

MEMORANDUM

TO: Maria Z. Mossaides

FROM: Edie Rathbone

RE: Foster Care Review Observations

DATE: June 9, 2022

In March and April 2022, I observed 51 Foster Care Reviews (FCR). I observed by joining the virtual meeting that was organized by the Foster Care Unit at DCF. At the beginning of each review, I introduced myself to the attendees of the review. I explained my role as an observer on behalf of the Office of the Child Advocate. I further explained that my purpose was to learn about how the reviews were being conducted in general, rather than about the specifics of any one case. After introducing myself, I set my computer to mute and turned off my video so that I was not seen nor heard during the review. I did not participate in the review in any way.

The three-person Review Panel in a FCR consists of a Case Reviewer (FCRer) who is a member of the DCF Foster Care Review Unit, a Second Party who is from the Area Office in which the case being reviewed is assigned (but is not in the chain of command for that case) and a Community Volunteer.

Prior to my observations, I worked with OCA staff to develop standardized questions to help frame my observations and track the quality of each review. I will use these questions to report on my observations.

Generally, there is no discussion at the outset of the review about who was given notice of the review and why noticed parties were not present. However, the FCRer does generally seem to know who is expected at the review. If someone is not present, they ask the social worker about whether that person is expected to attend. The FCRer also takes time to call a missing party into the review and only proceeds once they have the sense that everyone who is intending to attend is present.

In all FCRs, there is a discussion of the Family Assessment and Action Plan (FAAP) which includes a consideration of whether the Plan is still relevant.

The safety and wellbeing of each child is always discussed. The foster parent is given ample time to describe in detail how each child is doing in the home, what activities they are engaged in and, if the child is school aged, how they are doing in school. If the child is in a residential program, program staff gives a detailed description of how the child is doing in the program.

If there had been a prior review of the case, the current review discusses any progress since that prior review. The FCRer was careful to frame the discussion so that the focus is on the six months since the last review.

The efforts of all parties are always discussed. There is also always a discussion about what services are in place and what services are on the FAAP. However, these discussions are sometimes muddled, as it is not always clear exactly how engaged a party is in the service and/or whether a particular service is available. There were also many reviews in which the social worker did not have confirmation of a party's participation, either because they did not have a sufficient release of information by the provider, or because they had not been able to reach a provider.

There were some reviews in which an open and honest discussion of the situation did not occur. Usually, in these cases, there was a foster parent in the review, who may also be a potential adoptive resource, and a biological parent(s) who is working towards reunification. DCF is obligated to "concurrently plan" for a child in care and this can result in an awkward situation in a FCR when potential adoptive resources are face to face with the biological parents.

In approximately 50% of the reviews, it was not evident that the length of time that a child had been in care and the effect that time was having on the child were being considered during discussion about permanency/goals for a child.

Permanency and goals were consistently discussed. However, in some circumstances timelines appeared to be established solely to align with the next FCR rather than being grounded in the realities of the case.

There was a community volunteer participating in 49 of the 51 reviews I observed. In 20 of the reviews, I found the community volunteer to be actively engaged in

the review, which I determined by the questions they asked or comments they made. Community volunteers are all engaged in the Determinations section of the review however, by that point in the review, the volunteer is usually simply agreeing with the determination made by the FCRer.

In all the reviews, I observed that the FCRer was focused on the unique challenges of the case being reviewed and the individuals in the case. Although the determinations required to be made at the end of the review are standard and sometimes seem formulaic, I always felt that the discussion that preceded the determinations was individualized to the case.

Following each review, the FCRer prepares a Foster Care Review Report that is distributed to all attendees. I have reviewed the reports for the cases I observed.¹ These reports are comprehensive and include a history of the case, the current situation, and detailed recommendations, when appropriate, for further action on the case. They also include, when appropriate, a description of what needs to be done to achieve the permanency goal.

¹ The FCRer for one review left DCF prior to completing the report; DCF intends to reconvene that review.