cases completed in FY 2023, Item 15: Caseworker Visit with Parents has an 82% (28 out of 34) ANI Rating.

QRI data provides the following insight on applicable cases reviewed for Item 15

YEARS	2021	2022	2023
Item 15 applicable cases	148	172	168
Strength #	109	127	114
ANI #	39	45	54
% Strength	74%	74%	68%

GOAL:

The Department will increase the frequency and quality of visits between caseworker to child and worker to both parents which leads to better permanency outcomes for children.

Strategies:

- Meaningful Caseworker visit training is available to all counties as needed. The Department is looking at integrating this training into the new worker training model that is being developed.
- Quality CWP staff continues to conduct ongoing peer and onsite reviews in the county, including the review of caseworker visits with all parties, and will provide feedback to county supervisors/staff around enhancing the quality of visits, and continues to provide support through direct supervision in the counties.

Well-Being Outcome 2 Children receive services to meet their educational needs

Item 16 Educational needs of child(ren)

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA WELL-BEING OUTCOME 2 Includes 2024 Updates

The Department assess the educational needs of children through record reviews and child-specific directives and feedback conducted by the OQCWP and Quality Assurance reviews.

- The Office of QCWP random reviews find that workers are involved in the educational outcomes for children. In 18/26 applicable foster care cases reviewed, 16 had evidence of assessment of children’s education needs (89%).

Workers are aware of the child’s reading level, grades, and any difficulties the child may be encountering. Workers are found to be involved in IEPs and other school meetings. The educational needs of children were being assessed and met. In the cases reviewed, where educational needs of the children were not being met, contributing factors were lack of engagement with the school, lack of advocacy when a need is identified, and lack of referral for services for children who are not yet school aged to ensure developmental progress. In CPS cases, caseworkers do not always assess the educational needs of children in their caseloads.

Every Student Success Acts (ESSA)

The Department continues its collaboration with the State Department of Education regarding all ESSA matters. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support's Deputy Director continues to serve as the State Office liaison for ESSA case concerns and inquiries. This partnership continues to be of great benefit for our foster youth who are being enrolled in school without delay. Our Deputy was invited back to present at the annual State of Alabama Education MEGA conference in July 2023. The two sessions highlighted Kinship Guardianship in Alabama and Ensuring Educational Success for foster youth. Conference attendees were provided County contacts for each DHR office as well as pamphlets on Kinship Care inside and outside of Foster Care. Information was also shared regarding Alabama's Foster Care to Success program and the Kin-Share program administered by our TANF program which serves those students not in foster care.

In collaboration with their local education department, each county office continues to submit annual written educational plans for foster youth. Specific case challenges brought to the state office's attention are continually being successfully resolved with additional exchanging of information by all parties involved. Eight case mediations were successfully resolved after collaborating with the local LEA and local DHR Directors regarding transportation disputes.

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Includes 2024 Updates

GOAL:

The Department will increase the access to educational services to meet the needs of the children under DHRs care and supervision.

Strategies:

1. Workers will ensure they receive all educational information (i.e., standardized testing results, IEP, etc.) pertaining to a child in foster care upon withdrawal and present the information to the new school at the time of enrollment. This will be documented in the narrative and entered in FACTS in the education screen.
2. Educational staff will be invited to all ISPs. Staff will continue to provide absentee ISP forms to educational staff when they are unable to attend.
3. The QCWP Specialists continue to conduct ongoing peer reviews with county supervisors and reviews in the counties. These case reviews include the review of educational well-being and whether educational needs of children are being met. They will specifically review whether educational services are being implemented/initiated in a timely manner when a child's placement changes, that grade and reading levels are documented in the record, and where deficiencies are noted, that appropriate services are being provided to the child. They will also review whether educational personnel are being invited to the ISPs and being provided absentee forms when unable to attend. The specialists will provide feedback to the county supervisors around their findings, as well as through direct support provided in the counties.

Updates for 2024:

These strategies are ongoing

GOAL:

State DHR will request that counties assess the educational needs of children at the onset of cases to ensure that children receive needed educational services timely.

Strategies:

1. Monitor OSRI results of item 16 and identify both positive and concerning trends in counties/districts and seek ways to address areas of concern (e. g. through consultant visits, conference workshops, etc.).
2. During the 2024 reporting period, we will redistribute the ESSA administrative letter and provide any training as needed per county request.
3. Meaningful Caseworker Visit training has been developed by the QCWP unit and continues to be available to counties upon request. This includes the assessment of education needs during caseworker visits with families.

4. Training for supervisors and workers around the CFA/ISP process was developed by the QCWP specialists and is available upon request. This training includes a focus on the assessment of children’s educational needs, as well as the provision of services through the ISP process to meet those needs, an emphasis on ensuring that children’s educational needs are met in a timely manner and that there is no gap in services during a change in placement or case transition.
5. During permanency reviews, the Office of FC will discuss educational needs of the children, when appropriate.
6. The Office of FC will encourage counties to include educational providers within the ISPs or have an absentee ISP form completed.
7. The Office of FC will encourage workers to seek out educational support services for children in foster care.
8. The Office of FC will encourage counties to include educational needs in the ISPs and the CFAs.
9. The Office of FC will encourage counties to enroll children timely into schools when coming into care.
10. The Office of FC will provide training on meaningful worker visits to address the assessment of educational needs for children in foster care, when requested.

Updates for 2024:

In county onsite reviews and case reviews by foster care specialists, evidence is seen that workers are assessing educational needs of children at the beginning of cases and throughout the life of the case. This is evidenced by documentation of workers attending IEP meetings, following up with school counselors as needed, and discussing educational needs with children and caretakers. Further, evidence is seen that counties are making referrals for tutoring, early intervention services, and obtaining educational records. ORSI data shows that in FY 2023 74% (20 out of 27) cases rated a Strength on Item 16 and QRI data shows that the state has rated a STRENGTH consistently in the recent years for Item 16.

YEARS	2021	2022	2023
Item 16 applicable cases	121	141	155
Strength #	107	132	142
ANI #	14	9	13
% Strength	88%	94%	92%

WELL-BEING OUTCOME 3: Children receive services to meet their physical and mental health needs

Item 17. Physical Health of Child

Item 18. Mental/Behavioral Health of Child

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA WELL-BEING OUTCOME 3 Includes 2024 Updates

Item 17

Physical Health of Child

Proper focus on the physical health and well-being of our children and families is stressed by specialists across Family Services and the Quality Assurance Division. As part of the CQI process the OQCWP completes peer reviews across the state. The updated QCWP record review tool provides information on the child’s physical and dental needs, medication dosages, and EPSDT screenings related to Item 17.

Updates for 2024:

- 35 OSRIs were completed in 2023 which were applicable in Item 17 for physical health of the child. Item 17 had a 70.37% Strength rating.
- Only 8 in-home OSRIs were rated in this item with a 50% Strength rating.

- EPSDT screenings are being completed timely and maintained in case records. Counties have access to pediatricians, dentists, and optometrists to meet the physical needs of children. Any specialized physical needs of children, such as surgery or ongoing medical conditions, are met through the appropriate provision of services

Overall, reasons for ANIs included no proper oversight of medication logs, not assessing or arranging services for dental health needs, overdue EPSDT or not receiving a medical upon entry into care. Regarding in-home OSRIs completed, there was a need for formal assessment to address the physical and dental health and any developmental concerns for children who were victims of substantiated abuse or neglect.

Item 18

Mental/Behavioral Health of Child

State DHR Behavioral Analysts, the Office of Foster Care, Resource Management Division, and State QA MAT assessors conducted round table congregate care staffings with the counties for children who have been in intensive placement for 11 months or longer to discuss needs, barriers, and next steps via conference calls. The Multi-Dimensional Assessment Tool (MAT) is also used by state staff to discuss recommendations made through the MAT assessment.

A Behavioral Services Unit has been developed within SDHR, which includes five Behavior Analysts strategically located throughout the state. Behavioral Analysts continue to provide significant support to counties in assisting them to meet the behavioral health needs of our children.

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

GOAL:

The Department will increase the access to physical, dental, vision, mental, and behavioral health services to meet the needs of the children under DHR's care and supervision.

Strategies:

1. All children receive a medical within 10 days of entering care which is documented on the 10-day Foster Care Medical form and entered into the FACTS system.
2. SDHR requires all counties to provide yearly documentation in FACTS of health well visit screenings. All other screenings will be provided on an as needed basis per individualized needs that will be implemented through the ISP and documented when stated goals are met.
3. Children who enter care have their dental care and appointments tracked on the annual foster care medical form and that information is also entered into the FACTS system.
4. SDHR Quality Assurance Division, in conjunction with SDHR Family and Children Services Division, will begin an updated format for the staffing of children in congregate care, focusing on a more in-depth review of a smaller number of children to work towards a more individualized approach to reaching permanency. This updated process is scheduled to begin in April 2024.
5. The QCWP Specialists will continue to conduct ongoing peer reviews in the counties, including the review of children's physical and emotional well-being and whether their needs are being met in these areas. They will specifically review whether medical records, including the Foster Care Medical Forms are being obtained and recorded in FACTS, as well as whether needed services are being provided to address both physical and emotional behavioral issues. The specialists will provide feedback to the county supervisors around their findings in regard to Items 17 and 18 as the OQCWP review tool now specifically addresses these items.
6. The CFA/ISP training was completed and will be integrated into new worker training as the current training model is revised.
7. The State continues to monitor service provision, through ISPs, CFA, FACTS, ERD reports, and quality assurance reviews to ensure needs of all children, youth, young adults, and families are adequately met.
8. The Office of FC will recommend behavioral health services to counties (Autism services, psychotropic medication review, behavioral assessments, mental health assessments, psychosexual assessments, intensive in-home services) and assist with providing referrals.

9. The Office of FC will encourage counties to monitor psychotropic medications for children in foster care by referring counties to complete referrals to the Alabama Psychiatric Medication Review Team.
10. The Office of FC will encourage counties to include medical, dental, vision, and behavioral needs in ISPs and CFA.
11. The Office of FC will continue to review ERD reports to monitor FACTS entries.
12. The Office of FC will encourage counties to attend treatment teams meetings for children in foster care.
13. The Office of FC will continue to monitor incident reports to ensure that medical follow ups are completed. The Office of FC reviews and logs incident reports monthly.
14. The Office of FC will encourage counties to gather medication logs from agencies, facilities, and foster parents.

Updates for 2024:

- For FY 2023, on average there were 87 cases staffed monthly by SDHR OFC, Behavioral Analysts, county staff, and program staff.
- 26 OSRIs were completed in 2023 which were applicable in Item 18 for mental/behavioral health of the child. Item 18 had a 58% Strength rating—65% in foster care OSRIs and 44% in in-home OSRIs
 - Overall, reasons for ANIs included lack of appropriate assessments of mental and behavioral health, no concerted efforts to refer child to needed services, and lack of sufficient oversight of mental health medications.
- QCWP case reviews completed statewide from October 2022-June 2023, the findings are as follows:
 - In 18 applicable in-home cases, documentation reflected an adequate assessment of children’s needs in 11/18 cases (61%). Of the 7 that did not include an adequate assessment, 3 were lacking an assessment around their MH needs.
 - In 19 applicable foster care cases, 15 had evidence of assessment of children’s mental/behavioral needs (79%).

Based on OSRIs, the following are strengths noted in this area:

- Workers are aware of children’s medications including needs and side effects
- Works are following up with caregivers to assess the effects of medications
- Medication logs are kept by providers
- Immunizations are up to date for children
- Evidence of workers assessing behavioral issues
- Discussion of behavioral or mental health concerns with caregivers

Factors continue to contribute to mental/behavioral health being an area needing improvement:

- Delays arranging psychological evaluations for children
- Lack of monitoring for progress and measuring for effective outcomes
- Lack of provider notes or no evidence provider notes have been reviewed by agency
- Delays or disruptions in service provision due to lack of resources or implementation of the ISP.
- Limited mental health services available

GOAL:

The Department will decrease delays or disruption in service provision.

Strategy:

1. Counties will explore additional ways to build positive relationships with community partners by including the in DHR training events and/or quarterly meetings.
2. The following activities will be completed with the aim of enhancing physical/mental health outcomes for children and families: Promoting the timely onboarding of new staff, developing/implementing meaningful on-the-job training activities/supports for staff, implementing a case consultation model, adopting a coaching model for supervisors, and ensuring that feedback loops are in place. These strategies are ongoing.

Systemic Factor: Statewide Information

Item 19.

State is operating a statewide information system

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Alabama’s automated child welfare system known as Family, Adult, and Child Tracking System (FACTS) is a standardized, comprehensive way to manage child welfare information. Its objectives are to improve outcomes for children, adults, and families, improve practice, strengthen management, improve decision-making, improve reporting, and provide accurate and timely case information. This system has the capability to capture and report information about each child’s removal status, demographic characteristics, location, permanency goals, and is easily accessible in FACTS at any given time. The FACTS system is available to all child welfare caseworker, supervisors, managers, and administrators statewide. The system is fully operational and available at all times, except during periods of routine maintenance.

During periods of maintenance when FACTS is not available for data entry, users are still able to utilize FACTS Downtime to search for child abuse and neglect history, access child removal status, demographic characteristics, location, and permanency goals. The worker assigned to the case is responsible for all data entry. Supervisors have access to cases assigned to workers that they supervise and are able to enter and update any information as it relates to the case and the four key data areas (status, demographics, characteristics, location, and goals). Entries into FACTS are time sensitive and upon entry a date and time stamp are created so that data may be monitored for timely entry.

Data is pulled from information entered in FACTS by workers and supervisors. The accuracy of FACTS information is examined through analysis of various reports and queries. Careful review by Office of Data Analysis staff provides opportunities for any discrepancies to be discovered. Further analysis by individual counties allows for an additional review of accuracy.

An example of data entry timeliness monitoring is found in regularly running ERD reports that monitor timely documentation of caseworker visit documentation for CPS cases. These reports run twice per month to assist workers and supervisors in ensuring that worker visits are documented in FACTS within policy timeframes.

**Caseworker Visits with Children in Protective Service Cases
July 2024 - August 2023**

Month	Date of report	% of Visits Documented Within 30 Days	% of Visits Documented in 31 thru 45 days	% of Visits Documented in 46 or More Days
May	7/15/24	84.00%	11.00%	5.00%
April	6/15/24	88.00%	6.00%	6.00%
March	5/15/24	89.00%	6.00%	6.00%
February	4/15/24	89.00%	7.00%	5.00%
January	3/15/24	90.00%	5.00%	5.00%
December	2/15/24	86.00%	7.00%	6.00%
November	1/15/24	90.00%	6.00%	4.00%
October	12/15/23	89.00%	7.00%	4.00%
September	11/15/23	90.00%	7.00%	3.00%
August	10/15/23	87.00%	9.00%	4.00%
July	9/15/23	87.00%	7.00%	6.00%

June	8/15/23	87.00%	8.00%	5.00%
Total		88.00%	7.17%	4.92%

July 2023 - August 2022

Month	Date of report	% of Visits Documented Within 30 Days	% of Visits Documented in 31 thru 45 days	% of Visits Documented in 46 or More Days
May	7/15/2023	85.00%	9.00%	7.00%
April	6/15/2023	88.00%	6.00%	7.00%
March	5/15/2023	87.00%	8.00%	5.00%
February	4/15/2023	85.00%	7.00%	7.00%
January	3/15/2023	87.00%	7.00%	6.00%
December	2/15/2023	86.00%	8.00%	6.00%

November	1/15/2023	85.00%	9.00%	6.00%
October	12/15/2022	87.00%	7.00%	6.00%
September	11/15/2022	88.00%	6.00%	6.00%
August	10/15/2022	87.00%	9.00%	4.00%
July	9/15/2022	90.00%	4.00%	6.00%
June	8/15/2022	91.00%	7.00%	2.00%
Total		87.17%	7.25%	5.67%

July 2022 - August 2021

Month	Date of report	% of Visits Documented Within 30 Days	% of Visits Documented in 31 thru 45 days	% of Visits Documented in 46 or More Days
May	7/15/2022	88.00%	7.00%	5.00%
April	6/15/2022	90.00%	6.00%	4.00%
March	5/15/2022	89.00%	7.00%	4.00%
February	4/15/2022	91.00%	6.00%	2.00%
January	3/15/2022	90.00%	6.00%	4.00%
December	2/15/2022	86.00%	9.00%	5.00%
November	1/15/2022	88.00%	7.00%	5.00%
October	12/15/2021	91.00%	5.00%	4.00%
September	11/15/2021	91.00%	6.00%	2.00%
August	10/15/2021	90.00%	7.00%	3.00%
July	9/15/2021	92.00%	5.00%	3.00%
June	8/15/2021	91.00%	7.00%	2.00%
Total		89.75%	6.50%	3.58%

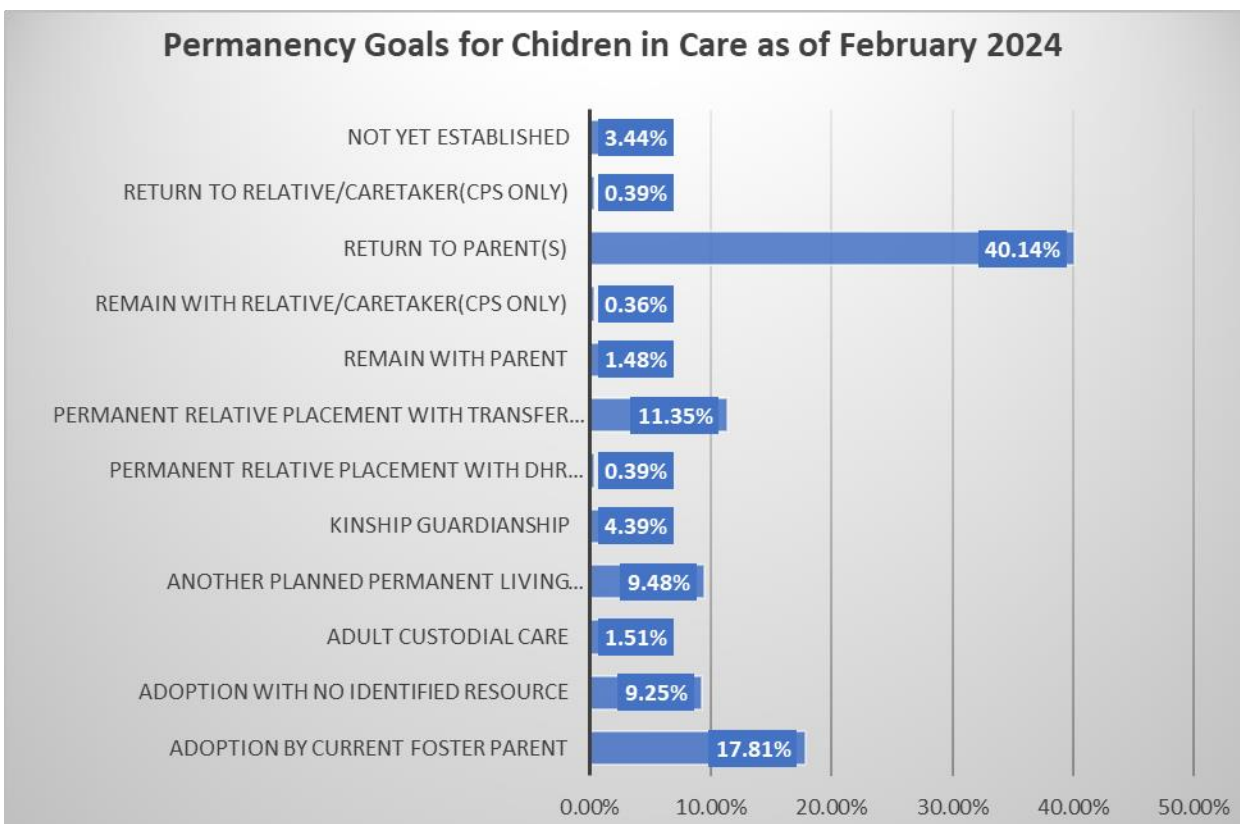
Another example of monitoring for completeness and accuracy is regularly running report ERD and accompanying query that monitors documentation of Case Plan Addendums documentation.

Addendums	Sept. 2022	Sept. 2023	(July) 2024
Addendum Documented:	5251	5369	5447
Addendum Not Documented:	456	591	467
Total:	5707	5960	5914
Percent w/ Addendum Documented :	92.01%	90.08%	92.10%

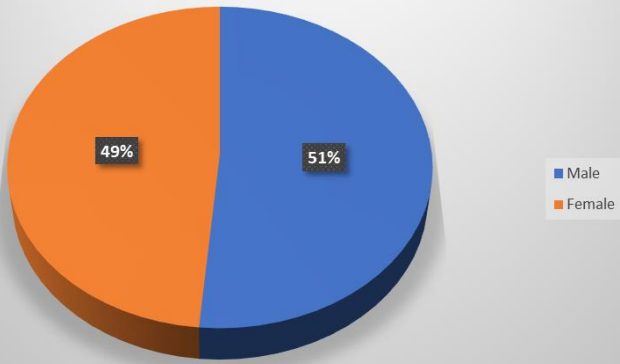
Reports are also provided to workers monthly that monitor completeness of documentation entered into the FACTS system around EPSDT and Dental Care appointments. Reports also run that provide workers and supervisors information regarding missing information that is required for eligibility determinations.

When an issue is reported, the report or query is examined to see what was not pulled correctly and adjustments are made to ensure accuracy. FACTS programmers have corrected many of the data extraction issues noted in the AFCARS PIP and continue to work on addressing all issues. FACTS users are required to verify the completeness and accuracy of the AFCARS data they have entered each month via an AFCARS report that is generated on the state’s reports system.

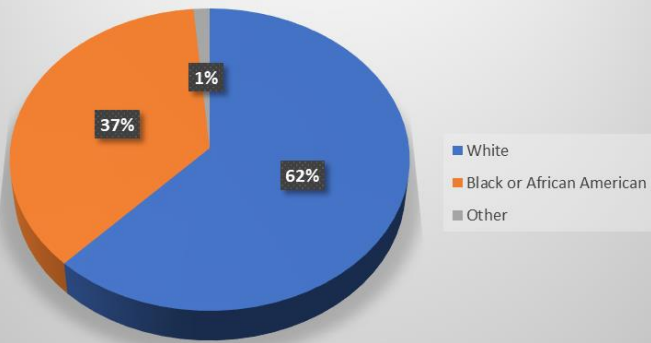
Some examples of FACTS functionality that provides status, characteristics, placement location, and permanency goals are provided in the charts below. Data provided in these charts was taken from reports that run regularly on the state’s reports application. This application is available to all staff statewide.



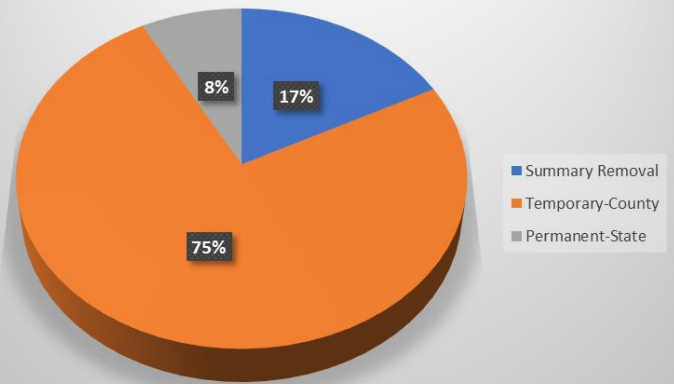
Gender of Children in Care as of February 2024



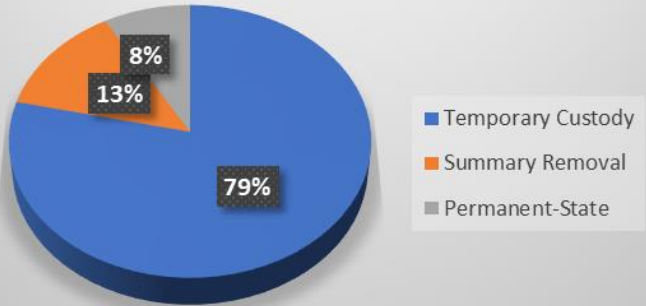
Race of Children in Care as of February 2024



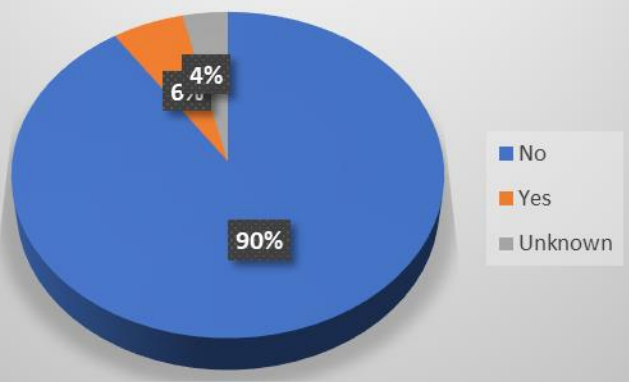
Custody Status of Children in Care as of February 2024



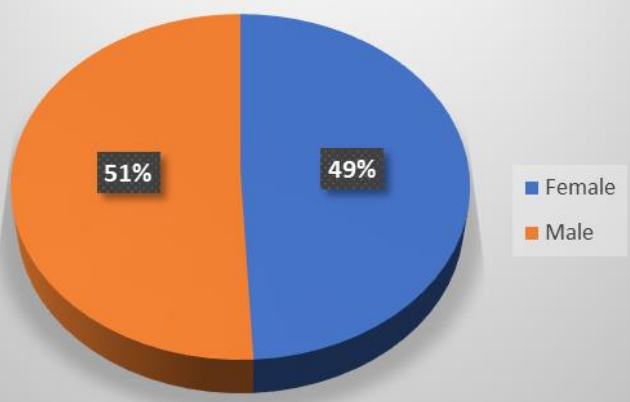
Custody Status of Children in Foster Care as of 9/30/22



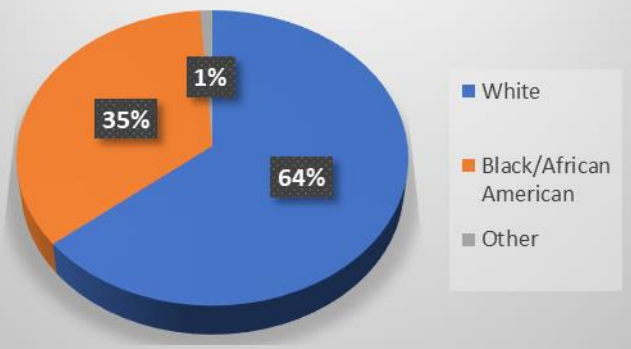
Hispanic Origin of Children in Foster Care as of 9/30/22



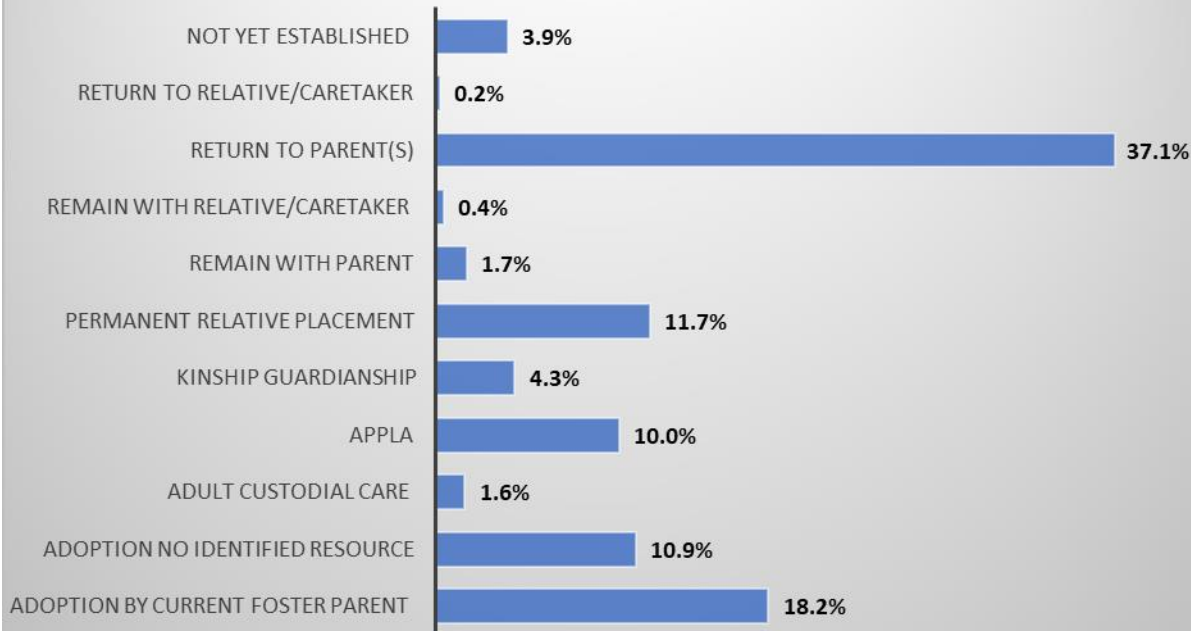
Gender of Children in Foster Care on 9/30/22



Race of Children in Foster Care as of 9/30/22



Permanency Goals for Children in Care on 9/30/22



SYSTEMIC FACTOR CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Item 20.

Written case plan:

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

During case reviews, there is evidence that case plan meetings are being held timely and as needed as cases evolve and needs change. Addendums are being completed timely as well. There is evidence from internal and external stakeholder interviews that participants are given the opportunity for their opinions to be heard by the case plan team. Team members feel they are invited to meetings and that meetings are being held at a convenient time and location for all involved. Reviews also noted that case plans are being documented in FACTS, copies of the documents are located in the paper files, and copies of the case plan are being distributed to parties at the close of the case plan meeting.

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

GOAL:

The Department will develop Comprehensive Family Assessments that lead to the development of family plans that better instruct case participants of the achievement of the desired goals.

- In the coming year, training will be provided around engaging fathers and relatives throughout the life of the case so that fathers and paternal relatives can be considered when forming and reviewing permanency plans.
- Permanency plans and service arrays are discussed as a part of the Child welfare/Judicial Summit each year. Helping judges understand all the possible permanency goals and the requirements for each has been impactful particularly with increasing the Kinship Guardianship numbers.
- The baseline for including mothers in the ISP at the beginning of PIP implementation was 69% and improved to 88% at the end of PIP implementation. The rating for including fathers in the ISP process remained steady at 46% from the baseline to completion, so this remains an area of need.

Strategies:

The Quality CW Practice Specialists will continue to conduct ongoing peer reviews and onsite reviews in the counties, including the review of CFAs and will provide feedback to county supervisors and staff around family engagement which will improve their ability to gather needed information to fully assess the families’ strengths, needs, functioning, safety, etc. Quality Child Welfare Practice Specialists offer Family Engagement training, as well as CFA and ISP training. This strategy remains in place and trainings continue to be offered.

Updates for 2024:

- In 12 applicable foster home cases reviewed by QCWP specialists from October 2022-June 2023, parents were included in the development of the case plan and ongoing process in 11/12 cases (92%).
- In 26 foster home cases, there was monitoring of progress toward goals in 16/26 (62%).
- The Office of QCWP has provided support around the ISP process in all 67 counties through ongoing case reviews. Feedback is provided as well as point in time, in depth reviews in each county which occur approximately every 4 years.

This goal is complete.

Item 21.

Periodic administrative / judicial review

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

In stakeholder interviews conducted annually by the Office of QA and county QA committees, internal and external stakeholders reported a good working relationship between the Department and the court system in many Counties. Worker and supervisor turnover were specifically identified during stakeholder interviews as a possible cause for any strained relationships between the court and the department.

Data available from AFCARS provides the following insight on the timeliness of required reviews:

Year	2021A	2021B	2022A	2022B
Percentage Timely Review	93.78%	93.37%	93.61%	93.35%

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

- There is currently a data sharing agreement in place between Alabama State Department of Human Resource and Alabama Administrative Office of Courts. This agreement allows for the tracking and sharing of information related to which children/cases have not experienced timely reviews in court. Through this data we can focus efforts on the counties where there are systemic issues.
- There is an ongoing Judicial/Child Welfare Initiatives between DHR and the courts. Issues that the Department collaborates on with AOC as part of this initiative are improving permanency timeframes, educating on policies, and strengthening partnerships between the courts and the Department. One such initiative is iCAN which has expanded to include 24 counties. iCAN agendas are established between the county director and the local judge to reflect what they see as the specific needs in their community; each iCAN county focuses on individual issues within their county and continually assesses issues specific to their individual county using data provided by the department.

- A youth panel is present at the annual Child welfare/Judicial summit where there is always discussion around the court and their allowing youth to be actively involved in hearings

Item 22.

Process ensuring permanency hearings

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Strengths noted in the most recent OSRI reviews include:

- Evidence of permanency hearings being held noted by orders being filed in case records and noted in the FACTS system
- Evidence of hearings being held timely via stakeholder interviews and documentation in case records and FACTS
- Court reports are being completed timely with accurate information so as not to delay information being received by the Court
- Evidence that guardians-ad-litem are attending hearings
- Counties are utilizing internal tracking systems to ensure that hearings are requested and held timely such as pen and paper lists and Electronic Distribution Reports
- There is evidence of flexibility between the Court and the local office to ensure that hearings are held timely
- In stakeholder interviews conducted annually by the Office of QA and county QA committees, there were internal and external stakeholders that reported a good working relationship between the Department and the court systems. However, there were also some counties in which stakeholders reported a more strained relationship between the Court and the Department. If this was identified as a need for a county through stakeholder interviews, this is being addressed through steps developed and implemented in the Court Improvement Plan.
- In foster care OSRIs, there were examples of permanency hearings and judicial reviews generally being held timely. Permanency hearings were generally full hearings with testimony taken.

Some challenges seen in the most recent reviews include:

- Gaps in case records after the initial hearing
- Scheduling by the Court in some counties is inconsistent
- Orders being signed by judges are not always signed timely
- Some courts schedule six-month hearings at the conclusion of the adjudicatory hearing
- Hearings can be postponed or continued, and it is strictly up to the local judge’s discretion to allow this.
 - If there is an issue identified in a specific county regarding timeliness of hearings, a discussion between DHR and AOC would be initiated.
 - Additionally, for iCAN counties, this is a prime example of what they discuss.
 - And it is also addressed at the Judicial Conference and at the CIP meetings.
- There is a court tracking screen available on the FACTS system for workers to enter court-related data. Some counties use this while other counties don’t use it to the extent that it can be used.
- DHR continues to partner with AOC to collect data on timeliness of hearings. DHR partners with CASEY to provide trainings on expediting permanency and avoiding roadblocks to permanency.
 - This is always an area covered at the Child welfare/Judicial conference.

TIME TO PERMANENCY HEARINGS

Home Removal to Initial Permanency Hearing	FY21	FY22	FY23
Average # of Days	319	329	331
% of Timely Hearings	66%	65%	64.16%
% Untimely Hearings	34%	35%	32.15%
% children >365 days with no hearing documented	3%	0%	3.69%

Initial Permanency Hearing to 1st Subsequent Hearing	FY21	FY22	FY23
Average # of Days	274	276	298
% Timely Hearings	77%	67%	63.43%
% Untimely Hearings	23%	22%	19.63%
% children who should have had but did not have a subsequent hearing	9%	10%	13.76%
1st Subsequent Hearing to 2nd Subsequent Hearing	FY21	FY22	FY23
Average # Days	233	258	266
% Timely Hearings	86%	74%	69.62%
% Untimely Hearings	14%	18%	15.27%
% children who should have had but did not have a subsequent hearing	10%	8%	15.11%
2nd Subsequent Hearing to 3rd Subsequent Hearing	FY21	FY22	FY23
Average # Days	223	253	253
% Timely Hearings	88%	80%	68.42%
% Untimely Hearings	12%	14%	15.79%
% children who should have had but did not have a subsequent hearing	8%	7%	15.79%
3rd Subsequent Hearing to 4th Subsequent Hearing	FY21	FY22	FY23
Average # of Days	199	215	237
% Timely Hearings	92%	84%	71.78%
% Untimely Hearings	8%	11%	15.77%
% children who should have had but did not have a subsequent hearing	6%	5%	12.45%

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The Alabama Judicial/Child Welfare Collaboration Project is a partnership between the Alabama Administrative Office of Courts, the Department of Human Resource, and Casey Family Programs, the nation’s largest operating foundation focused solely on child welfare systems improvements. Our goal is to strengthen partnerships between the judiciary and child welfare to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being for Alabama’s children and families. We pursue our goal through facilitating judicial and child welfare collaboration and the use of data to drive solid practice and foster shared outcomes.

Alabama currently has 24 active iCAN Teams with two additional county teams developing. A Judicial Summit is planned for the upcoming year in which current iCAN counties will be encouraged to invite new counties to participate and explore the benefits of iCAN Team Collaboration. We discuss the importance of timely hearings at each of these and brainstorm on ways to make the system run more efficiently.

Item 23.

Process ensuring TPR proceedings same data

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Alabama law requires the TPR trial to be completed within 90 days after perfection of service of a TPR petition and for a trial judge to enter a final order within 30 days of the completion of the trial. The ADPT 90 report is available statewide on the states ERD system. The report is designed to track TPR filing dates, TPR hearing dates, TPR disposition dates, adoption filing dates, and adoption finalization date. In addition to this report, Family Services partners with the Administrative Office of Courts (AOC) to exchange data via queries to look at permanency activity timeframes. The Office of Data Analysis also pulls data related to permanency time frames and makes this data available to appropriate agency managers.

Updates for 2024:

This goal is completed.

Item 24.

Process ensuring notification of / right to be heard in legal proceedings

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Alabama Child Welfare laws and DHR policy require that all relative caregivers, pre-adoptive parents, and foster parent of a child in foster care or under the responsibility of the state shall be given notice, verbally or in writing, of the date, time, and place of any juvenile court proceeding being held with respect to a child in their care. These parties have a right to be heard in any juvenile court proceeding being held with respect to a child in their care. No foster parent, pre-adoptive parent, and relative caregiver of a child under the responsibility of the state shall be made a party to a juvenile court proceeding solely on the basis of this notice and right to be heard.

Most juvenile courts in Alabama give notice of the next scheduled hearings from the bench at each hearing. There is not a way in the current system to track such notices. However, the state's strategies to monitor these notices include that, once the notices are received by the county, copies could be sent to the relatives, foster parents, and pre-adoptive parents via mail. Then the worker could document the notices in the narrative and place a copy of the notice in the case file. This would be monitored by case reviews.

Systemic Factor Quality Assurance/Continuous Quality Improvement

Item 25.

Statewide operation of quality assurance system

Assessment of Progress / Data

How well is the quality assurance system functioning statewide to ensure that it:

(1) is operating in the jurisdictions where the services included in the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) are provided:

Alabama has an extensive CQI system operating statewide in all 67 counties. State DHR has a QA Division with a Deputy Commissioner, Director, Program Manager, and a QA Unit consisting of a Program Supervisor and 7 Program Specialist. There is a uniform QA Guide which outlines specific QA and CQI activities which are expected to occur in every County each fiscal year. QA Specialists host quarterly meetings with County QA Coordinators or designated staff from each County to discuss issues relevant to CQI. Each of the 67 counties have an identified QA Coordinator and an established local QA Committee comprised of community stakeholders. Alabama has adopted the OSRI as its primary review tool for the State QA Unit and it is used during onsite reviews of the 67 counties. Training is arranged in the OMS E-learning Academy for all County QA Coordinators or designated County staff in the OSRI. Additionally, in calendar year 2023, QA Specialists conducted 15 On-site Reviews in a total of 15 Counties of various size and geographic location to obtain a sampling a service performance across the jurisdictions. These Counties included: Lamar, Wilcox, Lauderdale, Walker, St. Clair, Bibb, Dale, Jefferson, Macon, Elmore, Geneva, Chambers, Bullock, Lawrence, and Perry.

(2) has standards to evaluate the quality of services (including standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect their health and safety)

Beginning in September 2022, after the completion of Alabama's PIP, State DHR returned to conducting county specific onsite reviews utilizing the OSRI and OMS. The current Onsite Review Process included the completion of OSRIs, a Permanency Assessment, a Safety Assessment, a Resource Record Review, and stakeholder interviews.

In the Permanency Assessments, between 10-20 foster children (depending on the county size) are randomly selected for a record review to assess the quality of services in place as well as the health and safety of the children. In the Safety Assessment, a sample of 10-20 investigations and 10-20 assessments (depending on the county size) are reviewed for thoroughness of the case practice. Reviewers also began evaluating a sample of reports in which plans of safe care are necessary to ensure the agency has developed thorough plans of safe care and linked children and families with appropriate safety-related services. In the resource record review, a sample of 10-30 foster homes (depending on the county size) are reviewed for compliance with the state's Minimum Standards policy as well as the quality of assessment and services arranged for foster parents to preserve placements.

During each On-site Review, there is a process of reporting any health and safety issues which may need immediate intervention. If a concern is noted in any phase of the Onsite Review, the respective review team member notifies the leads for the Onsite Review who in turn notify the County Director and upper management within State QA of the concerns. The County then is expected to make a plan to address the imminent concern. In turn, the appropriate division with Family Services is included to staff the situation with the County. This turnaround occurs within the same day. The feedback loop is closed once QA staff have confirmed that the County has taken the proper steps to resolve the concern. Additional, staffing between the County and Family Services may continue based on the circumstances.

All county QA Committees are required to complete an established number of QRIs per year. QRIs, after being debriefed with the county, are submitted to State QA for review and then entered in the QRI database. The database allows for reports to be run depending on entered parameters. QA Specialists provide written feedback to each County for each QRI the QA committee completes to ensure there is fidelity with the rating/scoring protocol.

All counties are expected to complete and submit their County Self-Assessment every 6 months. The County Self-Assessment utilizes the 36 federal items and is supported by county stakeholder interviews, satisfaction surveys, case reviews, and ERD reports. Once the QA Coordinator compiles all the necessary supports for each item, county management, frontline staff, and stakeholders review each item and determine if the item is rated a strength or an area needing improvement. The report is then submitted to SDHR QA Division and is used in the development of the County Improvement Plan.

If a county had an onsite review completed by the State QA Unit, the Summary of Findings can be used in place of or in conjunction with their County Self-Assessment to develop their County Improvement Plan. QA Specialists review each County Self-Assessment that is submitted and provides written feedback regarding any progress, regression, and barriers to performance observed and to ensure all required information is submitted in the report.

During the county self-assessment, Items 29 and 30 requires the county to assess their service array and ability to develop necessary resources. Should these items be identified as an Area Needing Improvement, the county would make plans in their CIP to address barriers and ensure the county can develop and provide appropriate services to the children and families being served.

(3) identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system

In the onsite reviews completed from January 2023 to February 2024, items 29 received a 77% strength rating and item 30 received a 47% strength rating in the counties reviewed. The counties identified having the resources needed to ensure children can remain in their homes and services are available to meet the individual needs of the children and families served to facilitate the identified permanency goals for children.

Although the onsite reviews and counties identify resources are available and can be adjusted, the OSRI findings reflect that services are not always delivered timely and that in many cases, parents refuse to access the services to ensure children are able to remain in their homes, prevent entry into foster care, or the timely achievement of permanency goals.

In the OSRIs completed from January 2023 to February 2024, 20 OSRIs were applicable for Item 2, of the 17 applicable OSRIs, 12 (60%) was rated as a Strength and 8 (40%) were rated as Area Needing Improvement. For Item 12, of the 43 applicable cases for the same time period, 9 (21%) were rated as a Strength and 34 (79%) were rated as Area Needing Improvement.

In a review of Item 2's rated as ANI, the reviewers identified workers completed an adequate assessment of the family needs and needed services, but there was a delay in service provision or no provision of services. In some instances, referrals were made for services, but not followed through or it was left for the family to secure the services on their own. Safety Assessments completed Sept.2022 through Dec. 2022 during on-site reviews, identified thorough assessments throughout the investigations and services provided, however some children entered foster care despite services provided.

In a review of item 12's rated as ANI, the reviewers identified workers failed to complete an adequate assessment of the underlying needs of the parents more often and either provided no services or services that did not appropriately address the true needs of the family. The permanency assessments completed Sept. 2022 through Dec. 2022 during on-site reviews identified the children and foster parent's needs were assessed for the most part and appropriate services provided; however, the parents, especially fathers, were not appropriately assessed and appropriate services were not provided.

(4) provides relevant reports

The QA unit has several feedback loops in place. At the completion of each onsite review, the counties reviewed received a Summary of Findings Report that identified the 36 items as either a "Strength" or an "Area Needing Improvement". Within the Summary of Findings Report, the appendix provides the individual reports for the OSRIs, QRIs, QRI Re-Reviews, Safety Assessment, Permanency Assessment, and Resource Record Review.

County Self Assessments are reviewed by the county's QA specialist and returned with questions of requests for clarification if needed. Counties also provide copies of Foster Parent Recruitment Trackers and Extra Curricular Activity Trackers quarterly to State QA. These documents are reviewed by the county's QA specialist and returned if clarification is needed. Information from these reports are used to help inform recommendations made in County Improvement Plans, addressing strengths and needs and enhancing practice in counties.

The OMS provides the ability to run reports with many different parameters, and the QRI database also allows a lesser number of parameters to be run such as county, district, case type, gender, ethnicity, time in care, reason for case opening, worker, supervisor, and reviewer. Item specific reports are provided to SDHR staff as requested to assist in analyzing targeted areas.

The agency also has access to ERD and Family Services Dashboards. SDHR can identify services provided to children and families when acquired through a purchase order; however, SDHR is unable to run reports that detail the use of community-based services or contract services.

Alabama DHR is looking at ways to use the above-mentioned reports in order to increase providing reporting resource to the county. Currently the QA division is providing limited information, and additional ways to share data are being explored.**(5) evaluates implemented program improvement measures**

After the submission of the County Self-Assessment and prior to the development of the County Improvement Plan, State QA (practice specialist and QA specialist) meet with county management, frontline staff, and stakeholders to review ratings, identify priority areas, goals, data elements to track, and set data goals. Participants are requested to consider the best possible steps to achieve goals before the next meeting to develop the County Improvement Plan.

During the County Improvement Planning meeting, county management, State QA staff, frontline staff, and stakeholders develop the steps for identified goals. Each step should have responsible parties identified with timeframes for completion. The steps will also identify the type of service and support provided to the county by the State Office.

In example, County A identified Timely Permanency Achievement as an area to address in their County Improvement Plan. The action steps identified included ISP reviews by the county QA supervisor to ensure documentation of appropriate permanency goals in cases, as well as reviewing for compelling reasons not to file a TPR petition, and progress towards permanency goals, and reporting the findings of the reviews back to supervisory staff. County A also initiated quarterly internal case reviews with management and supervisory staff to review case progress. Progress of these steps were measured by a minimum of 75% of the cases reviewed to be in compliance.

During the implementation of the County Improvement Plan, the Practice Specialist will continue to track county data and will report to the county, as well as Division leadership, monthly the progress of reaching the identified data goals. Should no progress be made, the Practice Specialist will alert the county and a meeting will be held to address the barriers and identify new steps.

Systemic Factor: Training **Includes 2024 Updates**

Item 26.
Initial staff development and training program for staff

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

The Office of Child Welfare Training (OCWT) is responsible for training social work and supervisory staff of county departments in the basic child welfare skills curriculum. The Office of Child Welfare Training (OCWT) unit consists of six trainers and a Program Manager. Trainers are located throughout the state with in-person sessions primarily held in Montgomery or Birmingham.

The Office of Child Welfare Training currently develops and updates training curriculum for new staff; provides the initial classroom training for all new child welfare workers and supervisors; provides train the trainer sessions to staff, foster parents, and child placing agency providers that allow them to train prospective foster and adoptive parents across the state; and assists other units in developing training curriculums.

The Striving Toward Excellent Practice (STEP) curriculum equips child welfare workers and supervisors with the knowledge and skills necessary to help them to be successful in their work with families. STEP: Foundations is the initial training module, and all new child welfare staff are required to attend this training. Staff are enrolled into this training upon their employment, and this is managed through the online Learning, Education, and Training System (LETS). There are additional modules in which staff can be enrolled by their supervisors/directors depending on their unit assignments within the county. These modules include Intake, Investigations, Case Management, and Adoption. Some modules have pre-requisite requirements before staff can be enrolled. Workers can be registered to attend one or all these modules depending on their assigned responsibilities and the decision of county management. Outlined in the table below are the number of sessions and participants that have attended each module thus far in FY 2024.

TRAINING	# of FY24 SESSIONS	# of STAFF TRAINED	COUNTY REPRESENTATION
STEP Foundations	17	228	42
STEP Intake	7	89	32
STEP Investigation	10	116	38
STEP Case Management	10	102	40
STEP Adoption	7	27	19

THIS TABLE REPRESENTS DATA FOR OCTOBER 2023-JUNE 2024.

The average length of time between an employee’s start date and the date that employee began STEP training was 16 days.

DHR Supervisor Management Training was presented during the onset of FY24. Two sessions were provided to new and experienced supervisors.

TRAINING		# OF STAFF TRAINED	COUNTY REPRESENTATION
DHR MANAGEMENT NORTH	SUPERVISORY TRAINING -	12	9
DHR MANAGEMENT CENTRAL	SUPERVISORY TRAINING -	12	10

Areas that need to be strengthened:

- More in-depth FACTS training is consistently noted as an area of need. As such, we are looking at ways to enhance this component of training and focus on some of the greater areas of need that have been identified. This may result in the development of a stand-alone FACTS module vs. having it included in the STEP modules. We are in the process of determining the viability of this option.
- While it appears that STEP consistently allows workers to understand the core concepts of work with families (engaging/joining, giving feedback, genuineness, respect for cultural difference, understanding the cause of abuse/neglect, etc.), it does not prepare them quite as well for the concrete, hands on piece of the work, particularly around assessment, such as:
 - Determining the appropriate response times
 - Utilizing the 6 assessment questions to assess a situation to determine safety and act appropriately to ensure safety
 - Determining appropriate referrals to other agencies
 - Gathering, analyzing, organizing information to provide a professional analysis of the family for the CFA
- One of the areas of identified need is for more initial training around the Department’s policy and procedures. While our current training does a very good job of teaching our staff how to engage with families, assess their needs, and learn to develop case plans, etc., all child welfare policies are not included in the classroom training. Policy PowerPoint presentations are in process of development. These trainings can be viewed by more experienced staff and supervisors as policy refreshers as well whenever needed.
- Simulation labs for child welfare training provide an immersive training environment that affords a realistic experience for trainees to prepare them for real-world interactions. Some of the benefits of simulation include increased transfer of learning, practice in a safe environment, improved skill retention, and opportunities to watch and learn from others. The Department is working to revise the training curriculum for new staff, and this will include simulated learning experiences.
- The Office of Child Welfare Training currently does not track data as it relates to the effectiveness of the trainings provided to caseworker. However, this process will be updated with the implementation of a new training model.

Item 27. Ongoing staff development and training program for staff

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Alabama partners with Children’s Justice Task force who presented Domestic Violence and Substance Abuse training to case workers around the state. Alabama also partners with Children’s Aid Society to present the Permanency Conference in the spring each year. Presentations are made annually around the importance for timely permanency of children and addressing any barrier to such.

Family Service Division presents two supervisor trainings annually in June and July. This year the keynote speaker spoke on leadership with other topics including using data, correct dispositions on CANs, Foster care and placements were presented. Family Services Division also presents an annual Child Protective Service Conference with topics geared toward safety assessments and safety planning.

All of these trainings have positive survey results. Everyone who attends is asked to complete a multi question survey. Employees are asked a series of questions designed to enhance training subjects, trainers and media used to relay the information. One of the questions is around their belief that the material presented was helpful and meaningful to their daily work and decisions. This particular question usually receives high rankings and in 2024, over 90% of respondents said that the topics and presenters were impactful and meaningful to their daily work and decisions.

All employees training needs as well as training credits are maintained on the LETS system. Annually, all employees are required to complete a list of courses online via LETS. The system generates emails to workers and their supervisors to highlight trainings pending completion. Those include Active Shooter Preparedness, Americans with Disabilities Act, Confidentiality in the workplace, Emergency Welfare Duties, Service and Safety from threatening behavior and Safety in DHR facilities. Caseworkers, supervisors, directors, program specialists and those ranked above must also complete the following annually: Behavioral Services for Children with special needs, TCM training, Family Services Language assistance and training for Medicaid Rehab services trainings.

Required LETS Course	# Complete	# Incomplete	Total	% Complete
Active Shooter	3681	13	3694	99.65%
ADA	1403	16	1419	98.87%
Confidentiality	3653	19	3672	99.48%
Emergency Duties	3679	23	3702	99.38%
Facilities Safety	3670	25	3695	99.32%
Threatening Behavior Safety	3635	26	3661	99.29%
Language Assistance	1255	22	1277	98.28%
TCM/IV-E	1331	29	1360	97.87%
Behavioral Services	1417	15	1432	98.95%

Item 28. Foster / adoptive parent / facility staff training program

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

In 2016 the state began training TIPS-MAPP – Trauma Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanency in the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (TIPS).

The TIPS program is a mutual process built around 12 skills to be successful foster and adoptive parents. TIPS utilizes both a staff trainer and a foster parent co-leader to facilitate the sessions. If parents are struggling with too many of the skills,

they can select themselves out or can be selected out by the Agency co-leader. The data around the number of prospective foster/adoptive homes that are selected out/select themselves out is kept at the county level. The State Office will need to determine the best way of collecting this information.

- TIPS Co-Leader Training participants are surveyed at the end of the training course, there is a need to develop a survey for both county staff and providers as well as foster/adoptive parents to be completed approximately 6 months after their initial placements to determine the effectiveness of TIPS and how well the training prepared them for placements.

Systemic Factor: _____ **Service Array**

Item 29.
Service Array

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Services for children/youth and families are facilitated through the ISP process. The ISP team determines the needs of any child and family. The ISP team is led by the county DHR office and partners with others, including the child/family and others from the community, to determine which providers can best meet the child/family needs, with an emphasis on out of home care.

This systemic factor is not captured in the case specific OSRIs or QRIs completed. The following show data from On Site Reviews. Since 2022 the State has rated a Strength in this systemic factor.

<u>Year</u>	#Onsite Reviews	#Strengths	#ANI
2022	5	5	0
2023	15	11	4
2024	8 (through June)	7	1

Child & Family Services Continuum

Alabama continues to utilize Intensive In-Home Services (IIHS). The services are available in all 67 counties and the number of slots to serve families increased thus eliminating wait lists. There are currently 661 IIHS slots statewide. These services are readily available for families to receive in the county in which they reside. As of December 31, 2023, 421 families were being served through IIHS programs around the state. The IIHS services focus on achieving the outcome of successful permanency for children in a family setting through either family preservation or reunification programs utilizing evidenced-based programs. These programs have the flexibility to design individualized services that are family-driven and youth/child focused. Intensive in-home services are available to families for longer periods of time than 4 – 6 weeks as previously allowed in in Continuum of Care and FOCUS programs. All services are customized for delivery in the least restrictive manner. Programs are located in areas with a high concentration of families in need of services to address their safety and stability.

Service Coordination

There is a statewide ability to provide accessible and linguistically responsive services through the use of translators and interpreters as needed for child welfare activities such as child abuse/neglect assessments and general service intake matters. There is a gap in the number and accessibility of direct service providers (e.g., private therapists, mental health professionals, etc.) who speak the language or dialect of children and families, which impacts the capacity to provide individualized services. In terms of general practice delivery, staff demonstrate cultural sensitivity to the diverse, primarily Hispanic, populations. The development/use of a culturally competent framework or model of practice, provided through training, and reinforced through ongoing supervision would better promote statewide responsiveness in this regard.

The Multi-Dimensional Assessment Tool (MAT) is completed on children whom the county is referring to Therapeutic Foster Care and Moderate providers to determine the most appropriate level of care. The county office provides

information to the MAT assessor around the child’s needs. The information provided includes a current psychological with a DSM Axis I diagnosis, a comprehensive family assessment, a review of behaviors occurring within the last 30 days, and a summary of the child’s needs. If a child is placed in Therapeutic Foster Care or in an Intensive residential placement, a review MAT must be completed every 9 months. If a child is placed in a Moderate placement, a review MAT must be completed every 6 months.

Percentage of Services Offered		
TYPE OF SERVICE	TOTAL OFFERED	PERCENT OFFERED
Clothes/Shoes	2074	16.62%
Baby Products	1515	12.14%
Identification	1509	12.10%
Transportation	1311	10.51%
Individual Psychoeducational Services	1136	9.11%
Drug Screening/ Assessment	783	6.28%
Sitter Services	549	4.40%
Diagnostic Testing	634	5.08%
Family Counseling	488	3.91%
Gifts	377	3.02%
Medically Fragile Payments	394	3.16%
Other	357	2.86%
Child Day Care	337	2.70%
Medication	145	1.16%
Food	174	1.39%
Medical Treatment	129	1.03%
Mental Health Consultation/Coord.	121	0.97%
Individual Counseling	263	2.11%
Individual Family Support	160	1.28%
Enhanced Foster Care Services	20	0.16%
TOTAL	12,476	

*Note: these totals are services that are documented within the FACTS system. Other services including free and/or contract services may not be represented in the chart.

The Resource Management Division monitors all contract provider services. The gaps in services are determined by length of stay, discussion with counties and trends/issues they see, and reviewing data regarding placements. Current gaps that are seen are services for youth aged 17-20 who are mentally ill and behaviorally challenged and children with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, have an IQ under 70, and have behavioral challenges at home and in the community. The Department of Mental Health has developed intensive home-based services for children from birth to age 20 with autism spectrum disorder or autism spectrum disorder with co-occurring intellectual/developmental disabilities. These services include intensive care coordination, therapeutic monitoring, behavioral support, in-home therapy, family support, and peer support provided to child in the setting in which the child resides or a community setting. During FY 23, 20 mental health centers around the state received funds for the expansion of school based mental health services. There are currently 97 school systems and 18 community mental health centers participating in the school-Based Mental Health Collaboration Program, per the Alabama Department of Mental Health. This is an increase of 17 school systems participating in the program this year. A goal of this program is to ensure that children across the state have access to comprehensive mental health services, including early intervention, prevention, and treatment services.

Service Decision-Making Process for Family Support Services

The Request for Proposal (RFP) is utilized for all service provisions procured in the state of Alabama unless there is an existing interagency agreement of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) authorized by the Commissioner. The RFP process includes a review of each proposal submitted by the potential providers and grading of each proposal by select county and state office staff. The scores are submitted to the Office of Procurement and a selection process is used to determine the awarded contracts. The sites are located where there is a high concentration of families needing services to address their safety and stability issues. The Department is successful in having, developing, or coordinating for the arrangement of services for all families and understands that the need to have readily available and easily accessible services to those families and children we serve is of great importance and must be addressed. Consistency in individualizing services for families and children also needs to be strengthened, especially related to general mental health services at the local level. This would include general staffing gaps of the local mental health agencies and increased ability to offer psychiatric consultation.

Family Support Services are selected through the Department’s procurement process. A solicitation is issued publicly describing the array of services to be provided and includes the requirement for the services to be community-based. Proposals submitted in response to the solicitation are assessed by a team of evaluators for their ability to meet the requirements of the solicitation. The agencies selected to provide these services have met the requirements and stipulations of the procurement.

PLACEMENT RESOURCES

Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) and TFC with Enhanced Services

Therapeutic Foster Care and TFC with Enhanced Services: These providers continue to work with the Resource Management Division and counties in placing our children in need of TFC in the most appropriate settings. There are 10 providers of TFC in the state. There are not sufficient TFC homes willing to accept and maintain older teens/young adults and children with more significant behavioral/mental health issues. The Department is currently working with the Praed Foundation who developed the MAT tool we currently use, to build out a more comprehensive framework. They have developed a draft framework and are in the process of testing it at this time. Once testing is completed, the Department will review the findings/outcomes and initiate implementation of the model as appropriate.

Total Number of Children in TFC as of 12/31/2023	227
Total Number of Children in TFC-E as of 12/31/2023	122
Total:	349

Residential Facilities

These facilities are licensed and appropriately able to provide and/or access appropriate services for the children with greater needs than can be met in a foster family home setting. Selected information below reflects the strengths and needs of these providers, which are vital in achieving best outcomes for the children we serve.

Congregate Care placements are being monitored in several ways. The Certificate of Need from a physician and concurrence from the ISP team, and a provider recommendation letter are all required for placement in intensive residential facilities. The Resource Management Division assists counties in locating appropriate placements through centralized intake. Approval by the Deputy Commissioner of Quality, the Deputy Commissioner of Family and Children Services and the Special Assistant to the Commissioner must be requested by the county director, the case must be staffed with the county director and approval must be given for the placement of children 12 or younger in basic or intensive placements. Family Services must also review and approve any TFC placement of a child aged 5 or younger. The Department is continuing to emphasize that discharge planning begins at the time of placement, so we can ensure that work is done to match children with the most appropriate, least restrictive placement as soon as it is appropriate based on the needs of each child.

Alabama Fatherhood Initiative (AFI)

The Alabama Fatherhood Initiative includes 20 projects statewide that are funded through a partnership with the Family Assistance and Child Support Divisions of State DHR and the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention/The Children’s Trust Fund that provide a variety of services to custodial and non-custodial parents and legal guardians. During FY 2023, DHR funding provided Fatherhood services in 49 counties and served a total of 1,730 participants, 551 of whom were employed.

The Fatherhood Programs are funded with TANF dollars through a MOU between DHR and ADCANP. All TANF Fatherhood Programs are funded through a competitive process. Each program focuses on workforce development and placement, parent education and support, case management, child support education and payment, and strengthening healthy relationships for families. Referrals are made through all DHR programs, community agencies, child support court, and self-referrals. Noncustodial and custodial parents and legal guardians are assessed immediately upon referral. Participants attend weekly parenting classes and workforce development components as directed by the program facilitator. These components are job readiness, job placement, GED classes, credential skills training, and other adult education and training components. Additional resources and referrals may be needed to mental health, substance abuse, and vocational rehabilitation services. The goals are to help participants develop the skills needed to support their children financially and emotionally.

Item 30.

Individualization of services

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Includes 2024 Updates

By policy and practice all services provided are individualized based on the assessed needs of each family/child. The process begins through the compilation and analysis of information within the CFA and is presented in the Department’s ISP. Each child and family’s needs are unique, so plans are highly individualized. All participants take into consideration services available within their specific communities and in surrounding areas. Policy dictates that the Department provides services to families when they need it, at the frequency with which they need it, and in a timely manner. Flex funding is made available to each county and is used for the provision of necessary individualized services that are authorized by the ISP team.

This item has consistently rated as a strength in OSRIs

Item 30: Individualization of Services				
<u>DATES</u>	<u>CASES REVIEWED</u>	<u>STRENGTH</u>	<u>ANI</u>	<u>Strength %</u>
September-December 2022	5	5	0	100%
January-December 2023	15	8	7	53%
January- July 2024	8	5	3	63%

Source: OSRIs

GOAL:

The Department will enhance staff’s ability to engage with families, accurately assess their underlying needs, and identify and provide the appropriate services to meet those needs.

Strategies:

- Quality Child Welfare Practice Specialists will continue to work with supervisors across the state to build capacity around the CFA/ISP process and enhance the supervisors’ skills related to delivering feedback to their staff regarding the quality of the work completed. The specialists will provide this feedback through direct practice with supervisory staff. This work is ongoing across the state.

- Engagement and assessing underlying needs were addressed at the Supervisor and CPS conferences. Family and Children’s Services will continue to provide training in these areas.

Systemic Factor: Agency Responsiveness to the Community

Item 31.

Ongoing engagement and consultation with community stakeholders

Consultation with Community Stakeholders through Quality Assurance

In addition to having a QA committee in each county with stakeholder representation, the State SQ Committee also has representation of stakeholders across the state and meets on a quarterly basis.

The Office of QCWP continues to conduct random case record reviews with county supervisors across the state. The review tool used provides detailed information that will be beneficial to the supervisor to use during worker/supervisor conferences. These reviews give OQCWP the opportunity to work one-on-one with supervisors to help them understand how to engage and empower their works to produce family centered case work that is in line with policy. In turn workers feel heard, valued, and become invested in good outcomes for the children and families they serve. The Office of QCWP also provides support to supervisors across the state in structuring individual conferences with their workers. This is an avenue to support supervisors and their caseworkers to discuss needed services to address the underlying conditions of families that come to the attention of the Department. Those outcomes should be beneficial to staff retention, thus offering stability with families and community partners. The information gained in these reviews is used to develop trainings, measure progress of the current CFSP to be reported in the APSR and create goals for the new CFSP.

The Alabama Department of Human Resources has continued with its process for community consultation through its quality assurance operations. Birth parents, relative caregivers, and youths are interviewed during OSRIs and QRIs when appropriate. The OSRIs are completed during county onsite reviews by the State QA unit in conjunction with county staff that has been trained in the OSRI process and QRIs are completed by the local QA committees. The OSRI results from county onsite reviews are shared with county directors, DAS, and county QA committees. The QRI results are shared with the county director, supervisor, and worker. Birth parents, relative caregivers, and youths are also provided an avenue to give input through satisfaction surveys and each county DHR has an independently functioning QA committee. While each county QA committee completes QRIs to measure and monitor outcomes for children and families, it is an expectation that each committee also complete stakeholder interviews annually to measure and monitor systemic issues. Stakeholders interviewed include juvenile court judges, juvenile probation officers, foster parents, law enforcement, education personnel, service providers including mental health and child advocacy centers, attorneys and Guardians-ad-litem, and Agency staff. Information and any resulting recommendations from OSRIs, QRIs, and stakeholder interviews are provided to each county department to strengthen their practices toward better outcomes. The information gathered is compared with statewide data to determine strengths and needs for the state in developing the 2025-2029 CFSP and measure progress on the 2019-2024 CFSP for APSR reporting.

The Office of Quality Assurance conducts approximately 15 county onsite reviews each year to evaluate the quality of services and the outcomes achieved by children and families. Children and Family Services is assisting conducting a safety assessment as a part of the county onsite reviews. The Office of QCWP also conducts regular record reviews with county supervisors to promote best practice and build supervisory capacity. The information gathered is compared with statewide data to determine strengths and needs for the state in developing the 2025-2029 CFSP and measure progress on the 2019-2024 CFSP for APSR reporting.

The Office of Adoption continues to partner with a number of stakeholders in public awareness activities and in their efforts to recruit additional foster and/or adoptive families. These stakeholders include adoption, foster care and ILP staff,

members and volunteers of heart Gallery Alabama, Children's Aid Society's APAC program, Wendy's Wonderful Kids Recruiters and the Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parent Association. The AFAPA is vital in partnering with the department in the development of goals for the CFSP and measuring the outcomes of goals to report in the annual APSR around placements and recruitment and retention of foster/adoptive families.

Alabama Children's Justice Task Force (CJTF)

The CJTF continued to be active during the past year. Four CJTF meetings were held with a combined platform allowing both in-person and virtual attendance via Zoom during this reporting period.

Two sessions of Family Violence Assessment and Safety in CPS Training were held February 8-9 and July 19-20, 2023, in Montgomery, which is centrally located in the state. This training has been an on-going Children's Justice project for multiple years, as this training topic continues to be identified as a training need and the entrance of new staff continue to support its continuation. This training audience is primarily child welfare staff and domestic violence shelter staff, although law enforcement officers are invited. This training works to help attendees better work collaboratively on these complex and volatile cases and provides a conduit for training on the continually changing laws regarding domestic violence. This training emphasizes the co-occurrence of child abuse and domestic violence and the need for ongoing assessment of domestic violence throughout the involvement with any family. Over sixty-five (65) people were trained during the course of both trainings. An additional three trainings are scheduled for FY 2024.

The Substance Abuse Assessment two-day training was held four times in FY 2023. Three of the trainings were held in Montgomery, which is centrally located, and the final training was held in the northern part of the state at the request of supervisors and staff in that area and to encourage attendance. The training dates were January 9-10, February 27-28, May 22-23, and July 31-August 1, 2023. The training attendees are child welfare staff, supervisors and administrative staff and focuses on the complex nature of families that are struggling with issues of substance use and how to assess for child safety in these cases. Further, this training increases knowledge about substance abuse training assessment services throughout the state and the importance of collaborative work between multidisciplinary team members to meet the many needs of families struggling with substance use issues. Additionally, the training focuses on personal bias and how this may affect assessment and child safety, specifically as it relates to cases where substance use has been identified. More than 100 persons were trained during these 4 trainings. An additional four trainings are scheduled for FY 2024.

The Investigation and Prosecution of Crimes Against Children Conference was held August 28-29, 2023, in Birmingham, which is the largest city in the State and is centrally located. This two-day conference had a total of 234 attend, with 205 attendees on day one and 188 attend on day two. Attendance was comprised of DHR/child welfare staff, District Attorneys and their staff, child advocacy center staff, law enforcement, domestic violence staff, medical staff, juvenile probation officers and those from the Office of Pardons and Parole. The training agenda provided broad support for training needs identified in the Children's Justice Three-Year Needs Assessment including testifying training, collecting corroborating evidence, medical aspects of physical and sexual abuse, and the co-occurrence of child abuse and domestic violence. This training further enhanced the multidisciplinary approach and provided the opportunity for cross training to enhance local multidisciplinary team intervention.

One of the longstanding projects the CJTF has approved is to provide mini-grant opportunities for the local child abuse multidisciplinary teams in the state. The primary purpose of the mini grants is to assist the county multidisciplinary teams in improving the systems responses to the assessment, investigation, and prosecution of child abuse and neglect cases. In October 2023, an application to apply for a local project or training mini-grant funding was sent to each county DHR. The county multidisciplinary teams were required to involve, at a minimum, representatives from law enforcement, child welfare, district attorneys, and child advocacy centers in providing information related to the team's mini-grant application.

Mini grant applications were received in late October 2022 (early FY 2023) from 56 local multidisciplinary teams. Fifty-two (52) multidisciplinary teams requested registration slots for the International Symposium on Child Abuse, sponsored by the National Child Advocacy Center in Huntsville, AL. The 2023 conference was conducted in-person in Huntsville, Alabama on March 21-23, 2023. The CJTF approved 162 slots for multidisciplinary team members to attend. CJ funds were used to pay registration, travel/per diem and for Continuing Education credits for those that requested in advance. With the use

of CJ Grant funds, 140 local multidisciplinary team members, representing 56 counties attended the International Symposium on Child Abuse. The registered attendees were multidisciplinary and represented DHR child welfare staff (42 participants), DA/ADA staff (16 participants), law enforcement (37 participants), child advocacy center staff (39 participants), and mental health, legal aide, medical, education, domestic violence staff, and CJTF members (6 participants). The International Symposium of Child Abuse is considered one of the elite child abuse training opportunities in the country.

Additionally, seven (7) multidisciplinary teams requested and were approved by the CJTF for local child abuse training projects. One award was a multi-county award to four counties for a combined regional training, the remaining three awards were individual county awards. These training projects were encouraged to invite surrounding counties to participate when appropriate and will focus on assessment and investigation of child physical abuse including interviewing, assessing child safety, and the importance of the collaborative MDT process.

A requirement of the CJ grant is to complete a Three-Year Statewide Needs Assessment that includes a comprehensive review and evaluation of the investigative, administrative, and both civil and criminal judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect is conducted. The purpose of this Three-Year Needs Assessment is to guide the training and policy recommendations made by the CJTF and subsequently direct the projects to be approved for funding with CJ Grant monies. Alabama was last required to conduct this Three-Year Needs Assessment during FY 2021. The Children's Justice Task Force dedicates portions of our meetings to review CFSP and APSR goals, updates, and statistics. Further, as part of the Three-Year needs assessment, the Task Force reviews CFSP and APSR information. This information is then utilized when creating the Task Force Policy and Training Recommendations and Implementation Plan.

One of the major sources of information for the CJTF's Three-Year Needs Assessment was completion of a survey by county multidisciplinary teams. The survey was included as a component of the mini-grant application process, which provided responses from 52 county MDTs including the four largest counties in the state. A segment of the survey requested feedback on specific child abuse training needs from the different disciplines. In the 2021 Three-Year Needs Assessment, the following training topics were ranked in order of need with number one being identified as the greatest need for training for child welfare staff:

1. Assessing for child safety in cases of child trafficking
2. Assessing safety in cases involving child death
3. Testifying in court on child abuse/neglect cases
4. Understanding the medical aspects of physical and sexual abuse
5. Assessing child safety in cases of domestic/family violence
6. Assessing child safety in cases with substance abuse issues
7. Determining a dispositional finding on child abuse/neglect cases

The Three-year Needs Assessment was completed and submitted with 2021 Children's Justice Grant application in May 2021. Projects approved by the CJTF for Children's Justice Grant funding over the next three years were based on the FY 2021 Three-year Needs Assessment, including the projects completed in FY 2023. The CJ Task Force has begun work on 2024 Three-Year Needs Assessment which will be due with the Children's Justice Grant in May 2024. Recommendations from this Needs Assessment will support the projects for FY 2024 – FY 2026.

Alabama Judicial and Child Welfare Collaborative

Statewide Judicial Child Welfare Summits have been an annual event since 2014. The focus has been around timely permanency for children and has included presentations around areas such as child development, child welfare federal and state laws, case plans/ISP process, fatherhood initiatives, kinship guardianship, working with children who have experienced trauma, and more. Judges and County Directors have participated regularly with a representation of supervisors, DHR attorneys, parent attorneys and guardians-ad litem attending as well.

The Judicial Child Welfare Summit was last held November 1-3, 2023, with 52 counties represented. Topics presented included the importance of partnering with providers, the impact of language in IV-E court orders throughout the life of a case, the negative effects of labels on children, ways to navigate immigration with children in foster care, Independent

Living Program (talk time with teens in foster care), legal updates relevant to Juvenile Court, and a national look at child welfare outcomes. Along with State DHR staff and Judges, representatives from Casey Family Programs, Alabama's Office of Courts, Alabama's Attorney General's Office, and teens in foster care were in attendance. These topics are developed annually to work toward meeting goals set by the agency for systemic in partnership with the court system to advance safety and permanency. Most of the topics presented in 2023 focused on the agencies goal to engage, assess, and treat families with respect as individuals with their own unique strengths, needs and cultural identity, hence the presentations on foreign born children in foster care and the negative effects of labeling children. The youth who speak from the Independent Living program always address the goal and importance of increased involvement in their own case planning and the engagement of their family and support systems into the process.

Alabama currently has twenty-four teams of child welfare and judicial members who are dedicated to the mission of this collaborative which is to safely reduce the number of children in out of home care and place them in forever families. iCAN continues to be one component of our ongoing work with the courts and embraces a philosophy that has been accepted and incorporated into practice at the statewide level and in many counties. iCAN represents a partnership between child welfare and out judiciary that includes open and frank dialogue regarding barriers to optimal outcomes for our children and families as well as what changes are necessary to overcome those barriers. iCAN is one of several initiatives that can be credited with children spending less time in out of home care. These meetings help strengthen the partnerships between the judiciary and child welfare to achieve permanency for Alabama's children and families.

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Another such initiative is a statewide permanency project. Child welfare staff and legal staff schedule detailed staffings with county staff to look at individual cases to assure safety, well-being, and ultimately permanence. These staffings often bring to light overarching issues within a county or district that may be impacting case outcomes. This allows for SDHR to support the counties with trainings and other supports crafted to address individualized needs. These efforts have included things such as working to decrease continuance in court, perfect service in legal cases, expedite the receipt of orders, and increase an emphasis on kinship guardianship. This type of work has led to statewide sustainable changes. An example was passage of a law within the past year that removed some of the obstacles to finalizing kinship guardianship placements such as the parents no longer being required to give consent to this as a permanency plan as well as making state funding available for kinship guardianship placements when a child is not eligible for federal funding.

The next Judicial Child Welfare Summit is planned for December 9-11, 2024.

Adoption Recruitment Partners

The success in recruitment, matching and placement of children in permanent custody with a goal of Adoption No Identified Resources (ANIR) continues to be greatly due to the high level of cooperation and continued collaboration among the recruitment partners that help us promote the need for more adoptive families. We continue our quarterly partners meetings that include staff with recruitment responsibilities from the Office of Foster Care, Heart Gallery Alabama, Children's Aid Society/APAC pre-adoption program, and volunteers from the AFAPA. The location and host for meetings rotate between all agencies involved. These collaborative meetings have proven to be very informative providing updated staffing changes, conference schedules, recruitment activities, and adoption success stories. Each host provides an opportunity for all partners to place an item on the upcoming agenda as well as forwarding meeting notes after each meeting.

Collaboration with Foster Parents – Conflict Resolution Team

The Out of Home Care Policies & Procedures Manual includes a section on Supports to Foster Parents. A process for dealing with conflicts that may occur between foster parents and the Department is outlined in this policy which was updated in

May 2020. The Conflict Resolution Team (CRT) meetings that have occurred over the most recent fiscal years, requiring state office assistance are as follows:

- FY 2021 – 2 CRT meetings
- FY 2022 – 3 CRT meetings
- FY 2023 – 2 CRT meetings

The State's CRT has two facilitators (a state Office of Foster Care Liaison and AFAPA President) along with the CRT comprised of 2 independent county directors and 2 foster/adoptive parent representatives. All team members are presented with pertinent case information in advance to assist in fair feedback as well as prepare questions.

Foster Parent Advocates are available regionally to help foster parents at the time they file a complaint with their county office. Due to the advocates' involvement in the local process, complaints are often resolved locally rather than referred to the state team. The AFAPA and Office of Foster Care continue to be available to provide county social workers and foster parents training on the Conflict Resolution Process and Alabama's Foster Parent Bill of Rights.

The State Quality Assurance Committee (SQAC)

The State Quality Assurance Committee is an independent body of statewide representatives of the child and family service delivery system whose functions include monitoring outcomes and agency performance from a statewide perspective. This Committee serves as a link between the community and SDHR, promotes an effective child welfare system that supports positive outcomes for children and families served, and issues reports as part of its Citizen Review Panel responsibilities or for any other purpose. The SQAC is also a stakeholder group from which input has been sought for the APSR and current CFSP. The Committee meets quarterly and data updates from Family Services and Quality Assurance are provided at each meeting. More detailed information on the work of the SQAC can be located in the Alabama SQAC Annual Report. The current SQAC consists of representation from the Department of Children and Neglect Prevention, a foster/adoptive parents, the Department of Sociology and Social Work , APAC, a county QA committee member, the Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, ADAP, Children First Foundation, the Alabama Network of CACs, Children's Aid Society, Poarch Band of Creek Indians, the Alabama Child Death Review System, the United Methodist Children's Home, Montgomery County Sheriff's Department, the Department of Youth Services, Administrative Office of Courts, Alabama Department of Mental Health, community volunteer, a county supervisor/QA coordinator, and a county director. Over the next reporting period, Alabama will be removing the Citizen Review Panel responsibilities from the State QA Committee. Alabama is revamping the Citizen Review Panel process.

Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (ADCANP), also known as the Children's Trust Fund (CTF), was created by the Alabama Legislature in 1983 to address child maltreatment. The ADCANP is the lead agency for federally funded Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs as part of CAPTA. Partnership agencies are chosen by the 'Request for Proposal' process.

The ADCANP provides CBCAP funding to the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers (ANFRC), which includes 23 Family Resource Centers (FRCs) located throughout the state. CBCAP funds support ANFRC in building the capacity of their existing FRCs, developing agencies striving to become an FRC, and training a general audience on the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework. ANFRC offers services via the Strengthening Families strategy, which includes building 5 key Protective Factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children. Along with these factors, FRCs also offer workforce development including assistance in obtaining employment and/or GED certificates, arts/dance lessons, and housing assistance. Centers are also able to make referrals to other local agencies if there are other needs or resources families may need that cannot be provided through the centers.

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (ADCANP) uses CBCAP funds to support various parent education and support programs. This includes two programs serving the underserved population of incarcerated mothers through prenatal and parent education classes, doula support, and opportunities for the mothers to stay connected with

their children. A CBCAP grant is also provided to Children's Aid Society in providing the EPIC parenting classes to pregnant and parenting runaway and homeless youth through the Project Independence program, as well as providing the class in Spanish to parents in the Hispanic and Latino communities. The EPIC parenting classes include topics such as understanding children and their behavior, encouragement and self-esteem, and effective discipline. The Children's Aid society has offices in Birmingham, Huntsville, Mobile, and Montgomery. CBCAP funds also support the Alabama Parenting Assistance Line that provides information and support via phone call, texting, or chatting online to anyone in Alabama wanting to become a more confident parent. The Parenting Assistance Line is available statewide and is a free service. It can be accessed via telephone or online.

Finally, CBCAP funds are used to support 7 HEARTS Respite programs located at United Cerebral Palsy Centers across Alabama. The HEARTs program which stands for Help Emergency and Respite Treatment Service is designed to provide respite care for families of children with special needs up to age 19. A voucher system enables parents to secure a caregiver of their choosing with payment by voucher reimbursement. CBCAP funds have been prioritized to support these HEARTS programs because we know children with disabilities are at least three times more likely to be abused or neglected than their peers without disabilities, and they are more likely to be seriously injured or harmed by maltreatment.

Alabama Foster / Adoptive Parent Association

The Department continues its strong partnership and contract with the Alabama Foster/Adoptive Parent Association to support improved outcomes for children through joint training sessions, regional meetings, and various recruitment activities. The AFAPA model has local associations within each county; however, at this time, all counties do not have a local association. More attention has been placed on assisting counties with the development of a local association.

The AFAPA was instrumental in collaborating with State DHR to revise the Conflict Resolution Policy (CRT). Our CRTs continue to be a platform in which foster parents have an opportunity to be heard regarding any grievance not settled in their county of origin.

The AFAPA has been an active member of our provider quarterly meeting series. The Association held their annual conference in May 2023 with several representatives from SDHR presenting on topics including adoption, independent living, foster parents bill of rights, prudent parenting, and legal rights of birth parents, children, and foster parents.

The Association has nine (9) regional representatives who serve as trained advocates and liaisons with the Department. This organization provides additional training for foster and adoptive resources and develops them to become trained parent advocates. These identified advocates receive increased training around policy and practice to advocate with counties on behalf of foster families and empower foster/adoptive resources in supporting the children and their needs. In addition, regional foster/adoptive representatives are identified through the AFAPA to help provide support and training and offer resources in the specific region. The AFAPA has a very comprehensive website with guidance around this and other areas of advocacy for foster/adoptive parents. The Foster Parent Bill of Rights is posted for the convenience of our partners in caring for foster/adoptive children. See <https://afapa.org/> for more information.

The AFAPA representatives have continued to provide trainings statewide to include Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standards (RPPS). State DHR office staff have co-trained RPPS to foster parents with AFAPA representatives. The AFAPA staff meet quarterly to train their advocates. Membership and services are also offered to kinship care providers.

Item 32.

Coordination of CFSP services with other federal programs

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

SDHR FAMILY ASSISTANCE DIVISION – TANF

The SDHR Family Assistance Division administers programs pursuant to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant. Services and benefits are provided consistent with the four statutory purposes of the Block Grant and encourage the care and support of children in their own homes or in the homes of relatives by furnishing temporary financial assistance and other services to strengthen and maintain family life.

The Family Assistance (FA) Program

This is Alabama's time limited cash assistance program for low-income families with children. During FY 2023, a monthly average of 5,673 families received assistance representing about 10,484 children and 2,393 adults. Adult recipients of FA and certain former recipients are also served by the JOBS Program which provides services and assistance with finding and retaining employment. Supportive services include assistance in overcoming barriers to employment, increasing marketable skills and employability, gaining and/or retaining employment so as to transition from welfare to work. The Department contracts with the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence to provide services to TANF eligible clients who may be victims of domestic violence. Services are provided statewide under a program known as the Special Assessment, Intervention, and Liaison (SAIL) Project. The SAIL program provides services to families involved with domestic violence to help them remove barriers to becoming self-sufficient in a safe manner. Services are provided through a Domestic Violence Specialist who conducts assessments, provide counseling, and assists with safety planning. Services are available as needed to all counties that do not have an on-site Domestic Violence Specialist. During FY 2023, ACADV received 1,530 referrals for domestic violence via the SAIL program. Those referrals came from every DHR program and from the community with most DHR referrals coming from FA eligibility workers as a result of a domestic violence screening tool. The coalition assisted 697 SAIL participants, helped 271 participants acquire employment, and provided financial assistance to 356 low-income individuals.

County workers frequently refer families to the JOBS program for education and employment assistance. This is completed through the ISP process and would include a referral for day care. These referrals are usually in open CPS cases in which the children are in the home but lack of finances is noted as a need for the family.

Housing and Urban Development

The department entered a partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to decrease homelessness among youth aging out of foster care.

During the fiscal year, the Program has worked to improve self-sufficiency outcomes through expanded collaboration and strengthened partnerships with Job Corp, HUD, Youth Towers, Second Shift Alabama, Alabama Works, and the National Guard to assist youth who are homeless or need housing supports post-foster care. We have currently made over a hundred referrals to HUD for housing for our young people.

Each county department makes referrals to HUD for housing for parents whose children are at risk of entering foster care or who are in foster care. The biggest barrier for the families whose children are currently in care is that HUD will only place the parent in a home large enough for the children when the children are actually in the home. Often, the parent has to move to a smaller home and then move again when the children are placed back in the home. The department assists the family through the ISP process with payment for utility bills and furniture as allowed by flex fund rules and regulations.

DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT / PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Alabama will explore ways in which the current collaborative relationships will be maintained and enhanced. In line with the CFSR findings above, Alabama will demonstrate concerted efforts to solidify working relationships with the Departments of Education and Labor, Head Start, Medicaid, and state/federal agencies whose partnership will strengthen the work done with Alabama's children and families.

SYSTEMIC FACTOR FOSTER/ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING

Item 33.

Application of standards to all approved homes / institutions

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

The Department addresses the quality of care that foster parents provide to children by ensuring that all contacts with foster parents are captured in the provider narrative. This is accomplished through monitoring during semi-annual and annual visits by the county resource worker as well as monthly visits from the foster care worker assigned to the case. Specific recommendations are also made by State QA on specific case reviews.

The Department and contracted providers still train, assess, and approve traditional and therapeutic foster homes according to the Minimum Standards for Foster Family Homes. All foster homes in the state are approved by any of three entities. The county DHR office may approve traditional foster homes as well as kinship homes located in their specific county. Contract entities offering Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) will approve all homes providing services under the agency's purview.

Child Placing Agencies (CPAs) may approve foster homes for private placements, DHR placements, or a combination of private/DHR placements. CPAs must ensure compliance with Minimum Standards for Foster Family Homes. If the CPA licenses TFC homes, the Alabama Therapeutic Foster Care Manual must also be followed. Residential care facilities must comply with the Minimum Standards for Residential Child Care Facilities.

The Department's Resource Management Division completes at a minimum 2 site visits annually per licensed provider to ensure Minimum Standards are followed. Licensing site visits are facilitated and, if there are issues noted, a deficiency letter with the completed site visit report is sent to the provider with the expectation of the provider sending a plan to correct the deficiencies or proof that the deficiency has been corrected. The Resource Management Division provides the provider with a list of all deficiencies, a copy of the site visit report, and the date that a response is expected to be received from the provider. If the provider refuses to comply with correcting the deficiencies, then a corrective action plan may be implemented. There has not been any license suspended or revoked in the last three years.

Resource Management Division's Office of Licensing will review initial, or renewal applications and all supporting documentation provided by providers to determine the next actions to be taken. Resource Management conducts announced and unannounced visits for contracted and licensed providers.

The Office of Licensing provides technical assistance, consultation, training, and interpretation of the Minimum Standards to prospective and existing providers. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care provides the same for traditional foster homes and kinship related homes.

Item 34.

Requirements for Criminal Background Checks

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

The Department maintains and Office of Criminal History that ensures compliance with applicable federal regulations. Criminal History Check letters of Suitability are on the Resource Record Review checklist. Alabama Bureau of Investigation (ABI) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) criminal record checks and Central Registry Child Abuse/Neglect (CAN) clearances shall be completed for each foster parent, adoptive parent, and staff members of child placing agencies and residential childcare facilities. The results of the criminal history checks must be received and deemed suitable prior to approval of foster care and adoptive parents. All applicants and holders of a childcare license or six-month permit, all applicants for employment in a paid or voluntary position, and all current employees in paid or voluntary positions must be suitable and of good moral character in order to operate or work in a childcare facility and child placing agency. Any staff family members living in the home or visiting overnight in the children's living units shall also be of good character and suitability and as such, a criminal background check shall be obtained for these persons as well. During semiannual and annual reviews of the foster home, licensing workers assess the home as well as update the record with new information. If any documentation is not in compliance, the licensing worker will ask the foster parent for undated information. Each provider record includes a list of household members with demographic information. The assigned

licensing workers are responsible for ensuring that all household members are compliant with background checks including household members who have reached the ages of majority.

The state ensures the safety of foster care and adoptive placements by working collaboratively with community partners. In addition to DHR, law enforcement, the courts, mental health agencies, physicians, school, day care centers, medical facilities, and public health agencies will have occasions to observe the results of child abuse and neglect. If safety issues are identified in a foster home, they are assessed immediately, and dispositions are made within 30 days. When children have been placed in an adoptive home and report that they were abused or neglected while in a previous placement or in their birth parents' home, the county department receiving the report shall notify SDHR Office of Adoption.

Item 35.

Process for ensuring diligent recruitment of potential foster/adoptive homes

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRSS / DATA

The child register and the provider register provide race and ethnicity information on both the population of children in care as well as current approved foster homes. This information is available to all counties on Electronic Report Distribution reports which are accessible via FACTS. Counties are encouraged to consider any disparity in these numbers when developing recruitment strategies. Counties submit recruitment plans which are reviewed by Recruitment Consultants to ensure that strategies are targeted to meet the needs the needs of the children in care in their county. The counties that participated in the market segmentation-driven recruitment planning sessions looked beyond race/ethnicity in their foster family and foster child population. Diligent Recruitment Planning was completed utilizing county wide demographic information as well as Lifestyle Segmentation Information provided through Tapestry (a program of ESRI) and developed strategies that delivered the message about the need for more foster parents to groups of people more likely to say yes to fostering.

Counties are expected to regularly deliver a message about the need for more foster/adoptive parents. Each February, counties are expected to develop and implement a foster parent recruitment plan. Each county has an identified Office of Foster Care Recruitment Consultant. This person is responsible for one-on-one dialogue with each county as well as quarterly reports regarding recruitment activities. Through the implementation and use of radio and TV ads as well as attendance at community events, counties in Alabama have been successful in recruiting foster and adoptive homes. Having dedicated workers to fill inquiry request for information has also helped with the area of recruitment.

State office staff will continue to participate in recruitment efforts at sporting events, festivals, and community events that families frequent. We will work in partnership with our county offices to support their efforts related to recruitment and retention, offering additional trainings, services and supports to our foster parents, and encouraging the use of the Permanency Roundtable process to assist counties and the placement staff with recruiting for our older foster youth who have permanency plans of Adoption No Identified Resource. Twenty-three onsite reviews were completed between September 2022 and February 2024. Item 35, Diligent Recruitment was rated as a strength at 78.26%.

Alabama DHR no longer uses the Recruitment Responsive Team (RRT) model for responding to families requesting more information about becoming a foster/adoptive parent as of January 2024. The RRT database created by AdoptUsKids database, known as the Family Intake Tracking Tool (FITT) was discontinued November 2023. The department continues its partnership with CAS to track all forms of inquiries that are then shared with specific counties. The in-house tracking tool was renamed by CAS to the Weekly Recruitment Tool (WRT). The inquiry process has not changed for Alabama. Inquiries are made several ways to the department. Interested individuals /families can scan our QR code which is available at all recruiting events, on brochures and banners. We also continue to receive calls through our toll-free recruitment hotline (1-866-4AL-KIDS / 1-866-425-5437) or by submitting an inquiry form through the DHR web site (www.dhr.alabama.gov). All combined inquiries are shared weekly by CAS with the Family Services Director, Deputy Director of Recruitment and Program Specialist. CAS staff sends an e-mail immediately to the county with the inquires information. The specialists then share a culminative list with the counties for follow up. The assigned specialist also

contacts all inquiries at the 30-days and 60-day mark. Modes of response are by email, phone calls, and mail. Our FITT inquiries have increased each fiscal and calendar year.

FITT DATA below:

Full Calendar Year 2023 (Jan 1 - December 31) - 2491

Full Calendar Year 2022 (Jan 1 - December 31) - 2390

Fiscal year 2023 (Oct 2022- Sept 2023)- 2714

Fiscal year 2022 (Oct 2021- Sept 2022) - 2304

The Office of Adoption Subsidies and Support has an Administrative Assistant who has the responsibility for responding to child-specific inquiries on the following sites: www.dhr.alabama.gov, www.adoptuskids.org, and www.adoption.com. The Administrative Assistance is required to respond to child-specific inquiries within two weeks. Our partnership with Heart Gallery Alabama has been very beneficial in raising overall awareness of the need for more adoptive families but more specifically in providing another avenue for families to submit child-specific inquiries for children featured on this site. Heart Gallery utilizes donated time and talent from photographers around the state to capture the likeness of children waiting for forever families. They also raise funds from a variety of sources such as grants and fund raising, to fund the service they provide to Alabama DHR. Alabama DHR has had a contract with Heart Gallery Alabama that primarily funds staff to provide timely response and accurate information to families who inquire about children on their web sites or featured in on-site exhibits.

Assessment of the progress of efforts regarding the recruitment of potential foster/adoptive homes include both qualitative and quantitative measures. Assessment of the progress of efforts regarding the recruitment of potential foster/adoptive homes include both qualitative and quantitative measures. As of August 2, 2024, there are 5,925 children in foster care in Alabama. Based on available data, 59.16% of these children are white/Caucasian and 24.71% are between the ages of 0- 3. Child characteristics such as these are used by county offices to preform specific recruitment to meet the child population of their county. Counties are encouraged to continually assess, review, and consider any disparity in these numbers when recruiting and developing their local recruitment plan.

Qualitative measures include monthly follow-up customer service calls to potential families who have made an inquiry to SDHR. These calls are made to each inquirer to ensure that the family has information and forms needed to register for an upcoming foster/adoptive parent training if such family is ready to do so. If the family only has questions, these calls ensure that the family is rerouted back to their local county office for follow up if additional follow up is needed. In FY 2023, the office of Recruitment and Home Care responded to 2,714 inquires. Qualitative measures also include quarterly discussions with each local county office. Discussions include reporting response/ and or outcomes of each potential family who have inquired.

Quantitative measures include quarterly assessment meetings which include reporting the number and names of the potential foster parent(s) who have inquired for each county, as well as the total number of current approved foster homes. Quantitative measures also include the reviewing and discussion of reports to include ERD reports and SDHR internal reporting documents (Family Intake Tracking Tool LIST and Learn About Us Report). Data from these reports are reviewed and discussed with each local county.

The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support (R&HCS) continues to provide support to all 67 counties. The office of R&HCS is comprised of a Deputy Director, administrative assistant, two full-time Program Specialist and five part-time retired employees. Specialists are responsible for responding to each assigned counties weekly (FITT) Family Intake Tracking Tool, scheduling (TIPS) Trauma Informed Partnering for Permanency and Safety Training, collaborating with counties for recruitment activities as well as reviewing county specific data for measurable outcomes in their annual recruitment plans. The administrative assistant supports all unit activities. The (RSE) Retired State Employees are responsible for assisting with (DT) Deciding Together trainings across the state as needed. RSE's collectively assisted with 72 families in 2024. They continue to be a valuable resource with training Kinship Guardianship families.

Item 36.

Process in place for effective use of cross jurisdictional resources

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS / DATA

Home study requests received from another state for an adoptive placement in Alabama are not completed within 60 days, with one primary reason being the completion of TIPS typically takes 10 weeks. However, a status preliminary report typically would be provided within 60 days. Currently in FACTS, there is no way to track the percentage of preliminary reports that are received.

Data / Data Trend – Item Assessment

Geography is not a barrier to achieving permanency for children in the custody of the Department. The children with TPR and a goal of Adoption No Identified Resource are included in photo listing web sites and Alabama receives and responds to any inquiries. Inquiry data from Heart Gallery Alabama is already reported in an earlier section. The inquiries on that site are a good mix of both in-state and out-of-state families. The inquiries received and responded to through www.adoptuskids.org are primarily from out-of-state families.

The expeditious processing of referrals will allow permanency for children in a timely manner and reduce delays which are a barrier to permanent placement of children. We will continue to monitor workflow of staff. Tracking is accomplished through internal spreadsheets that are maintained. Barriers to processing include case crises, worker absence, and increased workload.

Inter-Jurisdictional Placements

Placements are made across county lines within the state as well as inter-jurisdictional placements through ICPC. Adoption studies on out-of-state families continue to be received for families who see our children on www.AdoptUsKids.org, www.heartgalleryalabama.com, www.adoption.com, and www.dhr.alabama.gov sites, resulting in a number of out-of-state placements. With increased recruitment efforts and matching to Alabama families, a higher percentage of placements are being made in the state as well. When a child is potentially matched with an out-of-state family, placements are made through the public or private adoption agency working with the family. When a resource is identified, to facilitate a successful placement, the specialist and the child's planning team determine the number of pre-placement visits necessary for the child and the out-of-state resource to feel comfortable in making the transition to a successful placement. The Office of Adoption has increased efforts to identify and develop in-state resources for placement of waiting children to assist in expediting permanency for these children. The state is aware of inter-jurisdictional resources are being utilized and are occurring statewide through the use of internal spreadsheets, FACTS, and the Office of Adoption reporting forms.

2024 ICPC Updates:

The Interstate Compact office is currently utilizing a new data tracking system called the NEICE Clearinghouse module. This computer system was developed in collaboration with the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and the Association of Administrators of the ICPC (AAICPC) to promote timely placements of children. The NEICE Clearinghouse data system went live in Alabama in June of 2023. This system is used to process incoming and outgoing Interstate Compact cases to include new referrals, 100-A's, 100-B's, home studies, supervisory reports, and status information. Alerts are issued to the county offices and status requests to other states for case updates. State procedures, policy and protocol guide the ICPC process when county offices or the Office of Adoption Consultants send ICPC referrals to the State ICPC office for assessment, review, and processing. The Interstate Compact office continues to assist the Office of Adoption with inter-jurisdictional out of state placements by increasing permanent placement options for children. New foster and adoptive study requests received from other states are generally not completed within 60 days due to the 10-week

training required. However, preliminary reports are requested within 60 days in order to meet Federal requirements. There was a total of 1051 home studies requests received in 2023.

The Clearinghouse module provides for the electronic exchange of information required for Interstate placements of children across state lines. The Clearinghouse system facilitates communication, tracking of cases between the states, improved data accuracy and lowers mailing costs. The Interstate Compact office will continue to maintain interagency collaboration with the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and with the Association of Administrators of the ICPC (AAICPC) as well as with other ICPC State offices. The Annual ICPC Conference provides training and Federal updates regarding the implementation of the ICPC process. This Conference will continue to be attended by at least a minimum of two staff each year.

III. Update to the Plan for Enacting the State's Vision and Progress

C 3.

PLAN FOR ENACTING ALABAMA'S VISION

Please see the 2020 – 2024 CFSP for details on the data and rationale that supported the original selection of goals and objectives that comprise the Plan for Enacting Alabama's Vision.

Goal 1:

State DHR will support and further the development of the child welfare workforce to improve child welfare best practices.

Objectives:

State DHR will conduct focus groups and statewide surveys for staff, clients, community stakeholders, and providers in each county to solicit the strengths and needs of staff, which will help identify the areas that need improvement.

State DHR will review and conduct statewide trainings on the Alabama Practice Model. The Alabama Practice Model has 7 guiding principles: 1) Safety and Protection 2) Permanency, Stability, and Sufficiency 3) Well-Being and Development 4) Family-Centered & Culturally Responsive 5) Individualization of Services 6) Community Collaboration and 7) Professional/Organizational Competence.

State DHR will assess the current curriculum for new worker training, to revise the curriculum in best preparing new child welfare workers for their job responsibilities and ensure a foundation of best practice knowledge.

The Department's current Practice Model, released on 09/30/2011, restated the principles, values, and best practices of the Department. The Practice Model guides service delivery and decision making at all levels and its purpose is to improve outcomes for the child and families of Alabama.

2024 Update:

Every new employee is trained on the Practice Model as part of the Striving Toward Excellent Practice (STEP) Foundations Training. For FY 2023, 139 new child welfare employees were trained. Many aspects of the Practice Model are trained in more detail in other STEP modules.

- ***The Intake Module*** trains workers on assessing vulnerability and risk factors, gathering all pertinent information from reporters, and clearing agency records for relevant history. This module assists employees in assessing and ensuring the safety and protection of children. For FY 2023, 57 new employees completed this module.
- ***The Investigations Module*** trains workers on the dynamics of child abuse, trauma effects of abuse and neglect, medical evidence of abuse and neglect, actively involving the family/team in the safety assessment process, first contacts with parents/caregivers, safety planning, and interviewing. All of these topics assist employees in assessing and ensuring the safety and protection of children. This module also trains employees on identifying needs, developing an Individualized Service Plan (ISP), building an ISP team, conducting an initial ISP, and legal

issues. These topics help workers better respond to and engage with families and children, and to identify families individual needs to offer appropriate services. For FY 2023, 54 new employees completed this module.

- ***The Case Management Module*** trains workers on providing services via the ISP Process, involving the family and team in crisis, building attachment and the impact of removal, gathering assessment information, assessing and treating the effects of abuse and neglect, contacts and visits with children and families focusing on meaningful case worker visits, assessing the child's strengths and needs, monitoring, evaluating, and revising the family's ISP, goals for permanency, and safe case closure. Each of these topics aligns with the Practice Model and assists employees in providing services, engaging with families and children, assessing for well-being, and working towards timely permanency for children. For FY 2023, 81 new employees completed this module.

Staff Training, Technical Assistance, and Evaluation

- State DHR is available for peer-to-peer consultative meetings as needed
- State DHR provides technical assistance, such as FACTS/ERD reports that focus on permanency, safety, and well-being
- State DHR conducts permanency staffing as need
- State DHR monitors progress through observation, documentation reviews, and ERD reports
- As Alabama works to overhaul the new worker training curriculum, we are considering how best to implement the CFA/ISP training into this new model, so that all new workers receive this training at the beginning of their employment.

GOAL 2:

State DHR will establish a resource development position to support all counties in identifying, recruiting, and assessing needed service providers to meet the needs of each county's children and families.

Objectives:

State DHR will conduct a statewide survey for staff, clients, community stakeholders, and providers in each county to solicit needed services, which will help identify what service providers are needed to strengthen families.

2024 Update:

The Department was successful in developing the resource development position however these workers were pulled into other areas to assist. These positions are still essential and the Department is working to address the workforce issue.

Staff Training, Technical Assistance, and Evaluation

- State DHR Program Specialists provide technical assistance as needed
- State DHR Program Specialists prepare the county resource developer to train local service providers as needed
- State DHR Program Specialists prepare county resource developer to train local staff
- State DHR Program Specialists collaboratively provide feedback with county resource developer and staff during the implementation and monitoring of resource development plan

The State Office of ILP utilizes the ongoing trainings and conferences throughout the year to share the resulting information from the state's quality assurance system, NYTD data and other available data. In addition to using these staff events to share data, the Department shares information to youth learned from the data when consulting at Dream Council events, camps, and local ILP meetings. Annual data collected is also used during training sessions during our annual Alabama's DREAM Ambassadors leadership retreat.

The Office of Data Analysis and the FACTS IT Division worked collaboratively to evaluate the state's CCWIS system during the previous year to determine the capacity to collect and report on new data elements required by the AFCARS 2020 Final Rule. Coding updates were initiated for data elements that could be extracted from fields already existing in the system. CCWIS enhancements were designed and incorporated into FACTS to collect data that was not previously collected by the system. Some of the areas that fields and coding were updated include demographic information on adoptive

parents, ICWA related information, and additional information regarding conditions present when children enter foster care. Data collected from these additional fields will be utilized to inform the state where progress toward goals is sustained and identify and highlight where goals are not being met or sustained. A summary of enhancements created in the FACTS system over the past FY is below.

- During the 2022-2023 reporting period, enhancements were completed to facilitate capturing data for the AFCARS 2.0 changes. These enhancements included:
 - Adding information that updated ICWA documentation.
 - Updating picklist values to allow documenting reasonable accommodations.
 - Fields were added to the Home Removal Screen to document prior adoptions and prior episodes of Kinship Guardianship, as well as updated picklists so that information about additional conditions at the time of removal could be documented.
 - Fields were added to the client general information screen as well as the client health information screens to document whether a child had ever fathered or bore a child.
 - Ethnicity pick lists were updated to allow documentation if a child was abandoned.
 - Fields were added to multiple screens that allow documentation of the steps in the TPR process
 - Modifications were made so that multiple episodes of missing or runaway could be documented.
 - Modifications were made to allow capturing additional information about sex trafficking prior to and/or during current home removal episodes.
 - An existing field in the client education section was modified that allowed documentation of IFSP's for children receiving early intervention services.
- Additional enhancements to FACTS completed during the current reporting period included disabling a reserved placement checkbox.

The next Data Quality Plan Biennial Review will focus on data elements that are related to goals identified in the CFSP to further improve the quality of data collected. Areas of review will be assessed for accuracy, timeliness, and completeness. Technical assistance will be provided to individual counties where discrepancies are noted, and frequently noted data quality issues will be included in annual statewide trainings. Additionally, the States Data Quality Committee will review data currently available and evaluate its effectiveness in measuring progress toward achieving and maintaining CFSP goal progress.

The QA unit conducts onsite reviews across the state utilizing the 36 federal items. As part of the onsite review process, stakeholders are interviewed for qualitative data. Information learned for items 26, 27, and 28 is gathered and provided to management. From January 2023 to December 2023, 15 counties were reviewed, and the averages for strengths in each item were:

Item 26: 80% Strength

Item 27: 60% Strength

Item 28: 53% Strength

QA has identified initial onboarding of new staff has greatly improved over the past 2 years; however, ongoing training within the county continues to need improvements. Stakeholder feedback from the On-site Reviews confirms staff attended required STEP training at the beginning of their employment and participate in regular individual conferences with supervisors to address their training needs. Lack of staff continues to impact the counties' ability to do ongoing training. During Onsite Reviews, stakeholders reported staff availability to perform initial foster parent training fluctuated across the state based on any staffing issues in the county. Stakeholders also reported a lack of formalized training programs for ongoing foster parent in-service training in some counties. Foster parents are primarily referred to view webinars or attend trainings offered by Alabama Pre/Post Adoption Connections. There was a general pattern that trainings were not targeted to the specific needs of the respective foster parents. Tracking of completed training hours for foster parents varied across counties. Lack of staff continues to impact the counties' ability to do ongoing training.

IV. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

C 4.

Alabama has worked diligently to implement enhancements necessary to capture data for the AFCARS 2.0 changes. Recent enhancements include updating ICWA documentation to capture more information. Enhancements were also made to picklist values to allow documentation of reasonable accommodations, prior adoption, and Kinship Guardianship as well as updated picklists for documenting additional conditions at the time of removal. Modifications were made so that multiple episodes of missing or runaway could be documented. Modifications were also made to allow capturing additional information about sex trafficking prior to and/ or during the current home removal episodes.

The QA Division is currently working on developing an OSRI training to provide initial and ongoing training for adjunct reviewers. The training will be provided multiple times per year in person and possible enhancement trainings on Alabama's online training, LETS (Learning, Education, and Training System).

Local and State QA Committees continue to seek members with lived experience to serve on the committees. In addition to seeking members with lived experience to serve on the committees, the agency realizes those with lived experience are a necessary component to participate in the Round 4 PIP. The QA unit is currently exploring ways to increase the number of OSRIs completed statewide to ensure an accurate assessment of practice can be made not only by county but also by districts and statewide.

Alabama's Data Quality Plan includes on-going monitoring of CCWIS data generated reports and queries in conjunction with data collected from Quality Service reviews, help identify strengths and areas of potential improvement and monitor progress toward goal achievement.

The next Biennial review will focus on data elements that are related to goals identified in the CFSP to further improve the quality of data collected. The States Data Quality Committee will review data currently available and work toward identifying areas of potential improvement, with an emphasis on goals outlined in the CFSP.

At the conclusion of Alabama's PIP, Alabama began conducting county specific onsite reviews. The onsite reviews consist of case reviews using the OSRI, stakeholder interviews, a safety assessment, a permanency assessment, and a resource record assessment. All information obtained from either the onsite reviews is provided to the county, Family Services Division, Quality Assurance Division, and Administration.

OMS reports, QRI results, stakeholder interviews ,and the 3 assessments will be used to inform counties of their current functioning and along with their county data from ERD, provides them the means to complete their county self-assessment. Each county is required to complete a county self-assessment based upon the 36 federal items twice per year. County Self-Assessments are to be submitted to SDHR Office of Quality Assurance by the end of every May and November. All County Self-Assessments are reviewed by the county assigned Quality Assurance Specialist and feedback is provided.

The counties use the findings of their County Self-Assessments to develop their County Improvement Plans (CIPs). CIPs are developed by county management, county staff, local QA committee members (stakeholders), and SDHR staff. ERD reports from FACTS are used to set data goals to measure the counties progress. CIPs are to be submitted to the QA Division and Family Services upon being typed up.

Specialists from Family Services and the QA Division compare submitted County Self-Assessments and current CIPs for progress.

- QA Specialists and QA Committees conduct Stakeholder interviews, and the information gained is compiled and shared with the county staff and the County QA Committee. This work is completed in an effort to strengthen practice in the county.
- We continue to try and get parents and youth on local QA committees. A number of counties have been able to get grandparents and relatives to serve on their committees.
- Members of the County QA Committees are provided opportunities to attend meetings to develop the County Improvement Plan.

The state showed improvements on the CFSR statewide data indicators for safety in areas such as timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment, which had an improvement of 17%. There was a 26% improvement in

services to families to protect children in the home and prevent removal/re-entry. An improvement of 25% from the state's baseline in permanency goals for children and an improvement of 23% from the state's baseline in achieving reunification, guardianship, adoption, or APPLA were noted. The stated also showed improvements of more than 10% from the state's baseline in worker visits with children, worker visits with parents, educational needs of children, and physical health of children.

V. UPDATE ON SERVICE DESCRIPTION

C 5.

Family Resource Centers

The Family Resource Centers are administered by the Family Preservation and Support Services (FP/SS) Programs, funded by Title IV-B, Subpart 2, "Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act". Family Resource Center sites are in targeted counties/communities where there is a high concentration of families in need of services to address their safety and stability issues. Each center assesses the community and collaborates with DHR in developing programs that meet the needs of the community and focus on the prevention of Child Abuse/Neglect by providing educational services, job training, parenting, etc. Service interventions are based on the following set of beliefs about children and their families:

- Children belong with their families if they can live safely at home;
- Most parents love and want their children;
- Most maltreatment is an expression of an underlying, unmet need;
- Most people can change;
- All children need to experience permanency in their lives;
- When children cannot continue to live at home, they still need community connections.

Core services provided by Family Service Centers are based on a comprehensive assessment process that results in goals identified by the families. The goal of these services is to strengthen and empower families so they can meet the needs which led to the occurrence of child maltreatment. Case management services are provided as a part of core services to facilitate access and follow-up. The variety of quality assurance processes in place indicates that the overwhelming majority of the centers are meeting community needs and enabling families to become safe and stable. In FY 2023 Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers provided direct services to 41,621 adults, 71,312 children, and 51,033 families. 52% participated in adult family support programs, 32% participated in parenting programs and 16% participated in youth programs.

The Department is partnering with family resource centers to implement Workforce Development Programs at 25 FRCs across the state. Each center works with their county office to enroll people in the A-RESET program, which provides participants with a small stipend while they work with the center to improve employability through components such as work readiness and job search. Family Resource Centers also utilized TANF funds to support eligible participants with a variety of services, including GED preparation, job training, parenting classes, relationship education, and emergency services. DHR provides ongoing technical assistance to support the WFD programs.

A Program Specialist in DHR's Office of Foster Care made a presentation to more than 50 Family Resource Center staff members about Kinship Guardianship and the resources available to families. This specialist provides ongoing related resources, which are shared regularly with hundreds of FRC staff members through a weekly newsletter.

The Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers provided 13 trainings on the Strengthening Families Framework to service providers at locations across the state. A total of 396 people participated, including 62 DHR county-level staff members. "The Strengthening Families approach and protective factors framework was introduced in 2003 by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. It is a research-informed, strengths-based approach that prevents child abuse and neglect

by focusing on the well-being of all families and helping families identify and build on their own protective factors,” per the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds website.

The framework includes five protective factors:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social/Emotional Competence of Children

All staff participating in the trainings were given information around these protective factors and how to help develop them in the children and families we serve.

Juvenile Justice Transfers – Children Exiting Care to the Department of Youth Services (DYS)

DYS youth are referred to as children that exited foster care with an exit reason of commitment to DHS. The following information was obtained from Alabama’s statewide information system (FACTS). During FY 2023, 7 youth in DHS custody were committed to DHS. Five of these youths reentered foster care during FY 2023. These children exited DHS custody during FY 2023 due to commitment to DHS and reentered into DHS’s custody during FY 2023 after being discharged from DHS. The average age at entry to foster care was 13.8 and at commitment age 14.8. Ages of children committed to DHS ranged from 14-16.

Psychotropic Medication /Monitoring Protocol

The psychotropic medication and monitoring protocol was implemented in October 2016 in a continued effort to minimize placement moves and reliance on psychotropic medication as a behavioral control. The contract with Auburn University continues to be renewed yearly with no additional changes made to the protocol. Presently, the APMRT team provides behavioral services to 10 catchment counties, consisting of Montgomery, Elmore, Autauga, Macon, Bullock, Russell, Lee, Chilton, Jefferson, and Shelby. Additionally, the team has provided consultation and support to our residential treatment facilities by reviewing case plans and assisting in designing behavior management plans to support and stabilize placements.

The Alabama Psychotropic Medication Review Team (APMRT) consists of a part-time child /pediatric psychiatrist, a project director, a nurse practitioner, four full-time board-certified behavioral analysts, and 1 graduate assistant. In November 2022, two part-time board-certified behavioral analysts were added to the Birmingham area. In June 2023, one of the part-time board-certified behavioral analysts transitioned to a full-time position.

The APMRT continues to review monthly medication data provided through a partnership with the Alabama Medicaid Agency and identify young people who are too young to be prescribed psychotropic medications, are prescribed too many medications of the same or similar drug classes, and are prescribed too many medications per set criteria. They will continue to contact the county office, share their concerns, and begin consultation to decrease reliance and use and provide behavioral support as a mechanism to safely reduce use of medications when appropriate.

Though the team moved to a telemedicine services model, behavioral services, medication reviews or both were provided to 88 clients from October 2022 through September 2023. The APMRT provided services to 26 different referring counties in the state of Alabama, with 38 referrals for behavioral services and 50 for medication review only. Extensive training continues to be provided to a residential treatment facility in the catchment area. The team has noted a steady increase in medication review requests, behavioral intervention services, and online training and education. The APMRT has safely resumed in-person services and continues to provide a hybrid model consisting of both telehealth and in-person services and will provide in-person trainings to staff and stakeholders. During the period of October 2022 through September 2023, APMRT conducted 345 in-person appointments, 337 telehealth appointments, for a total of 682 completed appointments. The APMRT received 126 appointment cancellations between October 2022 through September 2023. The APMRT, found

that the telehealth format was not suitable for each referred case, but families were receptive to behavioral and medication review services provided in this format, and hybrid approach has worked well across several cases this fiscal year.

The biggest challenge identified by APMRT from October 2021 through September 2022 was the high number of cases with adolescents that the team identified as “high needs cases.” These cases were characterized by multiple problem behaviors (e.g., theft, lying to caregivers, sexual behavior) displayed by adolescents and numerous barriers to working with the respective caregiver. More specifically, these cases required an extensive amount of time from the consulting LBA as well as one or more of our prescribers. In turn, the number of youths the respective LBA was able to concurrently serve decreased substantially.

In an attempt to address noted deficits in the APMRT’s delivery of behavioral services to complex cases and with adolescents in care, the APMRT is developing two new initiatives. They are developing an assessment tool to determine caregivers’ understanding of their (a) need for behavioral interventions, (b) time commitment for collaboration meetings with APMRT personnel, and (c) interest in reducing psychotropic medication. With this information, the APMRT hopes to better prepare and assign caseloads. In part, this process also involves analyzing data the APMRT has collected on caregiver contacts with previous families over those past five years. This also includes carefully tracking the time periods by which most beneficial outcomes should be produced. Second, APMRT is expanding the focus of their training with adolescents to include further skill development. That is, in addition to focusing on behavior to improve their relationships with family members and medication self-advocacy (developed in the fall of 2021), APMRT has developed protocols to broaden adolescents’ self-management skill sets. These programs currently include financial literacy (e.g., completing taxes, learning how to get a loan), applying for jobs and admission to community college, obtaining a driver’s license, making healthy food choices, and general time self-management (e.g., how to create and abide by schedules). The APMRT collective experience that adolescents in child welfare are almost universally deficient in these skills. APMRT is currently working with the Auburn University’s recording studio to produce instructional videos that will be available for general use (they will provide the links on the APMRT website). Their preliminary data indicate that adolescents engage with the materials, learn from the instruction, and recognize the value of the training videos. APMRT believes that developing these skills will increase successful independence of adolescents in care.

Additional information regarding the protocol for this project can be found in the Health Care Services Plan.

Services Related to International Adoptees

For international adoptees, APAC served 7 families in counseling. There is not a waiting list for the free APAC services. The families are seen by a counselor as soon as the counselor can schedule them. DHR families receive priority.

Pre/Post Adoption Services

Since 2018, all Pre/Post Adoption Services have been provided by the Children’s Aid Society under the title APAC (Alabama Pre/Post Placement Adoption Connection). The Pre-Adoption services include TIPS/Deciding Together Training, Home Study Approval, matching children with pre-adoptive families, and the finalization of adoptions. Pre-Adoption orientation was attended by 299 families. APAC served 52 individuals through TIPS/Deciding Together and the approval of home studies. APAC assisted in the finalization of seven children into six adoptive families and assisted in matching 17 children with 12 separate families.

The Post Adoption Services include counseling, family advocacy, crisis intervention, and training. APAC also offers adoptive family support groups, a library of resources for adoptive families, and other special events. The agency provided 872 individuals with Post Adoption Services. During the Fall, APAC hosted 2 special events called “Pictures in the Park”. Families were invited to attend and have professional family photographs taken. The events were held at local venues in two areas of the state. APAC staff offered activities for families while they waited their turn to be photographed. APAC also continues to partner with an equine therapy agency in the area to offer sessions and activities for children and families.

APAC provided trainings to 1,031 individuals to include in-person and virtual trainings. Topics included “Preparing Your Child for a New Foster or Adoptive Sibling,” “Emptying the Nest: The Art of Launching Differently,” and “Adoption and Addiction.” In addition, 335 individuals were served through Trained Therapist events.

These services help strengthen adoptive families and provide necessary support to ensure the adoptions are successful. Families are referred to these services through county workers and State Adoption Placement Specialists. Families can better understand the trauma history of the child/children in their home and implement techniques to better manage behaviors. The low number of adoptions disrupting shows the services are working. Satisfaction data is also collected via surveys by APAC, and the surveys are shared with the Department.

Services for children adopted from other countries

All adoptive families have access to training and the resource library at APAC. Services that are available to these children include individual and family counseling, parenting/coaching, a resource library, adoptive family support groups, and free trainings or webinars. These services are free to families upon request. Families can self-refer via APAC or referrals can be made by the county agency.

Wendy’s Wonderful Kids

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) awards grants to public and private adoption agencies to hire adoption professionals who implement proactive, child-focused recruitment programs that target exclusively on moving America’s children who have been waiting the longest out of Foster Care. Wendy’s Wonderful Kid Recruiters maintain an active caseload of twelve to fifteen children and use the Child-Focused Recruitment Model to match the children with adoptive families.

The emphasis of the Child- Focused Recruitment Model is using a case dig method to go back and revisit every person with the child has a prior relationship. The Recruiter uses email, letters, and phone calls to reach out to the people identified to try to reconnect the person with the child if appropriate. Even if the adoption is unable to be finalized prior to the child reaching adulthood, the individual has re-established connections that can last a lifetime. We have seen children reconnected with family members, prior caseworkers, and previous foster parents. These relationships give the children a sense of purpose and acceptance. The families that can proceed with adoption go through the State’s licensure requirements to be a State approved adoptive home.

Due to Alabama’s continued success with the DTFA grant, in 2022 we were given permission to expand the grant to five additional recruiters. This now gives us a total of seven recruiters. This allows approximately eighty-four children to be on WWK Caseloads. These Recruiters are assigned regions, and the children on the caseloads originate from those regions. The Recruiter is responsible for building rapport with the children during monthly face-to-face visits and using the information they learn during visits to recruit an adoptive family that can meet the child’s needs. During the face-to-face visits Recruiters are building the children’s self-esteem and helping them become ready for adoption through education about mental-health, permanency, and social skills, and relationships.

The WWK Program has experienced some barriers. Many family members that are deemed appropriate for the child do not want to move forward with licensure. Some of our teenagers have experienced failed adoptions before, and do not want to consider being adopted again so they advocate for the permanency plans to be changed so active recruitment does not continue. We are overcoming these barriers through better education and training through our Pre/Post Adoption Connection Services (APAC) and using tools to unpack the reasons for hesitancy regarding adoption of our teens.

Our Recruiters have attended training through the Dave Thomas Foundation of Adoption on making new connections, barriers to adoption readiness, and teamwork. In addition, our Recruiters and the Program Manager have been offering

training in the county offices to increase the awareness of the Wendy's Wonderful Kids Program, and how we can partner with caseworkers to increase permanency outcomes.

AdoptUsKids

AdoptUsKids is operated through the National Adoption Exchange and one of the most popular photo listing services worldwide. The page includes only children legally free for adoption. In addition to photos, profiles, and biographies, the site provides a mechanism for posting video footage of the children. The site has a link to the photo listing website for Alabama, Heart Gallery. An Administrative Assistant in the Office of Adoptions manages the photo listing websites and is responsible for responding to inquiries and building the summary pages for each child based on information received from the custodial county.

Out of State Agencies send inquiries on behalf of adoptive families in other states in an attempt to match Alabama's children with waiting families. The home studies are reviewed, and information about waiting children is sent to the families to see if the children can be matched. Once children are matched with out-of-state families then the children can start visits and have services to prepare for the idea of living out-of-state.

Heart Gallery of Alabama (HGA)

Heart Gallery Alabama connects youth in foster care with permanent families through photo listings. Children are photographed when they receive a permanency plan of adoption with no identified resource and termination of parental rights has occurred. The kids are taken to various state sites including parks and museums to have a fun day of playing and shooting photos.

Heart Gallery also ensures that foster youth have birth celebrations. The Hope from the Heart Program provides youth with birthday cakes and gifts to ensure someone remembers their birthday. The program is led by the Heart Squad, a group of committed volunteers who want to make a positive impact.

Heart Gallery has started a Mentor Program, Supporting Opportunities to Achieve and Rise (S.O.A.R.). The mentor program is a partnership with Big Brother/Big Sisters of Central Alabama to create connections for youth to help them have a stable, lifelong, and positive relationship. Mentor relationships can help youth learn to advocate for themselves and break barriers to success. Additionally, we hope these relationships will foster a connection that will lead to adoption if the mentor is willing to become the child's adoptive parent.

Our photo listing sites have helped us finalize twenty-three adoptions this reporting period. We currently have four additional adoptions waiting to finalize. The Heart Gallery also keeps records of success stories on their sites so interested adoptive families can hear the stories of other families' adoptions.

Applied Behavior Analysis

An Applied Behavior Analyst program is available statewide. There are 5 Behavior Analysts, and one Behavior Manager, based throughout the state. This service focuses on the environment in which a behavior occurs, and scientifically determines what factor of the environment is maintaining the target behavior to then create an intervention for positive change in the target behavior. This is accomplished through Tools of Choice, an introductory behavior management/parenting course that teaches positive parenting techniques, as well as through Individual Consultation in which an assessment is conducted for a specific child, a treatment plan is created for the caregiver to implement, and follow up occurs to ensure the plan is successful. The use of these services promotes stability of placements and permanency for children.

From May 1, 2023, to February 29, 2024, 94 children were served through Individual Consultation cases, and 33 Tools of Choice classes were conducted with 168 participants.

Stephanie Tubbs Jones child welfare services program – Also see Outcomes/Systemic Factors & CFS – 101

Alabama’s statewide information system known as FACTS (Family, Adult, and Child Tracking System), is a standardized, comprehensive way of managing child welfare information. It is available to all child welfare caseworkers, supervisors, managers, and administrators statewide and provides the opportunity for staff to manage their work in a data-informed manner. See Item 19 of the Final Report for more detail on enhancements made that have improved the system’s ability to impact outcomes over the past five years. Also, Item 19 of the 2024 APSR provides a description of current and planned activities for improvement across the next three years.

Alabama’s case review system has a foundation that includes the ISP process and a strong relationship with Alabama’s Administrative Office of Courts (AOC). Across the last five years, the ISP process provided a model for utilizing family input in framing goals and strategies, though QA findings reflect the importance of ongoing emphasis on engaging families and actively seeking their involvement. The relationship with the AOC across the last 5 years has been maintained and continues to be enhanced with the focus on improving permanency outcomes. See Items 20-24 of the 2022 APSR for more details around the strengths and challenges of Alabama’s case review system going forward as well as Item 31, under “Alabama Judicial & Child Welfare Collaborative”.

Alabama’s design for children is that they have a safe return to families from which they have been removed, or if that is not possible that they be placed in a relative/kinship home, placed for adoption, or another planned permanent living arrangement. Timely achievement of permanency for children remains a challenge. The case review findings of the CFSR found cross-cutting issues that affect timely permanency, particularly challenges in engaging parents in assessment and case planning, caseworker visits with parents that were not of sufficient frequency or quality, and inadequate service provision to children and families. Timely permanency through adoption was a most significant challenge for the state. Case reviews revealed that factors affecting timely adoption including a lack of timely filing for termination of Parental Rights, court delays in docketing TPR hearings, lengthy TPR appeals, a lack of concurrent planning, delays in changing permanency goals, and in some cases refusal of the court to hold TPR hearings. These issues contributed to a lack of timely adoptions in over half of the applicable cases with this goal. The timely achievement of permanency for children continues to be a focus for the state.

Alabama recognizes the importance of having preventative services that are designed to help children at risk of foster care placement remain safely with their families. The Alabama Child Welfare System embraces the philosophy of service delivery in home-based or community-based settings, while maintaining the child in the least restrictive environment. Following an incident of maltreatment, decisions must be made if it is in the best interest of the child to remain with his/her family or to be placed in an alternate setting. If the child is to remain in his/her home, the variety of factors that precipitated the maltreatment must be sufficiently assessed to ensure child safety. When a child is kept in the home, he or she is able to maintain the sense of attachment to loved ones that allow for one’s sense of identity and belonging to develop. Typically, family preservation is comprised of intensive in-home or wrap around services. Family preservation can be comprised of a variety of services such as teaching parenting skills, child development instruction, assistance with emotional well-being, financial assistance, teaching budgeting skills, crisis intervention, providing services such as payment for utilities or provision of food through utilization of flex funds, respite care, or medical services. Family Preservation can also include the follow-up care provided to a family after reunification has occurred to ensure that the family remains intact. While Alabama does have a diverse array of in-home supports to address many issues throughout the state, the intensity of needs prompted by substance abuse pose unique challenges.

Attention to resource development was provided in the PIP and ongoing quarterly Resources Development meetings were held with counties. There is ongoing evaluation to assess/determine the Department's current capacity/bandwidth to implement this work in each county in the coming year. The Office of Resource Management has been working to develop regional trainings to address ongoing resource and service needs across the state. There has been a delay on the finalization and implantation of this training. The state will continue with the efforts to have the training in place in the near future.

Permanency for children through the use of cross-jurisdictional resources continues to be completed. Home study requests for adoptive studies from other states are generally not completed in 60 days due to the ten-week requirement for completion of training. Preliminary reports are requested within 60 days to meet the federal guidelines. While there is currently no mechanism for tracking the percentage of preliminary reports received, our FACTS unit has been asked to look at ways to access this information through enhancements to the FACTS system. In terms of the CFSR findings, information in the statewide assessment and collected during interviews with stakeholders indicates that the state is effectively utilizing cross-jurisdictional resources to support the permanent placement of waiting children through AdoptUsKids, Heart Gallery Alabama, and Adoption.com.

Alabama was awarded \$4,893,436 in FY23 for Stephanie Tubbs Jones grant. This grant pays for some of the staff at the DHR state office. Currently there are 19 employees being charged directly to the grant. Their salary and benefits, and subsequently any travel they may do (unless there is another grant identified for it) is paid with IV-B Subpart 1.

- CPS Legal Services
- Professional Court Services
- Printing
- Interpreter Services
- DHR portion of the MNC Shared Services

SERVICES FOR CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 5

Source Child Maltreatment 2022 (hhs.gov)

In reviewing data, Alabama knows that children ages 0-5 enter care due to substance misuse by parents at a rate almost double any other entry reason. Based on that information, Alabama has partnered with the Children's Justice Task Force to create and present training for front line workers around substance abuse. We also continue our partnership in Jefferson and Jackson counties with drug courts. Also, children under the age of 5 are able to be placed in legal risk placements to provide them with a stable home environment while awaiting court resolution. This helps with achieving permanency timely.

According to the 2022 Children's Bureau Child Maltreatment report, Alabama had 545 Infants with Prenatal Substance Exposure (IPSE) in 2022. 2 of those were in reference to Alcohol Abuse, 542 were for Drug Abuse, and 1 was screened out IPSE.

According to the 2022 Children's Bureau Child Maltreatment report, Alabama had 544 Infants screened in for appropriate services. 248 of those children had a referral completed for appropriate services, which represents 45.6%. Many times, when reports are received, there are no need for referrals or families are able to access services without the intervention of the Department.

In Alabama, children ages 0-5 move to permanency at almost the same rate as they enter care. We know that as children age, their time in foster care increases; so, as a part of our PIP we facilitated meetings with counties as a way to model in county staffing with directors and supervisors. We saw success in moving these children to permanency in a timelier fashion, so we are working on expanding the staffing statewide and including all children ages 4-10 without regard to their current length of time in care. The average length of time in care for children discharged, aged 4-10 in FY 2023 was 17.98 months.

Due to staffing issues in the counties in which state office personnel have had to step in and assist, these staffings have been put on hold. The Office of Foster Care continues to review and use the Children Under Five Receiving Services Query spreadsheets created in January 2018 to capture all services authorized through FACTS for children under the age of five.

The Department is currently completing face-to-face permanency staffing in 29 of our 67 counties. Other counties report monthly on permanency issues or have date only reviews. These are not services unique to children under 5 but are the services that are available to children of all ages. The report provides data on 62 unique services and can be specifically individualized by each county or consolidated to capture statewide totals. Consultants use this information to monitor trends as well as assist counties in developing unmet needs.

Children & Family Services continues our partnership with specific state organizations who serve children ages 0-5 and their families and work to address the developmental needs of the children. Referrals are made to each of these agencies when working with families who have young children.

- Head Start Child Development and Early Learning
- Women, Infants and Children, WIC (supplemental nutrition program for pregnant women and their young children)
- Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention/Children’s Trust Fund- Programs: Cribs for Kids, Mentoring New Moms, and Jefferson County Pilot Project to Prevent Child Maltreatment, Baby Box
- Early Intervention (reviews developmental needs by utilizing a checklist for children from birth to age five)
- Wendy’s Wonderful Kids (recruits for an appropriate match for foster care children under age five)
- Alabama School Readiness Alliance (receives appropriations for pre-K programs).
- Individual Service Plans
- Behavioral Analysts supports and assessments
- Protective Service Daycare
- Information and Referrals

See chart below to reflect FY 2023

Children Ages 0-5 at Time of Discharge

FY 2021	42%
FY 2022	27%
FY 2023	37%

Percentage of Children Ages 0-5 at Time of Entry

FY 2021	38%
FY 2022	27%
FY 2023	48%

Entry Reasons for Children Ages 0-5

Drug Abuse (Parent)	52%
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Physical Abuse	16%
Neglect	28%

Average Length of time in care for Children Exiting Care (Ages 0-5) in:	Months
FY2021	13.94
FY2022	14.44
FY2023	14.7

Community Partner Stakeholder Group for Children Under the Age of Five (Foster Care & Receiving In-Home Services)

2024 Update:

Due to a significant county staffing shortage in both front-line workers and management, this case review project is not being conducted at this time. Staff have been pulled to work in county offices so that counties can continue to ensure the safety of the families and children they serve. In the coming year, it is the Department’s intention to continue these permanency reviews as staffing allows. Services for these children continue to be in place and will remain available. Examples are counseling, referrals, transportation, and other needs that may expedite permanency. The Department explores legal risk placements for adoptions of children under the age of five that have the permanency plan of ANIR. Data is collected concerning the number of children placed in their home or relative placements. There is also monthly tracking of foster parent adoption.

EFFORTS TO TRACK AND PREVENT CHILD MALTREATMENT DEATHS

Child maltreatment fatalities reported to NCANDS are those children whose death has been reported to the department to have been caused by child abuse/neglect. Child death reports are taken and investigated per Alabama Child Welfare Policy. These allegations are investigated with the assistance of law enforcement and any other agency or individual that may have information related to the child’s death. The circumstances of the child fatality are entered into our CCWIS system as a CAN report, and multi-disciplinary teams confer during this process. Multi-Disciplinary teams are composed of DHR staff, law enforcement, district attorneys, medical professionals, and county corners. Alabama receives reports of child deaths from many reporters, including law enforcement, hospitals, and the general public. Coroners, law enforcement, and medical examiners are among Alabama’s legislated mandatory reporters.

In Alabama, doctors, nurses, medical examiners, coroners, social workers, and law enforcement officials are considered mandatory reports. The Code of Alabama requires them to report suspected child abuse/neglect to the department both verbally and in writing. Mandatory reporter training is accessed online as well as through in-person presentations in counties conducted by county staff to further educate mandatory reporters on their obligation and the process by which to make a report.

Any time a child dies or almost dies and the department has had contact with the family within the last 12 months, the county department must complete a child fatality or near fatality form and send it to management and legal at State DHR for review and monitoring of the case. The case is immediately reviewed by upper management to determine if the county has correctly assessed the allegations, safety threats to other children in the home, and protective capacities of caregivers. These are reviewed periodically by management to discern any trends of inaccurate assessments.

Each county in Alabama also has a child death review team. County child death reviews must be completed in situations where a child death occurred due to alleged child abuse or neglect and the Department has any child welfare involvement

with the child or the child’s family within 12 months prior to the date of the child’s death. The purpose of the child death review is to strengthen and improve future child welfare practice. The review should be comprehensive and evaluate system performance prior to the child’s death. Any recommendations resulting from the review should be specific and focused solely on remedial efforts to prevent future deaths. The make-up of the county teams includes the county director or designee, the county QA coordinator, a county QA Committee member, a State Office of Quality Assurance Division’s representative, and a Regional State Office Representative from the Family Services Division, Office of Administrative Record Reviews. This review process is to begin within 30 days of the receipt of a report of a child death unless good cause is established due to unusual or extraordinary circumstances. The review must include at a minimum a case record review and a meeting of the child death review committee. The review process consists of an objective discussion of DHR’s involvement with the family and an analysis of the Department’s performance as it relates to policy, procedure, services, and best practices. The final report should be completed within 90 days of the county department being notified of the child’s death.

Alabama also has a State Child Death Review Team composed of 28 members. The Alabama Department of Human Resources and the Alabama Department of Public Health are two of the departments represented on the state team. This team reviews the circumstances and underlying factors of all non-medical infant and child deaths in order to identify those deaths that could possibly have been prevented. The state team is responsible for coordination and efficient operation of the review process using the following causes of death: Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, Motor Vehicle Involvement, Fire Related Deaths, Suffocation Related Deaths, and Weapon Related Deaths.

Alabama also has a Governor’s Task Force on Infant Mortality ,which was created in 2017 to address the infant mortality rate in Alabama. One of the recommendations made was for a pilot program in 3 counties (Montgomery, Macon, and Russell counties) that would focus on nurse visitation programs, safe sleep initiatives, utilization of a screening tool to identify substance use, depression, and domestic violence. The goal of this pilot program, which began in 2018, is to reduce infant mortality rates by at least 20% in these three counties within the next 5 years. According to the Alabama Department of Public Health, in 2021 the top three causes of death were 1. congenital malformations, 2. disorders related to short gestation and low birth weight, not elsewhere classified, and 3. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The data below reflects the number and rate per 1000 live births.

Overall Infant Mortality Rate* (INFANT MORTALITY ALABAMA 2018 (alabamapublichealth.gov))						
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Montgomery	6.0	9.2	10.1	11.5	10.1	10.2
Macon	5.5	5.6	12.9	5.4	11.1	7.0
Russell	13.4	5.1	9.7	2.6	6.2	6.3
Alabama	7.4	7.0	7.7	8.5	7.6	6.7
*Rate is per 1,000 live births.						
Total Infant Deaths and Infant Mortality Rates by County*						
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Montgomery	19	29	32	36	31	30
Macon	1	1	2	1	2	1
Russell	11	4	8	2	5	5
Alabama	435	405	449	491	443	391

Data Source: Alabama Department of Public Health Amy.McAfee@adph.state.al.us and/or Alabama Vital statistics <https://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/healthstats/publications.html>

Requests for Data- vsdata@adph.state.al.us

Alabama has created a Committee for the Prevention of Child Maltreatment Fatalities. A primary goal of this committee is to create and implement a Child Maltreatment Fatality Plan that will direct targeted work toward reducing the number of child deaths due to maltreatment occurring in the state.

This Committee is comprised of community partners including members from:

- State Public Health, Child Death Review System
- State Public Health, Perinatal System
- State Office of Prosecution Services
- State District Attorney Association
- Administrative Office of Courts
- State Department of Education
- State Rehabilitation Services, Early Intervention Services
- State Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention
- State Department of Human Resources Quality Assurance Committee
- Department of Human Resources County Quality Assurance Committees
- State Department of Human Resources Administrative Staff
- Department of Human Resources County Staff
- Law Enforcement
- State Department of Mental Health, Substance Abuse Treatment
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- Children’s Hospital Intervention and Prevention Services (CHIPS)
- Medical Profession specializing in Child Abuse

Additional subcommittees, have been created to explore available data, review relevant literature, and provide recommendations to the Committee at large.

Over the past year, SDHR Leadership has met to review existing data and the recommendations provided by the Committee for the Prevention of Child Maltreatment Fatalities.

In the coming year, Alabama plans to work with the Citizen Review panel to review child death in children ages 1-3 months, who comprised the highest percentage of child fatalities in Alabama (per DHR child fatality data). This will be accomplished by exploring the causation of death in children 1-3 months of age, comparing child death data maintained by DHR with that kept by the Alabama Department of Public Health to identify any common/related themes and points of contrast (e.g. related to causes, persons allegedly responsible, age of child, family location, etc.), examining the location of Family Resource Centers and/or other in-home service providers in relation to the location of child deaths of children aged 1-3 months, exploring months of the year in which fatalities for this age group occur to see if any variables related to higher-frequency months appear noteworthy of further examination, and reviewing any other work, studies, etc. being done in Alabama related to child fatalities by the Department and/or any partner agencies.

Mary Lee Allen, Promoting Safe and Stable Families – Provide the following services using PSSF funds:

MARY LEE ALLEN PROMOTING SAFE AND STABLE FAMILIES (PSSF) (title IVB, subpart 2)

FAMILY PRESERVATION:	IIHS contracts; Family Service Center contracts (Res. Management Div. - RMD)
FAMILY SUPPORT:	Family Service Center contracts (RMD)
FAMILY REUNIFICATION:	IIHS contracts (RMD)
Title IV-B (2) fund expenditures:	Alabama was awarded \$5,959,351 in FY23 for MaryLee Allen, (PSSF). The Department used \$5,955,297 on the following services will be offered under each category in IV-B, subpart 2.

Family Preservation

Children in need of services by Alabama DHR are provided those services through our Investigation and Child Protect Services units. The needs of each family are assessed, and the services needed are implemented through the ISP process to help children be maintained in their own home or the home of a relative but not in foster care.

One service provided via contract is Intensive in-Home Service (IHS). These programs provide short term intensive in-home interventions in all 67 counties in Alabama to help alleviate situations and conditions within families where the removal of children from the home is imminent or the plan is for the child to return home after being in foster care. Providers may serve families for 6-9 months and may request extensions from SDHR if additional service time is needed. Families also receive aftercare services for 90 days and are tracked at 3, 6, 12, and 24 months. There are 12 vendors who provide IHS services in the state, with a total of 661 slots, which did not increase from 2023. In FY 23, an average of 428 families were served. As of February 12, 2024, there were 428 families receiving intensive in-home services, with 256 receiving services for Reunification and 172 receiving services for Family Preservation. Invoices are created in 1 adult and 1 child's name, even if there are other children in the home.

Family Support

One area in which Alabama provides family support to our residents is through our partnership with the Alabama Department of Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. This agency funds Family Resource Centers through the Family Preservation and Support Services (FP/SS) Programs, funded by Title IV-B, Subpart 2, "Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act".

Family Resource Center sites are in targeted counties/communities where there is a high concentration of families in need of services to address their safety and stability issues. Each center assesses the community and collaborates with DHR in developing programs that meet the needs of the community and focus on the prevention of Child Abuse/Neglect by providing educational services, job training, parenting, etc. These services allow children and families to engage and be treated like individuals as these services are unique to their strengths, needs, and cultural identity. This is an ongoing partnership with services that are continually adapting to the needs of the community.

Adoption Support

The Department employs six (6) Adoption Placement Specialists who work with children who are available for adoption with no identified resource. These specialists actively seek out adoptive resources that can meet the specific needs of the children on their caseloads. They offer support via calls and visits during the pre-adoptive process. They further provide links to services the family may need such as Alabama's Pre/Post Adoptive Connection (APAC) agency. These specialists also travel to make out-of-state visits and placements when an out-of-state resource is identified. Alabama partners with APAC to provide services to families that adopt, both preadoption and post adoption to include counseling, training classes, and general supports.

Alabama partners with the Heart Gallery to actively recruit for our waiting children. Children are provided with professional photo and video shoots in order to showcase their desires for a forever family.

Alabama policy provides that children who are in foster care and available for adoption can be adopted by their current foster parents. Foster parents are given priority when a child becomes available for adoption as the child already has an established relationship with that family. Supports and services are provided to the foster family by the local county workers as well as state office workers when necessary. These supports include monthly visits from their child's case worker, regular visits from the foster family's resource worker, and any services (e.g., therapy, medical needs, educational needs, etc.) the child would need to ensure the placement remains stable and to ensure the child's well-being.

SERVICE DECISION MAKING PROCESS FOR FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (ADCANP), also known as the Children's Trust Fund (CTF), was created by the Alabama Legislature in 1983 to address child maltreatment. The ADCANP is the lead agency for

federally funded Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs as part of CAPTA. Partnership agencies are chosen by the 'Request for Proposal' process.

The ADCANP partners with the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers (ANFRC) to provide community-based supports and services to families and children. There are approximately 23 Family Resource Centers located throughout the state as of this writing. The centers' values include stability for children, individualized services to families, strengths-based partnerships with families, collaborative approaches with families and other agencies, a focus on equity for all, a localized approach to meet the individual needs of those served, prevention first, and a commitment to high quality operational standards.

Alabama's Network of Family Resource Centers offers services via the Strengthening Families strategy, which includes building 5 key protective factors: parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children. Along with these factors, family resource centers also offer workforce development including assistance in obtaining employment and/or GED certificates, arts/dance lessons, and housing assistance. Centers are also able to make referrals to other local agencies if there are other needs or resources families may need that cannot be provided through the centers.

The Department is partnering with family resource centers to implement Workforce Development Programs at 25 FRCs across the state. Each center works with their county office to enroll people in the A-RESET program, which provides participants with a small stipend while they work with the center to improve employability through components such as work readiness and job search. Family Resource Centers also utilized TANF funds to support eligible participants with a variety of services, including GED preparation, job training, parenting classes, relationship education, and emergency services. DHR provides ongoing technical assistance to support the WFD programs. FRCs served 3,931 participants last fiscal year, with 61 earning GEDs, 1,157 gaining employment or improving their employment, and 1,100 attending parenting classes.

The Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers provided 13 trainings on the Strengthening Families Framework to service providers at locations across the state. A total of 396 people participated, including 62 DHR county-level staff members. "The Strengthening Families approach and protective factors framework was introduced in 2003 by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. It is a research-informed, strengths-based approach that prevents child abuse and neglect by focusing on the well-being of all families and helping families identify and build on their own protective factors," per the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds website.

The framework includes five protective factors:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social/Emotional Competence of Children

All staff participating in the trainings were given information around these protective factors and how to help develop them in the children and families we serve.

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (ADCANP) uses CBCAP funds to support various parent education and support programs. This includes two programs serving the underserved population of incarcerated mothers through prenatal and parent education classes, doula support, and opportunities for the mothers to stay connected with their children.

CBCAP funds also support Children's Aid Society in providing the EPIC parenting classes to pregnant and parenting runaway and homeless youth through the Project Independence program, as well as providing the class in Spanish to parents in the Hispanic and Latino communities. The EPIC parenting classes include topics such as understanding children and their behavior, encouragement and self-esteem, and effective discipline. The Children's Aid Society has offices in Birmingham, Huntsville, Mobile, and Montgomery.

Finally, CBCAP funds are used to support 7 HEARTS Respite programs located at United Cerebral Palsy Centers across Alabama. The HEARTS program which stands for Help Emergency and Respite Treatment Service is designed to provide respite care for families of children with special needs up to age 19. A voucher system enables parents to secure a caregiver of their choosing with payment by voucher reimbursement. CBCAP funds have been prioritized to support these HEARTS programs because we know children with disabilities are at least three times more likely to be abused or neglected than their peers without disabilities, and they are more likely to be seriously injured or harmed by maltreatment.

Alabama also utilizes Intensive In-Home Services through the Family Service centers. These intensive services are available in all 67 counties of the state. Over the last year, the available in-home services slots remained at 661 with 404 families served. These services are geared toward family preservation or reunification in the home setting.

POPULATIONS AT GREATEST RISK OF MALTREATMENT

In the 2020-2024 CFSP and subsequent APSRs, states were required to identify and describe which populations are at the greatest risk of maltreatment, how the state identifies these populations and how services will be targeted to those populations.

Alabama recognizes that many factors create a heightened risk for a child to be maltreated; parent functioning, child functioning, family dynamics and family support or outside stressors. Alabama accepts what we call prevention assessments when there are concerns reported to a county that do not rise to the level of a child abuse/neglect report. We assess the safety of the children; protective capacity of the parents, and community support and can open a case to provide extra services to prevent child abuse/neglect if the assessment warrants. Alabama further assesses each of these factors in our Comprehensive Family Assessment tool that is created on each opened case and is a working document used throughout the case to assist in assessment and provision of services.

Alabama has a 2-tiered response time on child abuse/neglect investigations that are based on vulnerability factors. Any report received involving a child under the age of 6 or who has a disability or a medical condition making them vulnerable or in which the reporter is unsure that there is a protective person available to protect the child from immediate harm requires an immediate response.

In Alabama, children whose parents abuse substances can be at a greater risk for maltreatment. When infants are born who are substance affected, Alabama has the option of accepting a prevention to assess the situation and possibly provide services or accepting a child abuse/neglect report and assessing for safety in that way. All workers must complete a plan of safe care in those cases. Our Family and Children's Tracking System (FACTS) requires it as part of the case information prior to resolving the referral. In the past 12 months, 43% of all children entering care had Parental Drug Abuse among their entry to care reasons. When looking at children ages 0 through 5 that percentage is 53.97%. Alabama DHR partners with drug courts where available to monitor and court order parents into treatment. The courts and drug court give oversight to random drug screening as well as participation in recovery programs to help parents reduce the safety risks to their children. Alabama uses in-home and out of home safety plans when appropriate to lower the risk to children while still allowing the youngest of our children to bond with their parents because visitation is much less complicated when a safety plan is put in place. Intensive in-home services are also used in cases in which young children and substance affected parents are involved. These programs allow children to be placed back in their home with several visits a week to ensure safety. All of these programs will continue in the CFSP 2025-2029.

According to the Children's Bureau 2022 report of Child Maltreatment, 231 of the 544 Infants with Prenatal Substance Exposure (IPSE) cases have a Plan of Safe Care, which represents 42.5% of the reported IPSE cases. All children who are born substance effected have a plan to ensure safety; there has been a learning curve for counties to actually name it a Plan of Safe Care. Alabama accepts all referrals from hospitals as immediate response referrals and assess the safety of the newborn and resolves safety concerns using a safety plan with the parents or removing the child from the custody of the parents.

Representatives from Alabama DHR sit on committees for a variety of community partners that work with at-risk families including the Governor's Task Force for Safe Sleep, Children's Justice Act Grantees Peer Group and Children's Policy

Councils around the state. Alabama DHR also partners with the Alabama Department for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect which funds regional Family Resource Centers to serve at-risk families.

Alabama has not seen any major shift in trends identifying those most at risk. The demographics of children in care align with the demographics of the state as a whole.

Source: Child Maltreatment 2021 | The Administration for Children and Families (hhs.gov)

MONTHLY CASEWORKER VISITS GRANTS

Alabama standards for Meaningful Caseworker Visits include any child with an open case or referral including children in foster care, in their own homes, in the homes of relatives, in residential facilities, hospitals, childcare institutions, pre-adoptive homes and children in ICPC placements. Alabama requires that children in intensive level programs must be seen twice per month at a minimum.

Caseworker visits continue to be made each month and are both scheduled and unannounced visits to the child's living environment. Some visits include exploration of goals and examination of any changes. Caseworkers continue to contact children and families through telephone calls. Visits to children in other settings may occur to provide opportunities for private discussions.

2023 Annual Caseworker Visit Data Submission for Alabama.

- The percentage of monthly caseworker visits was 95.5%
- The percentage of visits made in the residence of the child was 99.46%
- The total population of Alabama children in foster care for at least one month during FY 2023 was 7,990.

Caseworker visit grant monies have been utilized for iCAN county team meetings, iCAN Advisory Committee meetings, and Alabama's Judicial Child Welfare Summit. Each of these meetings includes caseworkers, supervisors, the county director, the local Juvenile Court judge, Guardians ad litem and other attorneys. The purpose of each of these meetings is to help the court and DHR problem solve on any areas within the county that are resolvable with conversation and action plans and raise the capacity of the workers and supervisors. At each of these meetings, the importance of engagement with families through meaningful caseworker visits is discussed and from the perspective of each of the members. Whether it is fathers and paternal relatives to look at as possible placements for children in care, mothers and maternal relatives to also assess for placement, foster/adoptive parents to look at permanency or collaterals for information and history on the family, engagement by caseworkers is the basis for all of the information we gather to assess and monitor strengths, needs and change and to report that to the Individualized service plan team or the court for guidance and input on services and case plans.

iCAN county team meetings, iCAN Advisory Committee meetings and Alabama's Judicial Child Welfare Summit have the same goals, timely permanency for children. Workers are encouraged to have meaningful visits with each child and parent to accurately assess the value of the services provided, the level of change in the caregivers, the appropriateness of relatives and the desires and adjustments of the children. The teams stress the importance of assessing each of the areas explored in a meaningful visit that includes safety, health, education, emotional well-being, and permanency so that that information can be relayed accurately to the ISP team and the court.

Alabama does not allow for virtual visits. All children who are in the care and under the supervision of the Department must be seen at least monthly in their placement or in their own home depending on the type of case.

Alabama was awarded \$376,695 in FY23 for Monthly Caseworker Visit Grant. The Department used \$355,605 on expenditures such as In-State travel, training, and drug court treatment.

Judicial Child Welfare Summit

Judicial child welfare summits are planned across FYs 2020-2024. They are collaborative meetings between AOC and DHR, with Casey Family Programs also being involved. Topics presented have included Kinship Guardianship, engaging fathers, hearing from our former foster youth, a review of statewide data with time to review and explore local data, trauma-informed practice, and others.

2023 Update:

The 2023 Judicial Child Welfare Summit was held November 1-3, 2023. Topics presented included the importance of partnering with providers, the impact of language in IV-E court orders throughout the life of a case, the negative effects of labels on children, ways to navigate immigration with children in foster care, Independent Living Program (talk time with teens in foster care), legal updates relevant to Juvenile Court, and a national look at child welfare outcomes. There is another Summit planned for December 2024, where tentative plans include a focus on areas such as permanency, timeliness, collaboration, and using data in practice, etc.

ADOPTION / LEGAL GUARDIAN INCENTIVES

Adoption Incentive Funds – Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Funds – 5-year Goals:

Alabama has consistently been awarded Adoption (and Legal Guardianship) Incentive funds for moving children to permanency. The Department divides the funds between each of the 67 counties, where each county receives a base amount of funding. Counties are then awarded supplemental funds based on the number of adoptions they completed the prior fiscal year. Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Funds have been utilized to support training, to strengthen and support staff and stakeholder capacity, and to achieve permanency through adoption. In addition, funds have been used for expanding the pre- and post-adoptive services to families and enhancing statewide recruitment efforts. If a county's allotment is exhausted or obligated, a protocol is in place to ensure they can secure more funds through the Office of Adoption. The State Office utilizes a portion of these funds to pay for recruitment and public awareness activities. Heart Gallery of Alabama's contract and the contract for CAS/APAC's pre-adoption contract, which provides for recruitment, training/preparation, and home studies for families interested in adopting children meeting the Department's special needs definition, are funded through these monies as well. Both agencies, as well as the county departments, focus a substantial amount of the recruitment activities in faith-based settings.

Each county contacts the Office of Adoption Subsidy and Support when they need to utilize the funds. The State Office of Adoption Subsidy and Supports ensures these funds are utilized to promote permanency of children. Some examples of uses of Adoption Incentive Fund are:

- recruitment activities to support the development and training of resources,
- to obtain specific services for adoptive families,
- trainings for the county staff around adoption issues
- to meet specific needs of children that will aid in their being adopted whose permanency plan is adoption
- to purchase fliers and banners for recruitment
- to purchase equipment to train foster/adoptive families
- for items needed for children in pre-adoptive placements such as special hospital beds, medical equipment, furniture, and suitcases

All counties received an allotment of Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive funds to use for local adoption recruitment and training efforts. Additionally, county and state office staff have used the funds to address barriers to permanency through adoption including but not limited to counseling, diagnostic testing, behavioral management services, and other items to help the child integrate into placement, etc. If a county's allotment is exhausted or obligated, a protocol is in place to ensure they can secure more funds through the Office of Adoption. The State Office utilizes a portion of these funds to pay for recruitment and public awareness activities. Heart Gallery of Alabama's contract and the contract for CAS/APAC's pre-adoption contract, which provides for recruitment, training/preparation, and home studies for families interested in adopting children meeting the Department's special needs definition are funded through these monies as well. Both agencies, as well as the county departments, focus a substantial amount of the recruitment activities in faith-based settings.

ADOPTION SAVINGS

Alabama has used the CB method for calculating the Adoption Savings each year; no change has been made from last year's submission. The spending of the Adoption Savings is done by the Finance Division for services including psychotropic medication review team to support positive permanent outcomes for children in foster care. Alabama further uses adoption savings to fund adoption and kinship guardianship subsidy payments and legal fees toward adoption and kinship guardianship for children who are not eligible for IV-E subsidy payments. The state plans to expand the amount spent on post adoption subsidies and services over the next 5 years.

CHAFEE FOSTER CARE INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM (CFCIP)

Program Design and Delivery

Alabama Department of Human Resources, Children & Family Services is implementing the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 by operating a statewide Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. The Education Training Voucher Program was implemented in 2004. Direct services (e.g., supplies, books, and fees) and indirect services (e.g., referrals to therapists, life coaches, and rehabilitation services) are provided to youth for whom the Department holds custody and planning responsibility. In 2015, the Department established a tuition scholarship program through the Alabama State Legislature called Fostering Hope. Fostering Hope provides tuition to eligible foster youth to attend public Alabama colleges, universities, and certification programs. In 2023, the Department began providing funding to prior foster youth through age 23 as needed. Alabama's Independent Living Program is a state-administered, county-managed program. The Alabama Department of Human Resources, through the Office of Foster Care and ILP Services, administers and supports the programs and services carried out by the 67 county Departments of Human Resources. Each county DHR office can create and maintain its own Foster Care Independent Living Program. Services are provided by individual and group programs such as financial literacy training and healthy relationship workshops and individual services, and several also offer experiential activities, including providing a budget and funds to shop for meals for a week or going to a local museum. The programs are to provide services to assist a youth in improving education and career opportunities and to decrease high-risk activities and the potential for incarceration, non-marital childbirth, dependence, and homelessness. The mission of Alabama's Independence Program is to assist Alabama's eligible foster youth and former foster youth in attaining the skills, education, and character needed to become healthy adults who will contribute to their community. The role of the State team is to provide and develop services, supports, training, and consultation to the counties, assisting them in the development of group and individual services and supports for youth in foster care. We partner closely with our current contract provider; Children's Aid Society of Alabama. This partnership focuses on providing supportive independent living services. Youth leadership development for DREAM Ambassadors is also a key role of our partner. The partnership is key in statewide training initiatives for our staff, providers, foster parents, stakeholders, and community partners.

As of February 1, 2024, there were 1,763 young people in foster care age 14 to 20: representing an increase of 3% in the number of youths in care from the most recent reporting period of 1,708 on March 1, 2023. All those young people are eligible to receive Independent Living Services. Per Alabama's most recent NYTD data from FY 2022, 810 youth received services. Data recorded on the NYTD Snapshot related to services received seems to be inconsistent with the work being done around the state. There is a 2% documentation of Post-Secondary Educational Support considering the ongoing work conducted by the Departments two staff who work directly with our youth attending college. Training schedules are being developed to help staff with service documentation so they can appropriately record the services completed. A partnership to develop a data merge with our post-education funding is another effort being developed. There will be focused efforts to work with our FACTS Team and our Office of Child Welfare Training to promote consistent documentation. The ability to provide services statewide continues to be related to the state's

Successful transitioning for older youth in our care continues to guide our practice through ILP tools. Our tools were developed and strategically rolled out for statewide use beginning in 2018. The use of our ILP Framework, in conjunction with Youth Assessment Summary and the Alabama ILP Transition Plan are used in concert with the youth's ILP plan to assess skills, craft services and support successful transition. Transition plans are monitored and reviewed with quarterly feedback provided to county workers during IL Consultant staffing. Caseworkers and foster youth update plans as needed along with their Individualized Service Plan.

Support services are being provided through our partnership with Children’s Aid Society of Alabama (CAS). CAS employs four former youth who have extensive experience with this population of young people. The CAS ILP Team serves youth, foster parents, congregate care providers and community stakeholders statewide. Our supports and services are enhanced through direct contact with county youth at regional ILP meetings that provide trainings by our youth ambassadors. CAS also provides training and networking opportunities at our annual state conference and leadership development for our state staff and youth ambassadors in facilitation of our attendance at the National ILP Conference. Their work continues to highlight the lived experience voice and has expanded to assist youth in our Transitional Living programs to make clear steps to independent living placements.

The ILP team continues to solicit the input of our community partners, providers, foster parents, CAS partners and most importantly our young people. Our young people and our DREAM Council leaders have also met as we continue to solicit their input related to strategic planning and improvement in delivery of ILP services. The development of the current service plan was in collaboration with current and former foster youth, community providers, congregate care providers, county, and state staff from both the foster care and Independent Living programs. Continuing to engage and formulate new relationships with community partners has positively impacted our ability to better serve both current and former foster youth. We are in constant contact with our community partners, such as Job Corps, Youth Towers, Heart Gallery of Alabama, Second Shift Alabama, BigHouse Foundation, and Lifeline Children Services. These partnerships have enhanced our ability to serve current and former foster youth by developing supports prior to and after youth have left foster care. Our DREAM Ambassadors are also an integral part of our training model. Their ability and willingness to provide lived-experience insight to judges, community members, quality assurance committees, TIPS classes, tribal members and DHR staff is invaluable.

The FY 2023 work of the ILP team related to training, collaboration, and support is outlined below. These activities are included in the statewide training: serving youth in congregate care, youth participation in court, and individualized service plans. Training regarding these issues were provided to staff and foster parents, service providers and stakeholders at the Annual Foster and Adoptive Parent Conference, Permanency, Judicial and ILP Networking Conferences. Education and training were also provided to youth at the annual ILP camps held in June and July 2023.

LGBTQ Resource Meetings/Contacts

LGBTQ breakout sessions were provided during both of our IL summer camps, giving youth an opportunity to share their voice. Five regional ILP meetings were held during 2023, which included breakout sessions that included opportunities for youth to share LGBTQ struggles and triumphs. Twice a month, a virtual support group for LGBTQ foster youth is provided through our IL support service provider, Children’s Aid Society. These virtual meetings provide youth with opportunities to develop healthy relationship skills, obtain support coming out, explore sexual orientation and gender identity through discussion, and learn about LGBT history and current news. As equally important, this group allows youth to connect to others in a safe environment. The support group has been utilizing an instant messaging app for ongoing communication. The Magic City Acceptance Center also provided training at our IL Networking Conference that reviewed language, terminology, and best practices for LGBTQ inclusion. Throughout all IL events, there is an established effort to increase knowledge of the LGBTQ community, affirming language, raise awareness of LGBTQ community needs, improve attitudes towards the LGBTQ community, and increase LGBTQ affirming behaviors and policies.

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

Ongoing efforts are being implemented to improve and provide accurate NYTD data. The Department’s funding provider for post-secondary educational services, Foster Care to Success, has been working to connect their recorded data to our FACTS system. Awareness for the importance of completing NYTD surveys are provided through our IL connect social media presence. County offices work in partnership with the ILP staff to ensure that youth complete the surveys timely.

Coordination with other Federal Programs and Private and Public Agencies

There have been several initiatives related to private and public agencies which will continue. The Independent Living Program works closely with **Children’s Aid Society** to provide services and supports to current and prior older youth in foster care. We have developed great collaborations with the **Alabama Adoptive and Foster Parent Association, Alabama**

Department of Education, Alabama Reach, the Alabama Medicaid Agency, Alabama Department of Youth Services, the National Social Work Enrichment Program, Foster Care to Success, Youth Towers, Second Shift Alabama, National Social Work Enrichment Program, Job Corps, Alabama Works, Foster Youth to Independence, Housing and Urban Development, Lifeline, and the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. These collaborations improved educational outcomes, college retention and matriculation, an improved knowledge of psychotropic medication use and trauma-informed practice, as well as a focus on ensuring that older youth re-enroll in the Medicaid program. We had the opportunity to coordinate services with Department of Youth Services crossover youth, provide training and education to our Tribal partners and Court Improvement Program staff regarding older youth issues.

The Department has continued its partnership with several national partners to include the National Selfless Love Foundation and Youth Thrive-Center for the Study of Social Policy. In November, we presented at the Georgia Divisions of Family and Children Services, Teens R 4 Me Conference. As a result of that partnership, Anthony Stover, the founder of EmpowerMENT, and Maria Batista with Florida's Children's First, provided training at our annual Ambassador retreat. Anthony and Maria provided leadership development training with a focus on group goal setting and personal leadership development.

Our ongoing work with the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) program continues to decrease the number of homeless youths. This is evidenced by new partnerships with Lifted Higher Ministries, Creative Ministries, and North Alabama Community Care. The Department continues its FYI collaborations with current placement agencies like Brantwood and Embrace AL Kids. Embrace AL has also opened opportunities to help additional youth in rural areas of Alabama. These agencies, along with our current partners, Second Shift Alabama, and Youth Towers, have provided support services to youth receiving Section 8 vouchers. Since implementing FYI in 2020, the Department has referred 94 youth in total, with 43 referrals made in the last 12 months to our 16 public housing authority partners.

Lifeline Children's Services continues to help us build relationships with churches across the state to host county ILP meetings, while promoting a model for introducing potential mentors, or advocates as they refer to them. This partnership is key and promotes consistent training provided by community members with a focus on relationship building between the participating youth and adults who are invested in their success.

We have coordinated training for our staff and youth, making them aware of their eligibility and directing them to Alabama's Medicaid website to re-enroll for insurance coverage. The information and link to the website is also on our Independent Living website. All young people who are eligible upon their exit from out-of-home care will be automatically converted to the Medicaid to 26 health insurance programs. The Department has continued to enhance an interface with the Alabama Medicaid Agency to ensure that all eligible young people will continue to receive this much needed service without interruption.

Serving Youth across the State

All youth in our System of Care are considered Alabama's children. To ensure that all young people receive the same level of support and services, the Program has gone to great lengths to provide training directly to youth by DREAM Ambassadors and community providers in the counties all over the state. We are currently strengthening our partnership with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians to provide training directly to their youth leaders. In October of 2023, a regional ILP meeting was held on the reservation to help promote continuity of skill development and provide exposure to Alabama's foster youth to the working and culture of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. All available services and supports are offered to all foster youth in Alabama. Youth and their caregivers and social workers can access information regarding ILP policy, NYTD, camps, conferences, services, job opportunities, health services, Medicaid, and trainings at our various youth social media avenues: www.ilconnect.org; @ILConnect on Facebook; and @originalilconnect on Instagram. This information can also be accessed through the IL connect app that was developed in partnership with our IL contract provider. Anyone who downloads the app has access to information about all ILP information for Alabama. The app also has an instant notification feature that allows connection to current and former foster youth. Two additional features include direct messaging to contracted IL staff and a lock-box feature that will securely hold important documents for youth like their driver's license, Social Security card, or birth certificate. These avenues offer a one-stop webpage that lists independent living services across the state.

The Division has updated the Official State of Alabama website, iDHR, with tools, forms, and instructions to improve accessibility of staff and community partners, thereby improving outcomes for our older youth in care. Services to our foster youth and those youth being served in their own homes are individualized to meet each youth's unique needs. Smaller counties continue to struggle with placing youth in their home counties, as there are a limited number of resources in our rural counties.

Case review and consultations have continued. Our ILP Team conducts monthly reviews related to young people in our ILP and TLP placement setting regarding their readiness for transitioning to adulthood. Our team also participates in meetings with the Office of Foster Care and our Resource Management Division regarding our hardest to place youth when needed. A special focus has been made to review pregnant and parenting teens.

Serving Youth of Various Ages and Stages of Achieving Independence

The focus of our Independent Living Program is to provide services and supports to promote healthy interdependence. Our young people enter care at various stages and levels of maturity. Because of the unique nature of their circumstances, proper assessment and youth engagement are key when serving this age group. The ILP Framework was trained statewide and emphasizes the worker's assessment of the young person's skills and abilities and is to be completed prior to or at the point of the Individualized Service Plan (ISP) to better offer and develop services to meet the needs of each youth. More importantly, our focus will be on identifying and facilitating authentic permanent connections.

Youth aged 14 to 21 can participate in all Independent Living activities provided by the counties and state. There are no age restrictions. Youth have participated in trainings geared toward their specific age group annually in summer or fall conferences/camps. There were 76 youth aged 14-16 who participated in Camp Life which provides introductory training regarding what they are eligible for as foster youth, how to effectively participate in their ISPs, basic NYTD, social media safety, money management, preparing for college by successfully completing high school, sex education, and human trafficking. There were 53 youth that participated in the 17-21-year-old group, and they were provided more detailed trainings focused on college, technical and trade school success, car maintenance, equine therapy, LGBTQ advocacy, mental health awareness and treatment, team building, foster youth rights and responsibilities in relation to juvenile justice, healthy relationships, and ILP services and supports.

All youth in the System of Care can participate in state and county trainings. ILP aged youth in our protective service caseloads are encouraged to participate in ILP activities, but there are no financial incentives offered for their participation. As previously stated, the Department implemented steps to allow financial support to youth through age 23. These efforts, along with the ongoing work of the Fostering Hope and ETV programs, provide support to youth after they age out of care at 21. Efforts to encourage career development and post-education success begin with our Annual Graduation Celebration. All graduating seniors across the state are invited to attend an event designed to recognize the milestone of completing high school requirements. There were 199 youth reported to graduate high school or complete a GED in 2023. There were 13 youth reported to complete college graduation. In the Fall of 2023, there were 217 youth reported enrolled in college and 21 enrolled in trade programs. Since 2015, when Fostering Hope began, there have been 41 youth complete certification programs, 31 complete associated programs, 41 complete their bachelors, and 7 youth receive their masters.

Our Finance Division ensures, through monthly monitoring, that no more than 30 percent of our allotted Federal CFCIP funds are expended for room and board for youth who have left foster care after 18 and have not yet attained 21 years of age. Young people are made aware at the time of discharge that they are still eligible for services and supports post-foster care to include the services and supports of our Fostering Hope Mentors, our post-foster care support providers, and the Foster Youth to Independence program and its Continuum of Care providers linked through HUD.

Alabama offered foster care to youth up to age 21 prior to the national Title IV-E foster care extension. There are provisions regarding school attendance or employment in our current policy to access Title IV-E funding. Young people may remain in foster care continuously past their 18th birthday without re-entering care through request and signature. They remain eligible for all services and supports until they reach age 21. Youth who have left foster care after attaining 16 years of age continue to be eligible for and participate in our adoption subsidy and kinship guardianship supports. Additionally,

youth who exit foster care at age fourteen for adoption or kinship guardianship are eligible to participate in the State’s Fostering Hope Scholarship.

Young people reside in all levels and types of foster care placements after age 18, ranging from traditional foster homes to Independent Living apartments and college dorms. We are working to offer services and supports and foster home placements for young people so that they can remain in foster care in their home counties as needed. There are programs, supports, services, and placements available to assist all special needs populations, to include substance using or addicted youth, pregnant and parenting young people, and those with mental health needs. We are working with a community provider to develop a facility or facilities to address the special placement needs of those young people who have been victims of sex trafficking. We have a partnership with our Adult Services and Mental Health communities to ensure that our young people with developmental disabilities receive the services needed as they transition to adulthood.

National Social Work Enrichment Program, and the **Alabama Reach Program**

A good education is the great equalizer for our young people. We continue our partnerships with the **Alabama Reach Program and NSEP** to promote post- secondary education. Because of these partnerships, we have more young people graduating high school and receiving GEDs and more attending two- and four-year colleges and universities, technical and training schools. Our number of foster youths has increased yearly for the past seven years, starting in FY17 at 161 up to 199 in FY23. We will continue to work with these community partners and work to expand our partnerships with Job Corps and the high school systems, the United States Armed Forces, and the Department of Youth Services to promote graduation and dual enrollment programs that are being offered in high schools across the state.

Alabama Reach

The Reach Program is currently housed at the University of Alabama with support from the University. Alabama Reach provides group sessions, access to host families, year-round dorm access, financial support, training, and volunteer opportunities for any youth identifying themselves as current or former foster youth. The program supports all foster care youth at the University of Alabama and at Shelton State in Tuscaloosa. It is their goal to serve all foster youth in the two- and four-year colleges and technical and training schools in the area. Alabama Reach has expanded its partnership with the Department during the five-year reporting period. They have participated in our annual IL Networking Conferences as participants, vendors, and presenters. They have also provided training and staff support at our annual ILP camps for our foster youth. Participation in the program has steadily increased; nearly doubling the number of youths served, with the exception of a slight decline during the 2020-2021 school year related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Alabama Reach was a supportive partner during the public health crisis, assisting youth with emergency housing and linking them to supportive services. Alabama Reach has expressed renewed interest in partnering with colleges and universities statewide with a goal of having a similar service available to youth no matter where they attend school in the state.

School Year	Youth
2019-2020	14
2020-2021	12
2021-2022	15
2022-2023	24
2023-2024	25

Fostering Hope

Since the passage of the Fostering Hope scholarship bill (2015), 842 young people across the state have received financial and mentor support. It has provided funding to cover tuition and required fees for young people attending 43 state two- and four-year colleges, universities, and certification programs. The scholarship covers tuition and the required fees for all youth in foster care at the time they graduate high school and all youth adopted at age 14 and older. An additional \$3.5 million was allocated for the 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 school years. Fifteen young people received certifications or degrees (seven bachelor’s degrees, 2 associate degrees and five certifications) in the fall of 2023.

Fostering Hope Funding		
2016-2017	164	865,839.50
2017-2018	189	1,067,712.00
2018-2019	194	1,079,449.00
2019-2020	207	1,187,062.00
2020-2021	213	1,232,924.00
2021-2022	251	1,543,621.00
2022-2023	243	1,627,449.00
Total	1461	8,604,056.50

The Fostering Hope Mentors are required to meet with each young person face-to-face at least once per semester. These meaningful visits are done to ensure students are meeting educational requirements, having their emotional and physical needs met, and are linked to appropriate services and supports on their campuses. The Mentors further serve as a liaison for the Department with the universities, should our young people experience difficulties. The Mentors work closely with county staff if participants remain in foster care. The application is accessed on the same web portal. This facilitates streamlining the process and maximizing the funding available for our young people.

Room and Board

Counties often need to know how board payments are to be used to meet a child’s needs. Board payments vary according to the age of a child and the core rate does not include difficulty-of-care payments. The maximum monthly core board payment should be used according to the following breakdown. These percentages are used as a guide and may vary according to a child’s specific needs. **Note:** Incidentals include purchases for a child such as school supplies, movie tickets, etc.):

- Room and Board 85.0%
- Clothing 7.5%
- Medicine Chest Supplies 2.0%
- Incidentals 5.5%

Data on Youth Over the Age of 18

As of February 2024, 501 of our young people remained in care past age 18. This number increased from the previous reporting period which noted 449 remaining in care past age 18; a 10% increase. There has been an emphasis tied to the rollout of the Alabama Transition Plan to encourage older youth to remain in care and receive ongoing IL services. Efforts in this area have clearly been successful. We will continue to monitor the outcomes related to the overall impact on long term permanency and post foster care success. As stated in the current APSR, they reside in every type of placement from traditional foster homes to college dorm rooms and apartments. All young people are eligible to receive training and employment support. Young people all over the state have access to local employment services and receive training to develop and increase their skills with employment and career preparation. All youth exiting foster care are eligible to receive the \$1000 aftercare payment and services and supports three months post their exit from foster care to ensure smooth transitions.

Age	18	19	20	Total 18-20
Total	276	153	72	501

Credit Reports and Health Care Proxies

Credit reports are to be requested by county staff each year upon each youth’s 14th birthday, per PL-113-183. Credit reports are pulled from all three credit bureaus. The results are shared with the young person, and results are recorded in their files. Youth are also provided training regarding the importance of maintaining good credit and responsible fiscal

management. The Office of ILP is developing a pilot to begin batching credit reports in partnership with Experian. This partnership will allow Experian to have the ability to pull the required credit reports to assist the Department in meeting this requirement.

Health care proxies are encouraged with youth who have not identified permanency resources to speak on their behalf, should they become incapacitated. Individualized consultation regarding this matter is provided to staff.

Determining Eligibility of Benefits

All youth aged 14 to 21 in the foster care system or receiving services through our Protective Service Program are eligible to receive services. Foster youth aged 14-21 are eligible for all benefits and services. There are no restrictions for the use of CFCIP funding for foster youth residing outside of the state.

Participation in National Evaluations

The State of Alabama’s Independent Living Program will cooperate and participate in all national evaluations required regarding the effect of the programs in achieving the purposes of Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

Education and Training Vouchers Program

The Alabama Department of Human Resources uses a vendor/provider who is experienced in providing ETV student support services. The vendor uses an electronic application platform. The Department verifies eligibility. The vendor works with the eligible youth and their respective colleges and universities to assess and confirm the cost of attendance. The vendor is selected through the Request for Proposal process and ensures that methodology to avoid duplication and overpayment of federally provided and assisted funding. The ETV vendor is required per contract to maintain a database related to individual and cumulative data related to an annual, unduplicated count and qualitative roster of ETV recipients.

Youth are supported with Chafee Foster Care Independence Program monies allotted for Education and Training Vouchers through our contract with Foster Care to Success. A web portal is maintained, which our youth and their caregivers, university officials, and state office staff can access 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The youth apply online, the information is verified by State DHR, they submit all required documentation related to their institution, and they are awarded ETV funds based on their need. Our contract provider delivers comprehensive support to include care packages, school supplies, and equipment. Our youth are required to check in with an identified staff member once monthly to report their progress.

Our ETV and Fostering Hope participation has steadily increased on pace with our high school graduation rate since FY20.

2022-2023 ETV Students	
Academic Year Total	223
1st Time Funded	102
Returning	121
Fall 2022	184
1st Time Funded	78
Returning from Spring 2022	48
Returning from a prior year	58
Spring 2023	162
1st Time Funded	24
Returning from Fall 2022	123
Returning from a prior year	15

ETV FY23		
Tuition	15,458.00	2.81%
Childcare	11,151.00	2.03%
Loans	4,800.00	0.87%
Living Expenses	147,720.00	26.86%
Housing	238,764.00	43.41%
School Supplies	87,065.00	15.93%
Transportation	55,891.00	10.16%
Healthcare	0.00	0.00%
Computer	7,500.00	1.36%
Credits	-18,889.00	-3.43%
Total	550,000.00	100.00%

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program Training

Our annual three-day IL Networking Conference was held in April of 2023, with 86 professionals attending: representing 60 Departmental staff and 26 providers/partners. The keynote speaker was Michael Sanders with the 220 Experience. Michael led 4 sessions and brought great energy and insight to the conference. He helped everyone reconnect with their “why” for being in this line of work; helped attendees understand how their perspective is just one perspective; taught on working across generations; challenged participants to understand their privilege; and challenged professionals to think outside the box when working with foster youth. There were six breakout sessions offered during the conference that focused on services for youth transitioning out of care, LGBTQAI support ,and policy/procedure of Alabama ILP. A joint session was also held to train and connect providers of our Transitional and Independent Living contract placement providers. The structure of the conference was designed to connect and allow networking to take place between county staff, contract providers and IL service partners from across the state. A networking lunch was conducted during the second day of the conference, where attendees were matched together during the meal with predetermined discussions to share.

In a carry-over from efforts that began in September of 2022, Regional IL consultations and training were conducted at 7 different sites, concluding in November 2023. The focus of the training was designed to support the training needs related to the varying experience levels of out changing county staff. Participants were provided an overview of our ILP services and supports, “All Things IL”. Tools to improve transitions out of care for youth and caregivers was also presented. One of our lived experienced youth provided training related to youth engagement.

Additional IL trainings were provided at our Permanency Conference in April 2023. The lived-experience youth voice was represented in a training on transitioning from foster care taught in partnership with DHR IL Staff and an IL Consultant from Children’s Aid Society. A general session at the conference also included pre-recorded video presentations from youth in care who shared the various positive and negative labels they felt put on them while being in foster care. This same presentation was presented as a breakout session for foster care staff during the two Supervisor conferences held in July and July 2023. Finally, a youth panel presented at the Annual Judicial Summit in November 2023. Youth shared their experiences in and out of care, with an emphasis on youth who were experiencing barriers related to citizenship issues.

Our Children’s Aid Society partners provided quarterly trainings at seven (7) of our Transitional Living placements and (1) of our Independent Living placement. The peer-to-peer training highlighted skill building and successful transitions. DHR ILP staff conducted ILP training to foster youth during our two summer camps in June and July 2023. Youth 17–20 years old learned about services and resources available to them as they transitioned out of care and youth attending the camp for 14 –16-year-olds were introduced to available IL services. The ILP Division in partnership with current and former foster youth and foster parents, provided training at the Annual Foster and Adoptive Parent Association Conference in May 2023.

The ILP Training activities for the reporting period were as follows:
 September 8, 2022 - Regional consultation in Mobile area

September 23, 2022 - Youth Leadership Training in Mobile
 October 13, 2022 - Regional consultation in Etowah County area
 October 22, 2022 - Youth Leadership Training in Etowah
 November 15, 2022 - Regional consultation in Montgomery area
 December 10, 2022 - Youth Leadership Training in Montgomery area
 February 9, 2023 - Regional consultation in Coffee County area
 February 24, 2023 - Youth Leadership Training in Coffee County area
 March 7, 2023 - Regional consultation in Huntsville area
 March 24, 2023 - Youth Leadership Training in Huntsville
 April 4-6, 2023 - ILP Networking conference
 April 19-21, 2023 – Permanency Conference
 September 7, 2023 - Regional consultation in Franklin County area
 September 16, 2023 - Youth Leadership Training in Franklin County
 October 5, 2023 - Regional Consultation in Escambia County at Poarch Creek Band of Indians Reservation
 October 20, 2023- Youth Leadership Training in Escambia County at Poarch Creek Band of Indians Reservation
 November 2, 2023 – Judicial summit
 December 1, 2023-Youth Leadership Training in Jefferson County
 December 27-29, 2023 – Ambassador Leadership Retreat
 February 24, 2024 -Youth Leadership Training and Staff and Foster Care Provider Training in Lee County
 March 22, 2024 -Youth Leadership Training and Staff and Foster Care Provider Training in Montgomery County
 April 2-4, 2024 – ILP Networking Conference
 April 9, 2024-Child Protective Services Conference
 April 17-19, 2024 – Permanency Conference
 May 4, 2024-Annual Graduation Celebration
 June 25-27, 2024- Camp Life I

Consultation with Tribes

The partnership with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians continued during the reporting period. They partnered with our ILP Team and DREAM Ambassadors to host our Transition Fair , our regional consultation with the county staff and a regional DREAM Weekend. The Poarch Band of Creek Indians do not have any foster youth at this time. We share statewide events with our Tribal partners.

The Poarch Band of Creek Indians is not IV-E eligible entity at this time. Consultation is held with the Tribe and State office management to establish protocols and assess any needs they might have. yearly to assess their needs. Should any needs arise related to Chafee/ETV, services as supports will be provided without restriction.

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program Improvement Efforts

Our Youth Leaders (DREAM Ambassadors) meet once monthly during the school year and participate in camps, leadership trainings, state, and local conferences annually. They set and develop goals based on information received from their peers during their monthly meetings which occur in a different county each month. They provide training at their monthly meetings and serve as junior camp counselors at the summer camps/conferences. They develop strategies related to their goals and consult with ILP staff and our Children’s Aid Society partners to effect the change that they would like to see.

Strengthening our partnership with our young people has been a focus in our effort to improve services and support to their peers in foster care and those who are transitioning. Our DREAM Ambassadors have received leadership training and support and have crafted and led this year’s DREAM Council meetings. Our DREAM Ambassadors are also participating in meetings with their peers to prepare them for the stakeholder interviews and facilitating the collection of consumer surveys. They have participated in the annual Daniel Conference every year, traveling to Colorado for the 2023 conference. They have met with our senior Department leadership team to include, the Commissioner, three Deputy Commissioners, two Directors and a Deputy Director in January 2023. That convening was repeated in January 2024 with a meeting including the Commissioner, Family Services Division Director, the Deputy Director of Data Management and Deputy Director of ILP. Youth were provided information related to the roles of the Senior Management Team and were afforded

the opportunity to share their experiences and talk through some barriers. The information shared will be used to update policy.

Older Youth Input

Ongoing skill development is the most integral part of the Independent Living Program. Beyond skill development, we recognize the need for older youth to develop long-term support systems, actively participate in their transition plans, and learn to manage their mental health. In addition to utilizing our designated Alabama Youth Ambassadors to assist with the development of policies and practices, we have begun recruiting for the voice and input of additional lived-experience youth. We had several ambassadors and lived-experience youth participate in our Judicial conference. During that event, youth were able to speak to Judges, County Administrators, and Guardians ad-litem. Information is frequently shared with and solicited from our youth at our quarterly TLP consultations and trainings, Regional DREAM Weekends and our IL Summer Camps. The information collected is used to prioritize and craft needed services and support and update policy where appropriate. The input collected since FY20 resulted in updates to policy related to meeting needs related to extracurricular activities and making IL funds use more flexible.

Report on the specific accomplishment achieved to-date– Includes 2024 Updates:

1. Help youth transition to self-sufficiency:

The number of foster youths in care 18 years and older remained stable, with 449 in FY22 and 501 in FY23. This is a 3% increase from the previous fiscal year’s reporting. We continue to see an increase in the percentage of young people completing high school and transitioning to college, training programs, and employment. We have continued to enjoy the full support of our partners. Our youth have provided training at our Supervisors Conferences, and our ILP Networking Conference.

Permanency Goal percentage of APPLA for children in Out-of-Home Care:

FY2022 (as of 3/31/2022)	10.26%
FY2023 (as of 3/31/2023)	10.50%
FY2024 (as of 2/1/2024)	10.28%

* Excludes children placed in own home, relative home or court ordered non-relative homes.

The number of youths choosing to remain in care after age 18 aligns with the number of youths leaving care with an APPLA permanency plan. We have made progress regarding the placement options and service provision available to these youth.

2. Help youth receive the education, training, and services necessary to obtain employment:

Alabama had a record 199 young people complete high school in 2023 exceeding our previous high of 191. We continue our efforts to review and support post- high school participation in vocational and educational opportunities. Annually we request that each county report future endeavors related to each youth. Those reports are reviewed, and counties are advised related to educational and vocational opportunities that can be shared with youth who had no post-high school plans.

3. Help youth prepare for and enter post-secondary training and educational institutions, ETV Statistics:

Awarded	Total ETV’s	Returning Students	# New Students
2021-2022	194	100	94
2022-2023	219	119	100
2023-2024	237	128	109

NSEP (National Social Work Enrichment Program) is an initiative to engage youth around education and career opportunities through a six-week program in which youth stay on campus at a local university and attend workshops, do community work, experience, and learn about campus life in preparation for career choices. Since 2010, NSEP has graduated over 320 participants. The Alabama Educational Assistance program is a comprehensive student support system developed to help youth attend and succeed in post-secondary education. The program recognizes that funding to attend school must be coupled with the consistent and specific help and guidance that young people need to navigate the

college experience and mature into confident, well-rounded young adults.

Provide personal and emotional support to youth exiting care through mentors and the promotion of interactions with dedicated adults: The State does not have a state-wide mentoring program. Our partners, Heart Gallery of Alabama, and Alabama Reach have developed mentoring programs for our youth. We are currently working with our partners to develop a more formalized network so that youth in every county can have access to mentors and caring adults. Congregate care providers also facilitate mentoring support. Mentors are strongly encouraged, and several counties recruit and link their young people with mentors. Though we continue to seek mentors for all youth in our care, natural mentorships have yielded the best results. Our areas of need with the statewide mentoring program are connected to our youth's placement stability. Our DREAM Ambassadors have identified mentoring as a need, and youth mentoring programs will be a focus over the course of our CFSP. Transition planning to include identifying a caring adult for each youth will be emphasized at upcoming ILP and foster care trainings.

Attending and making academic progress towards completing a degree or certificate is the goal of the Alabama ETV Program. Alabama's ETV program operates in tandem with our state's Fostering Hope Scholarship. We also partner with Job Corps, Alabama Works, and our post foster care partners to reach our goals related to education and employment opportunities after high school. Our Foster Hope Mentors meet with our college youth receiving the Fostering Hope Scholarship to assess their strengths and needs based on their performance and progress in the college/university and trade school setting. They attend ISPs as needed to assist county staff in providing support to young people, meet with college advisors, and provide necessary supports to promote academic success. Our Fostering Hope Mentors have participated in our monthly DREAM Council Meetings, ILP Networking, Permanency, and Supervisors Conferences to provide training to staff, supervisors, and community partner agencies regarding the scholarship and additional supports available to our students. The addition of this team has led to increased secondary education interest and participation.

5. Provide financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, and other appropriate support and services to former foster care recipients between 18 and 21 years of age to complement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to assure that program participants recognize and accept their personal responsibility for preparing for and then making the transition into adulthood: Aftercare assistance is available to youth who leave care between their 18th and 21st birthday in the form of financial assistance or services. Alabama provides each youth exiting the foster care system with a one-time stipend of \$1,000.00. Aftercare financial assistance and support services continue to be available to youth who leave the system prior to their 21st birthdays. For youth who leave care on or after their 18th birthday, policy allows for the youth to re-enter foster care if the need arises. If the youth need to re-enter foster care or remain in his own home, financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, and other appropriate support and services are also to be provided as needed until the 21st birthday. Room and Board payments are available for youth who choose to remain in care after their 18th birthday or for those who leave care after their 18th birthday on a case-by-case basis. County staff must make such requests to their State ILP Specialist to ensure no more than 30% of the state funds are used for room and board. Permanency outcome data will continue to be closely monitored. These programs offer emergency housing, job training, job referrals, internships, and facilitate housing referrals, link current and former foster youth to community services and supports and provide hard services to our young people. Additional placement options were added to our FACTS system to assist young people in moving into their own homes with continued room and board assistance from the Department. Supportive services to maintain those placements are encouraged and provided.

6. Make available vouchers for education and training, including postsecondary education, to youth who have exited foster care due to their age: See chart under #3.

7. Provide services to youth who, after attaining 16 years of age, have left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption.

Services to youth and their families as they leave foster care after age 16 have improved due to our partnership with Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parents Association. Kinship guardians are now provided the same supports, training opportunities, and financial support as foster and adoptive parents. ETV and the Fostering Hope Scholarship are also available to these youth. Services offered by our Alabama Pre and Post Adoptive Services Program are also available to these young people free of charge. Youth and their families may also participate in the free family support services provided by our extensive network of Family Service Centers. Foster youth who have exited foster care to adoption after

age fourteen are now eligible for our Fostering Hope Scholarship, which provides eligibility up to age 26. The Alabama Foster and Adoptive Parents Association offers scholarship opportunities for young people exiting foster care. There are also supportive services offered to these youth by BigHouse Foundation, Youth Tours., Alabama Department of Commerce, Alabama Department of Labor (Alabama Works), the Alabama National Guard and Job Corps.

8. Ensure children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age have regular, ongoing opportunities to engage in age or developmentally appropriate activities as defined in section 475(11) of the Act. Alabama will continue to provide supportive services to those youth likely to remain in foster care until age 21. We will work with all stakeholders, community providers, AFAPA and foster youth to develop policy to encourage participation in age and developmentally appropriate activities. As of February 1, 2024, 501 young people aged 18 to 21 chose to remain in foster care: 28.4% of the total older youth population. The number of youths remaining in care beyond age 18 has both benefits and challenges. Older youth with an APPLA permanency plan are encouraged to remain in care until age 21. Aftercare policy allows for youth to continue to receive support. The challenges in serving the 18 and older population are related to placement options appropriate not only for their age but their maturity levels. The rising cost of housing is extremely challenging when working with our older youth. Supervised independent living providers are facing challenges related to providing safe, affordable housing for eligible youth that will serve as a place that our youth are able to afford post foster care. Serving older youth with challenging mental health issues that do not meet the criteria to receive specialized services as adults is also a difficult population of young people to serve.

Young people who choose to remain in foster care past age 18 experience that process without interruption in services or supports and reside in placements ranging from traditional foster homes to college dormitories. These young people are strongly encouraged to take advantage of education, training, and vocational opportunities available to them while encouraging their participation in their transition planning. Staff, youth, and foster parents have all been provided information and have provided input regarding services and supports to our older youth. During the fiscal year, the Program has worked to improve self-sufficiency outcomes through expanded collaboration and strengthened partnerships with Job Corp, HUD, Youth Towers, Second Shift Alabama, Alabama Works, and the National Guard to assist youth who are homeless or need housing support post-foster care.

FIVE-YEAR PLAN: 2020– 2024, OBJECTIVES

Alabama's Independent Living program worked to promote positive permanency outcomes, well-being, and safety regarding our older youth population. We strategically planned with specific goals related to prevention of and services to our runaway population, improving transition planning and support, improved NYTD outcomes, improved education outcomes, and serving youth statewide. We provided training and ongoing support to all our county offices; conducting county-specific consultation support every three months and as needed for all youth aged 17-20. Consultation support is provided to all counties upon their request on an ongoing basis. Consultation support was also provided to youth who had challenges regarding finding appropriate placement in partnership with our Resource Management Division. Our Alabama Transition Plan and Youth Assessment Summary documents were developed to assist our staff in assessing and implementing needed services in tandem with their individualized service planning. We trained statewide related to Reasonable and Prudent Parenting, Sex Trafficking Signs and Prevention, high school success, and college readiness. Training was provided related to mental health advocacy, traditional and non-traditional education, and employment options.

The global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted our need to enhance our post-foster care services. Youth we were able to serve noted disconnection from appropriate services and supports. Barriers related to homelessness, lack of appropriate medical providers for dental needs, and predatory lending were highlighted. These outcome data were the impetus for stronger collaboration with our partners related to enhancing mental health support and a refocus on the development of networks of support. Ramsey Financial Solutions and our IL app were implemented and developed as a direct result of some of the information collected during the pandemic. The two programs met the need to have our young people become more financially savvy, and the app allowed us to provide needed information more quickly.

We endeavored to improve our young people's access to mentors by gathering our partner agencies and developing several strategies to increase mentorship statewide. Barriers noted were related to the often-transient nature of our other

youth population. High turnover among our line social worker staff was also noted as a barrier. Some of our placement and college support providers have been more successful with their mentor matching efforts. We will continue to work toward a state-led mentoring model.

Our NYTD outcomes remain a challenge. Our current snapshot does not reflect the hard work of our staff through some very difficult times. Our gains regarding connection to a caring adult are reflected. Our gains regarding education are not reflected at all. We will continue to work with our FACTS team and our county offices to provide the training needed to accurately reflect the services being provided to youth statewide.

Alabama’s older Alabama will continue to deliver specialized services and supports to those youth in our care age 14-21, based on their individualized strengths, needs, and goals.

Permanency for older youth continues to be a focus and objective for our program. Our youth who remain in foster care for over five years have increased by 8% between FY22 and FY23; conversely, the number of youths remaining in care for more than ten years has decreased by 27%. Our youth and our county staff are encouraged to support the youth as they remain in care and to continue to build their support teams as they transition. Additional services are also available through our post-foster care providers. We will continue monitoring this number to ensure that all positive permanency options are being explored. The Department’s focus related to our 18- to 20-year-old youth will continue to promote more gradual transitions. Having competent and capable adults in the lives of our young people is paramount to their overall success. We will continue to work with our partners to develop natural mentor opportunities for youth.

OBJECTIVE

An emerging area of concern are those young people exiting care in runaway status. We will continue our efforts to comply with the provisions of PL113-183 with regarding to reporting to law enforcement and the National Missing and Exploited Children per policy requirements to continue to reduce potential sex trafficking victims and additional poor outcomes for our young people.

We have improved our partnership with the National Missing and Exploitation Children. Young people listed in our FACTS system as runaway are reviewed biannually to determine accuracy and to review efforts related to locating them. The most recent review noted that staff was reporting per current state and Federal guidelines. Photographs and information regarding missing youth was provided timely to NMEC. Our number of young people exiting care while listed on runaway has slightly decreased from 17 in FY21 to 15 in FY22. There were 23 young people who exited care on runaway in FY23 an increase of 34% from the previous year’s reporting. Additional guidance regarding policy and procedures regarding runaway foster youth was shared with our county offices on April 27, 2023. We will continue to monitor runaway youth in foster care biannually. Runaway data is reviewed monthly.

End of Care Reason FY 2023	AGE						
	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Adoption Finalized	26	29	24	16	3	2	0
Adult Custodial Care	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Child Aged Out	0	0	0	0	2	17	8
Commitment to DYS	2	4	1	0	0	0	0

Commitment to MH	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Custody placed with Another Agency/Agent	3	3	6	7	5	0	1
Death of Child	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Emancipation	0	1	0	0	26	63	23
Kinship Guardianship Placement	6	15	8	3	4	0	0
Placement with Maternal Relative	34	34	31	23	15	3	1
Placement with Paternal Relative	20	13	15	12	4	2	0
Return to Parent Mother/Father	15	14	5	15	4	1	0
Returned to Parent/Father	14	11	9	7	6	0	0
Returned to Parent/Mother	34	38	39	30	11	3	1
Runaway	0	0	1	0	13	8	1
	154	162	140	113	95	101	35

OBJECTIVE

ILP teens will have access to information about policies and program development along with activities and opportunities that will be supportive as youth transition to adulthood. Youth Leadership will be promoted and enhanced.

Information regarding policies, resources, and programs that prepare and assist youth transition to adulthood is provided through ongoing support services by our contract provider, Children’s Aid Society as part of the content at www.ilconnect.org. This website in partnership with other social media tools, provides helpful tips for teens regarding foster care. Some of the topics include policy, educational and vocational information, peer achievements, camps and conferences, access to our NYTD portal, Independent Living and transitional living providers, congregate care providers, and the community at large. The site is regularly updated.

Beginning in September 2022 and concluding November 2023, the Department has conducted seven (7) Regional ILP meets across the state that included an opportunity for the development of local county youth leadership. Prior to the

regional meetings, local county offices and area foster youth were invited to a Friday night Dream Council meeting led by State ILP staff and Alabama DREAM Ambassadors. Youth who attended were trained on various leadership characteristics and given information on how they could support and lead a youth council in their area. Those youth who attended were able to assist in leadership with the Regional ILP meeting the following day.

The Department has worked with twelve (12) youth/young adults in the role of Alabama DREAM Ambassadors in 2023. We currently have nine (9) Alabama DREAM Ambassadors serving in 2024. The role and expectations of our Ambassadors are that they will partner with the Department as the ongoing voice for Alabama Foster Youth, connect with other in-care youth to represent their voice, partner with county staff to assist with building local youth leadership; and work toward sustaining change in the Alabama Foster Care system. A three-day leadership retreat was held for our 2024 Ambassadors in December 2023 to train, build unity, and cultivate strategies for the upcoming year. Several brainstorming sessions were held to cultivate input from the youth Ambassadors. Partners from the Georgia EmpowerMENT initiative and Florida's Children First provided training for our youth with a focus on team building and goal setting. Alabama's DREAM Ambassadors set two priority areas for 2024: improved transitional and independent living placements and a more formalized and enhanced peer support network for former foster youth.

OBJECTIVE

Improve educational outcomes for ILP Youth partnering with our education systems to provide additional supports and services.

As indicated above, the State has invested in our children's educational success, and it has resulted in very positive results. 165 young people graduated from high school or received their GED during the 21-22 school year. In the 22-23 school year, a record high of 199 foster youth graduated high school. So far, 163 are on track to graduate in 2024.

The Fostering Hope Scholarship Program celebrated its sixth year with an additional 18 young people completing 2- and four-year degrees and receiving certifications. About higher education, our Fostering Hope Mentors, Alabama Reach, Alabama Works, Second Shift Alabama Youth Towers and BigHouse Foundation partners join us in supporting our older youth as they tackle college and careers. We will continue to focus on positive educational outcomes for our older foster youth in out-of-home care. The Children's Aid Society, NSEP, and Alabama Reach, Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Works, the Alabama National Guard, BigHouse Foundation and Second Shift Alabama Programs have all worked to promote higher education, increase interest in trade and technical schools, and dual enrollment in high schools. The state's post-secondary graduation rate is above 10% related to our older foster youth population.

OBJECTIVE

The Department has enhanced its system to track youth exiting care more efficiently due to age from the System of Care to meet National Youth in Transition Data requirements to monitor outcomes for youth transitioning out of care.

Enhanced aftercare services will be available to all teens eligible and served for participating in the ILP Program. We continue to work closely with our FACTS Team to make suggested and required changes to our systems to improve NYTD data collection and youth outcomes.

Over the course of the reporting period, the ILP Program has enhanced and increased post foster care services and supports. Our partners include, Job Corps, BigHouse Foundation, Foster Care to Success, the Foster Youth to Independence Program, Second Shift Alabama, Youth Towers, Alabama Reach, and Alabama Works. The data collected related to the NYTD outcomes is not reflective of the services provided to our youth. One significant data point is the number of youths in post-secondary education. Our number of youths receiving ETV is 237. The number of youths noted in our NYTD data reflect 0% participation in post-secondary education. The Department will work with our FACTS team to develop a more streamlined mechanism by which more accurate measures reflect foster care and post foster care service delivery outcome data.

The Department made enhancements suggested in the NYTD PIP. A training is being developed for staff to ensure the NYTD data is being accurately recorded to reflect the services youth in care are receiving. This will allow the data to be more reflective of the work being completed.

OBJECTIVE

The Department considers all children as “Alabama’s Children” without regard to race or culture. The Department recently renewed efforts related to strengthening our relationship with the Poarch Creek Band youth. The PCB Tribe hosted both the Regional Consultation meeting for our local combined staff in the area and the DREAM Weekend in November 2023. The Tribe has no foster youth at this time; however, the PCB Child Welfare Director attended the DREAM Weekend Saturday event and spoke to the youth about the tribe and its history. Services to our Native youth who reside on reservations are accessible when needed. Our tribe has a comprehensive array of services available to tribal youth who do not access our IL services currently. As of this writing, there are no ILP age youth in foster care with the Poarch Creek Band of Indians.

VI. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION BETWEEN STATES AND TRIBES

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Alabama has one federally recognized tribe, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians (PCI) whose office is located in Atmore, Alabama. Alabama and the Tribe met face to face on May 7, 2024. During this meeting, the Alabama and Tribe discussed the potential goals and objectives for the upcoming CFSP. We discussed with the Tribe the importance of them having an active role in the provision of feedback and development of goals and objectives. Alabama’s tribal contact is Amanda Montgomery, Family Services Director. The Family Services Director serves as the liaison between the Department and the Tribe to schedule trainings, planned visits, and meetings. All contact persons for the Department and PCI were updated and shared at the most recent face-to-face meeting.

Representatives from PCI serve on the Escambia County Quality Assurance Committee, where they assist in record reviews and offer feedback to the county regarding casework and policy issues. Amanda Montgomery, Family Services Director of PCI, is also on the State QA committee.

The Inter-Agency agreement between the Poarch Band of Creek Indians and the Department remains in place with no changes needed. The agreement details who is responsible for protecting children who are enrolled in the Tribe, who is responsible for providing services to tribal children, and steps to take if tribal children are brought to the attention of DHR. The agreement also details guidelines for court involvement if it becomes necessary.

Alabama continues to be in compliance with ICWA mandates. There is an excellent working relationship between the Tribe and the Department. Alabama has a standalone ICWA policy that details the requirements of working with tribal families and children, which is available to all staff statewide via DHR Family Services policy. If there are changes to ICWA law and/or DHR policy, that information is disseminated to DHR staff statewide. ICWA is also included in the record review tool used by staff from the Office of Quality Assurance so that if any discrepancies are noted, they can be addressed with staff.

The PCI reservation is located in Escambia County, which has the most frequent contact with the tribe. Both PCI and Escambia County DHR report having a good working relationship. The county office and PCI share information fluidly between themselves. Both PCI and Escambia County regularly check with one another if information about a family is needed or if verification of enrollment in the tribe is needed. Both agencies are able to make reports to the other and are able to cooperate in providing services to local families, both enrolled and not enrolled. DHR is also available regularly to answer any child welfare related questions the Tribe may have.

Per the agreement between the State and the Tribe, PCI is responsible for providing services to tribal children. These services include case review, prevention services, and services for children in foster care. If children who are living off the reservation become involved with the Department, the Tribe has the ability to assume jurisdiction and provide services as they find necessary. Currently, prevention caseloads for PCI providers are between 10-15 families. PCI is able to offer any

services needed to tribal families and children based on a need. There are no barriers for provided services noted at this time. If there is not a service available on the reservation, then referrals are made to outside agencies. PCI is able to provide transportation and other services to families and children as well, including financial assistance. New to the reservation since the last submission, the Tribe now has a sober living house that is available for parents who have completed drug/alcohol rehabilitation to assist with adjustment to being home and resuming the parenting role. PCI currently has 5 foster homes and no children in foster care at this time. Typically, if a child is removed from a parent, they are placed with relatives, and services are provided as needed. PCI makes every effort to keep children with family rather than placing them in foster care and use the Tribal Court System if needed. The Department has provided PCI with a list of dates and times for Train the Trainer sessions for Trauma Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanence (TIPS) for licensing foster homes. The Tribe also has a preschool and Boys & Girls Club that provide services to children who reside on the reservation and those who are not enrolled. The Boys & Girls Club currently serves anywhere from 300-500 children. Staff on the reservation are required to complete Mandatory Reporter training offered online by the Department and they make reports as required.

Alabama will provide the Tribe with a copy of the 2020-2024 Final Report upon final approval. Copies of APSRs will be emailed to the Tribal Liaison, per the Agreement. Documents from the Tribe to DHR will be sent to the Director of Family Services.

VI. CAPTA

D.

Alabama State Liaison Officer (SLO)

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There have been no substantive changes to state laws or regulations that would affect the state's eligibility for the CAPTA State Grant.

Citizen Review Panel: Alabama is working towards strengthening the CRP process. The department is working with existing groups to be utilized as CRP groups. Alabama's existing group, the Child Welfare Collaborative Initiative (CWCI) will be utilized, along with The Children's Justice Task Force and The Child Death Review Committee. The Department has created 3 new panels that consist of community members and stakeholders. Each panel will examine policies, procedures, and practices of the State and local agencies related to their chosen topic. One group will review child deaths reports. One meeting of each group has occurred, and another is scheduled for this summer.

Use of Grant Funds

CAPTA funding provides salaries and benefits for 5 Program Specialists, 1 Social Service Caseworker, and 1 retired state employee. CAPTA funding also pays for travel for CPS staff to attend the annual Children's Justice Grantee meeting that was held in Baltimore, Maryland on May 23-May 24, 2023.

Alabama does not create a separate document for plans of safe care. As a state, we have several working agreements with families to provide safety and services in which we incorporate a plan of safe care. In any referral, if it is determined that a safety threat exists, the worker assesses the family's ability to make a safety plan with the department to maintain the safety of the child by providing a person who is vetted and can be responsible for the safety of the child/children while the parents maintain custody and work with the department to increase their protective capacities, thereby lowering the safety threat to the child/children. Alabama also uses an Individual Service plan for every family with whom we open a case to list the safety concerns, the permanency plan, the services that will be provided by the agency to lower the safety threat, and the agreement of the parents and any stakeholders to anything for which they are responsible. Alabama incorporates plans of safe care into each of these documents by including services like drug screens, drug assessments, and supervised visitation. The Individualized Service Plan includes a multi-disciplinary outreach and coordination as the plan is developed in partnership with the family, service providers, teachers, doctors, attorneys' relatives and other DHR program staff involved with the family. The team members are invited to participate in the ISP process to allow input and feedback to reach the established ISP goals. Meetings may be conducted at any mutually agreeable and accessible location which maximizes the family's opportunity for participation. The location of each ISP meeting is provided to all team members to allow them to prepare for and participate in the meeting.

Alabama has divided the state into 5 regions, each of which is assigned a child protective service program specialist. Their primary job is to support the county to which they are assigned by consulting on complex case issues in intake, investigations and in home services and completing the Administrative Record Reviews (ARR) for their counties to ensure clients receive due process. As a part of the consultation and ARR process, the specialist makes note if a plan of safe care was necessary, completed, and is currently being monitored. If one is needed but not completed, they immediately notify the county director and the CPS program manager to discuss a plan for correction.

These same specialists complete Alabama's safety assessment with the Division of Quality to ensure that children with whom the department has contact are safe and the necessary services are being provided. Each specialist reviews a random pull of screened out reports, intakes, preventions, CAN investigations, and open protective service cases. They monitor that Plans of safe care are completed in any prevention or CAN to which they would be appropriate. Any safety concerns, including a missing plan of safe care, are immediately addressed with the county director and the program manager for CPS to give recommendations for ensuring child safety.

As a part of the support and review, the program specialists are responsible for identifying training needs within their assigned counties. Plans of safe care, safety plans, and ISP training have been completed in each county as well as in multiple statewide training sessions to ensure that workers and supervisors understand what a plan of safe care is, when one is required, and how Alabama incorporates them into already existing documents and agreements.

1. Intake, assessment, screening, and investigation of reports of child abuse or neglect and procedures for appealing and responding to appeals of substantiated reports of child abuse or neglect.

The primary plan for CAPTA funds continues to be maintain the CAPTA due process requirement through the Administrative Record Review (ARR) process. The ARR process allows for any person, not entitled to an Administrative Hearing, who has an Indicated disposition to request a record review. This program improves the child protective services system by establishing procedures for appeal and responding to appeals of substantiated/indicated reports of abuse and neglect. CAPTA funding has been the cornerstone of many of the projects that continue to grow as well as protect children. This includes the Central Registry/Adam Walsh Act. Importantly, due process for those individuals with indicated/substantiated child abuse/neglect reports is one of the largest services provided. The record review process allows the Agency to identify and review Plans of Safe Care and determine if appropriate referrals/services are implemented. In addition, Plans of Safe Care are monitored through the Safety Assessments completed each year.

The Administrative Record Review program is a partnership between the county departments and the state office. State office and ARR reviewers and the county director or designee review the case record and any information submitted by the person allegedly responsible for abuse/neglect (PARAN) to determine if the record supports a finding of abuse or neglect. The PARANs are given written notice of their right to an ARR. They are informed that the review process will be completed by a DHR independent panel, members of which are not directly involved in the case and have authority to overturn the decision of the worker/supervisor if the record does not support the finding of abuse or neglect. A total of 1,852 reviews were completed, 1,369 were upheld and 126 were overturned.

The State Central Registry on Child Abuse and Neglect continues to be widely used by potential employers who work with children, mostly young children in a daycare setting, to screen applicants for employment and for the screening of foster and adoptive parents. The ARR process is critical to ensure the safety of childcare providers throughout Alabama. CPS staff continues to assist in providing accurate information to other states who are requesting Adam Walsh Clearances so pending placements can be completed timely. From October 2022 – September 2023, the Office of CPS conducted 47,376 Child Abuse and Neglect Clearances.

2. Enhancing the general child protective system by developing, improving, and implementing risk and safety assessment tools and protocols, including the use of differential response.

The Department continues to recognize that supervision is crucial to good social work practice. We continue to work on increasing the capacity of supervisors to assist their staff in making sound decisions around safety planning, case planning, and using the comprehensive assessment to improve case practice and case outcomes. The Department has created a Safety Assessment Desktop tool as well as conducted specialized training on Intake, CA/Ns, and Safety Assessments including Plans of Safe Care to counties by request. The Department continues to utilize a prevention track as a differential response, in that reports taken as preventions are assessed as not rising to a level of a child abuse/neglect report, and yet a safety assessment by department staff (using defined initial contact time frames) is still conducted. If an assessment finds that child abuse or neglect is occurring in the home, then the assessment is reclassified as a Child Abuse and Neglect report, and those policies and procedures then apply.

3. The services to be provided to individuals, families, or communities, either directly or through referrals aimed at preventing the occurrence of child abuse and neglect.

The Department continues to support Alabama's Parenting Assistance Line (PAL). The PAL is a collaborative service of the University of Alabama Child Development Resources and the Alabama Children's Trust Fund. When citizens call the toll-free number, 1-866-962-3030, a Parenting Resource Specialist provides helpful information and support. Callers can also request free literature. The PAL website can be accessed at <http://pal.ua.edu/>.

Community Based Child Abuse Prevention

The Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (ADCANP) uses Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention funds to support various parent education and support programs, also referred to as CBCAP. This includes two programs that service the underserved population of incarcerated mothers through prenatal and parent education classes, doula support, and opportunities for the mothers to stay connected with their children. CBCAP funds also support Children's Aid Society in providing the EPIC parenting classes to pregnant and parenting runaway and homeless youth through the Project Independence program, as well as providing the class in Spanish to parents in the Hispanic and Latino communities. Finally, CBCAP funds support the Alabama Parenting Assistance Line that provides information and support via phone call, texting, or chatting online to anyone in Alabama wanting to become a more confident parent.

CBCAP funds also support parents by funding a Healthy Families America home visiting site in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. This home visiting model, offered through Prevent Child Abuse America, is implemented across the United States and internationally through its comprehensive accreditation and training program that yields significant research showing

positive outcomes for families. Until recently, Alabama had only one Healthy Families America site, but the use of CBCAP funds enabled a second site. Additionally, CBCAP funds support the ongoing efforts of the Alabama Parental Advisory Council, a 9-member council of diverse parents across the state who further parent involvement in the planning and implementation of the agency's prevention programs and activities.

CBCAP dollars help serve Alabama's children with disabilities through seven HEARTS respite programs. The HEARTS respite program is offered across the state through United Cerebral Palsy affiliates and offers vouchers for respite services to parents of children with disabilities up to age 19, which allows the parent a short break from caring for a person with a disability or chronic illness so that can take care of themselves, their other children or spouse, or to tend to their own medical/personal needs. The purpose of the program is to reduce the stress of full-time caregiving associated with raising a child with a disability or with special healthcare needs, strengthen families, and reduce social isolation.

Another critical use of the funds will be for the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers (ANFRC) to develop new Family Resource Centers in underserved areas of the state, as well as increase the capacities of existing centers through the Family Centered Coaching training and the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening and Support training. Finally, funds will go to Charles Henderson Child Health Center to "address ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and toxic stress in youth and families" among the community they serve in Troy, Alabama. This work is led by a local pediatrician who identifies and assesses patients exhibiting signs of ACES and develops a treatment plan for them. The program provides positive parenting workshops and therapeutic expression sessions for children that include art therapy, yoga, and creative writing therapy. These innovative efforts to foster a "resilient community" for the children and families served are not being offered in any other community in the state.

4. Referral of Infants and Toddlers (under 36 months) to Alabama's early Intervention System (AEIS)

Child welfare staff, under provisions in CAPTA, shall refer all infants and toddlers from birth to 36 months, with indicated abuse/neglect reports received on or after June 25, 2004, to AEIS. The Alabama Early Intervention System, a division of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, is funded under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Early Intervention evaluates infants and any toddlers to identify those with a 25% delay in the major areas of development (e.g., physical, social, adaptive, cognitive, or communication skills) or a diagnosed condition likely to lead to delay and provides early intervention supports and services to eligible children.

An AEIS-DHR CAPTA referral form is required for all children who meet eligibility requirements (i.e., must be under 36 months at time of indicated disposition). Due process requirements must be completed for the PARAN before disposing of a CAN assessment and before sending the DHR-FCS-2121 to Child Find. Referrals are sent directly to the attention of ADRS/EI, 602 South Lawrence Street, Montgomery, Alabama 36104, or faxed to (334) 293-7393. Alabama Early Intervention System staff may contact the DHR caseworker for additional information needed to process the referral. Under Code of Alabama 1975 § 26-14-8 © (9) child welfare staff can share information with WEIS. *Refer to Child Protective Services Policies and Procedures, Central Registry, E. Use and Disclosure of CAN Information.* Referrals to AEIS are documented in the service case record. Parental consent is not required when making referrals to AEIS, but the referral should be discussed with the parents or primary caregiver. Alabama Early Intervention System assumes responsibility for obtaining written parental consent needed before AEIS can conduct an evaluation for referred infants/toddlers not in the custody of the Department. Child welfare staff shall pursue parental consent only when the referred infant/toddler is in the custody of the Department.

Note: Part C of IDEA recognizes foster parents as surrogate parents eligible to give written consent for evaluation when an infant/toddler is in foster care. Child welfare staff are not recognized as surrogate parents under Part C and therefore cannot give written parental consent for children in foster care even if DHR holds custody. In order to satisfy both AEIS and Departmental consent requirements for children in foster care, both the foster parent(s) and child welfare worker

must sign the consent forms. The CCWIS report to generate data on this item is still under development. In all CAN reports where there is a child victim under 36 months, who is also indicated to have been abused or neglected, the referral is required before the investigation can be disposed.

The following data is obtained from the Alabama Early Intervention System State Office

The Department continues to work closely with the Alabama Early Intervention System to ensure that children are appropriately referred for services. The two agencies believe that it is important to heighten the awareness of line supervisors about the need for appropriate referrals to the Early Intervention Programs and increase awareness of services available to benefit children who are victims of child abuse/neglect who may have a developmental delay.

Of the 506 referrals made in FY 2023, 340 found no concerns. Four children were already in the system; fifteen children were activated for a Child Find referral. Seventy-two children were closed by Early Intervention with no further action needed, and 73 were closed due to unsuccessful contact. There were 2 referrals sent to Early Intervention that were children over the age of three years. For the referrals that were closed or had no contact, the department fully assessed and offered/provided services.

5. Policies and procedures regarding the use of differential response, as applicable

Code of Alabama 1975 § 38-2-6 (10) mandates that DHR seek out and aid minor children in the state who are in need of its care and protection. Furthermore, Code of Alabama 1975 § 26-14-2 clarifies the legislative intent that protective services shall be made available in an effort to prevent further abuse and neglect, and to safeguard and enforce the general welfare of such children. Child Protective Services’ primary role is to intervene when suspected child abuse/neglect reports are received; however, there are situations when individuals contact DHR to report what they consider abuse/neglect, but the information they provide:

- Does not rise to the level of child abuse/neglect according to statutory and departmental definitions; or
- Is insufficient to determine whether a CAN report exists

When these situations occur and the intake information reveals the children may be at risk of maltreatment, the information is considered a CPS Prevention referral, and an evaluation of the child/family situation is needed. The evaluation process is known as CPS Prevention assessment. Preventions are taken as a differential response to utilize a different approach to assess and identify the strengths and needs of the family and develop strategies for meeting their needs. Preventions are taken while there has been no reported maltreatment as a means to provide services to families to prevent maltreatment from occurring. Many services are provided to families via the differential response, such as referrals to counseling, financial assistance, and others as needed. Risk of maltreatment is defined, for purposes of this policy, as “family conditions or circumstances that, if left unchanged, can cause child abuse/neglect.” The CPS Prevention process is designed to determine whether ongoing protective services are needed to prevent child maltreatment. At any time, safety threats or abuse/neglect are discovered during the CPS Prevention process, child welfare staff must follow *CAN Assessment Policies and Procedures*.

Number of Families that Received a Differential Response as a Preventative Service During the Year:

The data for prevention reports received is as follows:

FY	Preventions Received	Number of Children Involved
2022	9864	13768

2023	9510	13318
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*Data Source: Alabama’s FACTS System

*Preventions are Alabama’s Differential Response

6. Guardians ad-Litem (GAL)

Every child who is the subject of an open case in Juvenile Court is assigned a Guardian ad Litem by the Juvenile Court in the county in which the case is filed. In Alabama, a GAL must be an attorney and must be certified through the Administrative Office of Courts (AOC).

AOC staff has conducted GAL certification and recertification training sessions since grant year 2003-2004 in order to fulfill the requirements of 42 U.S.C.A. Section 5106a(b)(2)(B)(xiii) and Ala. Code 1975, § 12-15-304 (c) that all guardians ad-Litem must be trained as to their role. The federal law conditions the Department of Human Resources’ receipt of CAPTA monies on an assurance in the form of “certification” by the Governor that the state has a state law or a program including items listed in Section 5106a(b)(2)(B) which includes that GAL in these cases be trained in their role. This training requirement is just for GAL who wish to represent children in dependency and termination of parent’s rights cases and not for GAL who may be appointed in domestic relations, probate, or other type cases. It is required by policy that all GAL’s are to receive notice of ISP’s. All children who are involved with the Court in Alabama are appointed a GAL at the initial hearing. This is monitored via supervisory review. The Deputy Commissioner for Family Services at SDHR or her designee attend every training.

As of March 1, 2024, there were 983 attorneys on the master GAL appointment list. The number will increase in April after the first certification course of 2024. Judges bring GALs to the annual Judicial Summit that is held in the Fall of each year.

The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 (CARA)

On July 22, 2016, the President signed into law P.L. 114-198, The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 (CARA). This Act aims to address the problem of opioid addiction in the United States. Amendments to CAPTA’s provisions relating to substance exposed newborns and Plans of Safe Care were thereby enacted. County Directors continue to communicate with local medical providers, hospital staff, and substance abuse professionals to discuss the requirement that DHR is to be contacted in all cases when a medical determination has been made that a newborn has been affected by substance abuse or withdrawal symptoms. Plans of Safe Care are included in CAN investigations and/or the ISP process. Plans of Safe Care are not separate documents. They are plans that are built into Safety Plans or Case Plans (ISPs) as a case is investigated or opened for services. Substance exposed infants are tracked in the FACTS system at the initial contact with a family. Steps to ensure substance exposed children are carried throughout the life of the investigation or case as are necessary and are documented in Safety Plans or ISPs. In Prevention Assessments, (Alabama’s differential response), if children are found to have been exposed to substances, Plans of Safe Care are utilized at that time. Alabama’s FACTS system captures and tracks Plans of Safe Care. Plans of Safe Care are included on the Quality Child Welfare Practice review tools and are monitored through Safety Assessment reviews, random record reviews, and peer reviews.

Alabama’s FACTS system captures parental substance abuse as an entry reason into care and also which substance(s) were involved. There is also a Plan of Safe Care court in two counties, Jefferson, and Jackson. This is being provided through a grant, and the AOC is heavily involved. The referral process allows for the Courts to become involved with expectant mothers who are struggling with addiction prior to the birth of the baby to provide preventative services. The Agency does not have a mechanism to track costs related specifically to CARA. There is not a code on the work sampling forms to capture Plan of Safe Care or related duties, but rather this would be captured under Case Management. The Office of Child Protective Services continues to gather data to track the numbers of reports involving Substance Exposed Infants, coupled

with the Agency’s response and delivery of needed services and supports. The QCWP Case Review Tool for Foster Care and CPS cases addresses whether there was evidence that Plans of Safe Care were formulated for children born affected by substance use. Feedback is then immediately shared with the county as needed.

The Department continues to track the data in FACTS. The Plan of Safe Care courts have not resumed at this time. Clients are referred to a Safe Care program that provides wrap around services to mothers who have children that were substance exposed at birth. In addition, there are instances in which a plan of safe care does not constitute ongoing services provided by DHR. For example, a relative gets custody, children are adopted, and families are linked to community resources.

There were no changes to policy or practice concerning plans of safe care. The plan of safe care is incorporated in the Individualized Service Plan. It is monitored and evaluated by child welfare staff regularly to determine its effectiveness in producing desired outcomes. The state of Alabama did not identify any issues in implementing the provisions, and there was no technical assistance needed. Alabama has not participated in a CB site visit relating to the development of plans of safe care for infants born and identified as being affected by substance abuse or withdrawal symptoms resulting from prenatal drug exposure or a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Number of children referred to CPS under Policies and Procedures Established to Address the Needs of Infants Born with and Affected by Illegal Substance Abuse, Withdrawal Symptoms, or a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (number of children with each of the identified symptoms/allegations who were subjects of a child abuse/neglect report received by the Department). Data and time frames are provided below for the number of children in CAN reports received by allegation for the following allegations (Note: Referral Intake date was the method used to assign children to the yearly cohort groups):

- Chemical Endangerment (methamphetamine)
- Positive for Drugs at Birth / Drug Withdrawal
- Positive Test for Alcohol at Birth / Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

FY	TOTAL	Chemical Endangerment	Positive-Drugs at Birth	Positive-Alcohol at Birth/FAS
2022	702*	151	545	6
2023	728*	231	493	4

Data Source: Alabama’s FACTS system
2023: 710 unique children, 18 had multiple allegations
2022: *688 unique children, 15 children with 2 allegations

SDHR continues to work in conjunction with the Children’s Justice Task Force to implement the Substance Abuse Assessment Training. The Substance Abuse Assessment two-day training was held four times in FY 2023. Three trainings were held in Montgomery, which is centrally located. At the request of supervisors and staff, the final training was held at a new location in the northern portion of the state in an effort to improve attendance and limit travel for the northern counties. The trainings were held on January 9-10, February 27-28, May 22-23, and July 31-August 1, 2023. The training attendees are child welfare staff, supervisors, and administrative staff and focuses on the complex nature of families that are struggling with issues of substance use and how to assess child safety in these cases. This training continues to educate our staff on the importance of understanding and monitoring substance abuse to guide in the implementation of Plans of

Safe Care. Additionally, this training supports the idea of using the multidisciplinary approach when assessing and working with families struggling with substance use issues. The training increases the knowledge of substance use assessment services throughout the state and encourages communication between child welfare services and substance use assessment providers to better meet the needs of families. This training also works to address personal bias, specifically unconscious bias, when assessing families and child safety, specifically as it relates to substance use. Training evaluations continue to reflect very high scores from attendees on the content, structure, and activities provided during the training. In an effort to strengthen the evaluation of this project, an additional evaluation was administered in October 2023 to assess the ongoing goal achievement of this training. Exceptionally high scores in increased knowledge and skills, increase in decision-making skills, increase in job competence, and usefulness in day-to-day work supported the continuation of this training project. Almost 100 people were trained during these 4 trainings. An additional four trainings are scheduled for FY 2024.

CHILD FATALITY AND NEAR FATALITY PUBLIC DISCLOSURE POLICY

Family Service Administrative Letter No. 7452, dated March 19, 2015, addresses the reporting and public release of records in cases of child fatality or near fatality. It was released to County Directors of Human Resources on March 30, 2015, for immediate implementation. The DHR Guidelines for reporting child deaths and near fatalities included guidance on the composition of county Human Resources Child Death Review Committees and procedures for child death reviews. It includes:

- Cause, date (of death/near fatality), and circumstances regarding the child's fatality or near fatality
- Age, gender, and race of the child
- Child welfare involvement with the child/family during the 12 months prior to the date of the child's death or near-fatality incident. Identification of other pending referrals/open cases on the child/family at the time of death or near fatality
- A description of any other child welfare involvement with the child/family during the 12 months prior to the date of the child's death or near fatality incident
- The review process will consist of an objective discussion by the Review Committee of DHR's involvement with the family and an analysis of the Department's performance as it relates to policy, procedures, services, and best practices, etc.

Upon request for disclosure, information regarding child fatalities or near fatalities will in turn be provided by the Office of Data Analysis.

American Rescue Plan

Alabama DHR used American Rescue Plan Act supplemental funding to facilitate the annual Child Protective Service workers training. This training was held in Birmingham from May 3-5, 2023, for 150 front line workers. The training covered topics including using interpreter services, how to manage your time as an investigative worker, proper safety assessment and how to handle a child death investigation. There was also a session on ethics. The training provided participants 14.75 hours of CEU's. Presenters included departmental staff as well as external experts.

In 2022, Alabama used the American Rescue Plan money to fund the expansion of Intensive In-home services to families with open child protective service cases. The state has continued to use the money to fund this service which provides services to families in their homes. With this additional funding, Alabama was able to maintain slots dedicated to preservation referrals to those programs in several counties statewide to include several rural areas where access to services is limited and where poverty is more prevalent. This has allowed identification of maltreatment or likelihood of future maltreatment and greater access to services targeting prevention of removal from the home and entry into out of home care. This service is especially useful in cases in which the children are under 5 and not in school. It allows the agency to place children back in their homes or leave them in their home safely with the intensive nature of the wrap services provided. This service can also provide drug counseling in the home to families with substance abuse issues which are the families identified by the state as the families whose children are more likely to enter out of home care.

Alabama has not experienced any barriers with accessing or using the supplemental funds.

VII. UPDATES TO TARGETED PLAN

E.

A. Foster Parent Adoptive Parent Diligent Recruitment Plan

Alabama has a Diligent Recruitment Plan with 12 goals and 35 objectives, and this statewide plan has been provided to each of Alabama's 67 counties. Due to the diversity and specific needs of each county, a County Recruitment Plan has been developed to ensure the needs of families and children are met. These plans coincide with Alabama's statewide plan. Each county submits their individualized recruitment plan to the state office and provides updates annually regarding their progress towards reaching their goals. Each county has targeted monthly plans and includes goals such as training families in Deciding Together, holding a certain number of TIPS classes, public service announcements on local radio and television stations and in written media, contacting local churches and other civic groups to discuss the need for foster parents, and setting up booths at local community events.

Plans are reviewed upon receipt by the Deputy of the Office of R&HCS. Although submitted in the first quarter of the year, these plans are fluid. Each assigned Program Specialist also reviews these plans and is prepared to discuss them during quarterly calls with each county. Each plan is written to coincide with the (CIP) County Improvement Plan. Counties are encouraged to base their needs from data provided during their (CSA) County Self-Assessment as well as input from community stakeholders. The office of R&HCS monitors recruitment plans through quarterly consultations and monthly reviews.

The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support has identified seven pilot counties that are assigned to two specialists. These specialists work closely with the county director and resource staff from inquiry to licensure. Quarterly TEAM meetings are held with each pilot county to assess timelines to full licensure, meaningful recruitment activities, specific populations for placement needs, county capacity to place siblings, home availability to youth ratio, and reasons for home closures. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support has been providing additional support to one of our pilot counties which is one of the larger counties in the state. The Office of Recruitment and Home Care Support has assisted this county with conducting 6 TIPS classes between September 2023 and August 2024. Based on the characteristics of children in care in this county, a plan was created to recruit for this population. Efforts have included recruiting in specific zip codes, holding TIPS classes in different parts of the county on different days and times to make the classes more assessable. 16 families completed TIPS in July 2024 and are in the finalization process of licensure. There are currently two classes being taught with a total of 30 families. Most families report that they became aware of the need of foster and adoptive families and upcoming classes via our website, billboards, and radio ads. This has proven to be successful.

B. Health Care Oversight and Coordination Plan

The state of Alabama, along with local health departments, the State of Alabama's Medicaid program, local medical providers, local dental health providers, mental health providers, foster parents, and the Alabama Psychotropic Medication Review Team (APMRT), work together to ensure that the physical and emotional health needs of Alabama's children are met.

Though the team moved to a telemedicine services model, behavioral services, medication reviews, or both were provided to 88 clients from October 2022 through September 2023. The APMRT provided services to 26 different referring counties in the state of Alabama, with 38 referrals for behavioral services and 50 for medication review only. Extensive training continues to be provided to a residential treatment facility in the catchment area. The team has noted a steady increase in medication review requests, behavioral intervention services, and online training and education. The AMPRT has safely resumed in-person services and continues to provide a hybrid model consisting of both telehealth and in-person services and will provide in-person trainings to staff and stakeholders. During the period of October 2022 through September 2023, APMRT conducted 345 in-person appointments and 337 telehealth appointments, for a total of 682 completed appointments. The APMRT received 126 appointment cancellations between October 2022 and September 2023. The APMRT found that the telehealth format was not suitable for each referred case, but families were receptive to behavioral and medication review services provided in this format, and the hybrid approach has worked well across several cases this fiscal year.

The biggest challenge identified by APMRT from October 2021 through September 2022 was the high number of cases with adolescents that the team identified as “high needs cases.” These cases were characterized by multiple problem behaviors (e.g., theft, lying to caregivers, sexual behavior) displayed by adolescents and numerous barriers to working with the respective caregiver. More specifically, these cases required an extensive amount of time from the consulting LBA as well as one or more of our prescribers. In turn, the number of youths the respective LBA was able to concurrently serve decreased substantially.

In an attempt to address noted deficits in the APMRT’s delivery of behavioral services to complex cases and with adolescents in care, the APMRT is developing two new initiatives. They are developing an assessment tool to determine caregivers’ understanding of their (a) need for behavioral interventions, (b) time commitment for collaboration meetings with APMRT personnel, and (c) interest in reducing psychotropic medication. With this information, the APMRT hopes to better prepare and assign caseloads. In part, this process also involves analyzing data the APMRT has collected on caregiver contacts with previous families over those past five years. This also includes carefully tracking the time periods by which most beneficial outcomes should be produced. Second, APMRT is expanding the focus of their training with adolescents to include further skill development. That is, in addition to focusing on behavior to improve their relationships with family members and medication self-advocacy (developed in the fall of 2021), APMRT has developed protocols to broaden adolescents’ self-management skill sets. These programs currently include financial literacy (e.g., completing taxes, learning how to get a loan), applying for jobs and admissions to community colleges, obtaining a driver’s license, making healthy food choices, and general time self-management (e.g., how to create and abide by schedules). The APMRT collective experience that adolescents in child welfare are almost universally deficient in these skills. APMRT is currently working with Auburn University’s recording studio to produce instructional videos that will be available for general use (they will provide the links on the APMRT website). Their preliminary data indicate that adolescents engage with the materials, learn from the instruction, and recognize the value of the training videos. APMRT believes that developing these skills will increase the successful independence of adolescents in care.

Additional information regarding the protocol for this project can be found in the Health Care Services Plan submitted with the 2025-2029 CFSP

C. Disaster Plan

Alabama had two major disaster declarations for the calendar year 2023, January 15, 2023, and May 5, 2023. The governor filed three (3) state of emergencies for severe weather (January 18, 2023, March 24, 2023, and June 10, 2023) and one due to winter weather (January 14, 2024). No department staff were activated during these times.

In the event Alabama is affected by a natural disaster, plans are in place to identify, locate, and continue the availability of services for children under state care or supervision. Further, plans are in place to ensure a response to new child welfare cases, to remain in communication with caseworkers and other essential child welfare personnel, to preserve essential records, coordinate services, and share information with other states.

Staff of the Department of Human Resources are required to assist during times of disaster in the state. Each staff member completes disaster training annually. The Department has procedures in place to ensure that all citizens of the state who need child welfare services during a disaster receive those services timely, no matter their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background.

A copy of Alabama’s updated disaster plan was submitted with the 2025-2029 CFSP. There were no changes or updates required to ensure uninterrupted essential agency operations during a public health emergency.

D. Training Plan

Alabama’s Training Plan provides a list of initial and ongoing trainings for staff and providers. A description of each class and credit hours is also provided. A copy of Alabama’s updated Training Plan was submitted with the 2024 APSR.

VIII. STATISTICAL AND SUPPORTING INFORMATION

F.

INFORMATION ON CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICE WORKFORCE:

Alabama's Child Protective Service professionals and requirements for employment are as follows:

- **Social Service Caseworker I:**
Bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university in any major
- **Social Service Caseworker II:**
Current permanent status as a Social Service Caseworker I, a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university in any major, and two years' experience as a Social Service Caseworker I
- **Social Worker I:**
Bachelor's degree in social work from a social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education and eligibility for licensure as issued by the Alabama Board of Social Work Examiners
- **Social Worker II:**
Current permanent status as a Social Worker I, two years' experience as a Social Worker I, and an active LBSW as issued by the Alabama Board of Social Work Examiners
- **Senior Social Worker I:** Master's degree from a social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education and eligibility for licensure as issued by the Alabama Board of Social Work Examiners
- **Senior Social Worker II:**
Current permanent status as a Senior Social Worker I, two years' experience as a Senior Social Worker I, and an active LMSW licensure
- **Service Supervisor I:**
Bachelor's degree from an accredited four-year college or university in any major AND three (3) years of professional social work experience in child protective services, adult protective services, child/adult foster care, and/or adoption operations.
OR
Bachelor's degree from an accredited* four-year college or university AND 30 semester or 45 quarter hours in social or behavioral science courses AND two (2) years of professional social work experience in child protective services, adult protective services, child/adult foster care, and/or adoption operations.
- **Service Supervisor II:**
Current, permanent status as a Service Supervisor I, a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university in a social science or any major with at least 30 semester or 45 quarter hours in social or behavioral science, and two years' experience as a Service Supervisor I
- **Senior Social Work Supervisor I:**
Master's degree in social work from a social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, current permanent status with DHR as a Social Service Caseworker I or II, Social Worker I or II, Senior Social Worker I or II, Service Supervisor I or II, or Human Resources Program Specialist, and two years of professional social worker experience in child welfare and/or adult services in a public welfare agency
- **Senior Social Work Supervisor II:**

Master’s degree in social work from a social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, current permanent status with DHR as a Senior Social Work Supervisor I, two years of professional social worker experience in child welfare and/or adult services in a public welfare agency, and an active LMSW licensure as issued by the Alabama Board of Social Work Examiners.

All workers are required to complete initial training Striving Toward Excellent Practice (STEP) Foundations, which consists of approximately 40 hours of training. STEP: Foundations is based on five foundation concepts: the belief that people can change; respecting the family’s culture; joining with families; building partnerships with birth families; and foster/adoptive families in parenting; and working with families in an ecological (systems) framework. After the initial STEP Foundations courses, workers may attend specific modules of STEP which include Intake, Case Management, Investigation, and Adoption. The STEP trainings also include an On-the-Job Training component designed to strengthen the learning process for new workers.

After working with the Department for the times specified above in the classification descriptions, workers are eligible for promotion to the Supervisory level of employment.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FOR CPS WORKFORCE

- Service Supervisor I (50223, 92 employees)
- Service Supervisor II (50259, 103 employees)
- Senior Social Work Supervisor I (50224, 28 employees)
- Senior Social Work Supervisor II (50275, 21 employees)
- Social Worker I (50248, 95 employees)
- Social Worker II (50257, 67 employees)
- Social Service Caseworker I (50246, 442 employees)
- Social Service Caseworker II (50250, 213 employees)
- Senior Social Worker I (50221, 59 employees)
- Senior Social Worker II (50258, 23 employees)
- Total: 1,143 employees

RACE	SEX	COUNT
AMERICAN INDIAN	F	3
	M	0
ASIAN	F	2
	M	0
BLACK	F	492
	M	48
HISPANIC	F	12
	M	0
HAWAIIAN	F	1
	M	0
NO RESPONSE	F	15
	M	1
TWO OR MORE	F	14
	M	1
WHITE	F	520
	M	34
TOTAL	F	1,059
	M	84
GRAND TOTAL		1,143

***State Of Alabama Personnel as of 01/15/2024**

INFORMATION ON CASELOAD/WORKLOAD REQUIREMENTS

Child Abuse and Neglect Investigations: 12 new reports per worker per month

Ongoing child protective service cases (families): 18 per worker

Alabama's CPS workforce is often times cross-trained in other areas of child welfare, including foster care and adoption, as many counties in the state do not have "specialized" staff. Many county child welfare workers conduct child abuse and neglect investigations, work ongoing child protective service cases with families, work foster care cases, and conduct adoptions.

Alabama's system is not currently set up to track the specific degree held by each worker. Typically, these classifications: Senior Social Worker Supervisor I and II, Senior Social Worker I and II, hold Master's degrees or higher, and these classifications, Service Supervisor I and II, Social Worker I and II, and Social Service Caseworker I and II, hold Bachelor's degrees. In the future, Alabama will seek to use LETS (Learning, Education, and Training System) to track the specific degrees held by each worker, as well as courses taken.

IX. Financial Information:

G.

Title IV-B, Subpart 1:

The Alabama Department of Human Resources utilized FY 2005 Child Welfare Services (CWS) funds to assist the state in providing Protective Services and Foster Care Maintenance. For specific amounts, please see CFS-101.

Title IV-B, Subpart 2:

The state and local spending figure for the Title IV-B, Subpart 2 programs in FY 2023 was \$ 5,959,331, compared to the 1992 base year's figure of \$2,792,630.

Education and Training Vouchers: Please see Attachment C for details.

Payment Limitations:

See CFS 101 for details.