

Structural Recommendations

Complete

Financial

***To-Do

A. External Structure (Short-term Recommendations)

1. **External Relations Advisory Committee:** Appoint an advisory committee of no fewer than nine and no more than 15 members to advise the secretary on matters of importance related to external relations, such as the department's reputation, and building stakeholder relationships. The secretary should choose someone from each of the nine DCFS regions of the state to sit on the advisory committee and acquire representation from various disciplines related to child welfare and family services such as judicial, faith-based, nonprofit, education, adult literacy, etc. There are good examples of this committee structure in Tennessee, Virginia and California.
2. *****Service Provider Partnerships:** Enhance exceptional, existing partnerships. Explore the possibilities of new partnerships to better meet the goals and objectives of DCFS. Enlist the help of the newly formed advisory board in this task.
3. **Legislative Liaison:** The role of a strong legislative liaison is critical in this budget climate. The person(s) fulfilling this role should work with the secretary, department managers and the governor's office to secure funding streams for DCFS at the Legislature.
4. *****Interagency Collaboration:** The care of children and families in Louisiana needs to be addressed using a full system of care approach that relies on strong interagency collaboration among departments. This requires reframing the child welfare system through cross-agency integration, marking a dramatic change from the days of agencies not communicating or thinking about the ways in which their work interacts with other agencies. See the long-term recommendations section in this report on Page 17 for recommended solutions related to the Children's Cabinet.
5. *****Expand University Partnerships:** Continue and expand relationships with higher education institutions throughout Louisiana to build new partnership opportunities and increase the pipeline of qualified workers to the department, including internships, supervision opportunities of social work candidates to retain employees and additional training.

B. Internal Structure (Short-term Recommendations)

1. **Appoint a New Secretary and Leadership Team:** In order to fundamentally change the direction of the department and send a strong message of change to DCFS workers and the public they serve, sweeping change must be made at the highest levels of leadership. The new secretary must be an optimistic, courageous and qualified "people leader" who will both advocate and serve their department and our state's most vulnerable populations with a bold, visionary and accountable approach.
2. **Internal Operations Advisory Committee:** Appoint a diverse advisory committee of no fewer than nine and no more than 15 members to advise the secretary on operations within the department, particularly department structure, department performance, employee satisfaction and disconnection between policy and practice at all levels. The committee should comprise staff members and stakeholders at all organizational and experience levels.

3. **2010 Reorganization:** Assess the effectiveness of the current department structure in light of changes since the 2010 reorganization and make necessary changes to better serve the children and families of Louisiana. Our committee found the reorganization was not motivated by a desire to better protect and serve children and families, but instead driven by the philosophy of downsizing and streamlining. In fact, our committee has identified very few positive changes resulting from this reorganization.

a. The current structure is similar to that of the 1970s and a sign that we have moved backward. For example, since the reorganization, a top-heavy regional structure has resulted in only one regional manager overseeing all areas in his or her region.

b. Following the closure of several field offices across the state, the department is now understaffed, and the populations most in need are underserved. Many caseworkers work from home, the efficiency and effectiveness of which should be evaluated.

4. **Examine and Realign Structural Flaws:** Realign the organizational structure so that child welfare programs and resources are in one division and the means-tested eligibility programs Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Kinship Care Subsidy Program (KCSP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are in a separate division. Administrative offices and the Office of General Counsel should be supportive of all programs and may be housed in a single administrative division.

5. **Metrics for Success:** Identify the best measure to determine outcomes and use them appropriately. Quantitative metrics can be manipulated and cannot entirely capture qualitative circumstances.

6. **Staffing Crisis:** Fully staffing DCFS with the right people in the right places is absolutely essential to getting the department back on track. Staffing problems have resulted in the following recommendations:

a. **Fully Staff DCFS:** The department has been severely understaffed since the 2010 reorganization. For example, in 2009, DCFS employed 1,008 child welfare caseworkers, while in 2013 that number dropped to 816. This has resulted in cascading difficulties that directly impact the populations that DCFS is meant to serve. The department must prioritize fully staffing each area within the department.

b. **Invest in Employees:** Staff members are the most important resource at the department. The department must change major aspects of its work climate and operations in order to develop new talent at lower organizational levels and keep experienced employees. Veteran talent and dedicated employees were driven out after the reorganization and continued turnover of the secretary left a gap in experience and institutional knowledge. Each incoming secretary brought in management from outside of the department rather than investing in and growing talent at DCFS, which compounded this problem. The department should develop a long-term staffing plan that includes a review of the number of staff who are nearing retirement and the number of recently retired staff who are currently being used for special projects (WAEs).

- c. *****Staff Turnover:** An 18-month average lifespanⁱⁱ for child welfare workers, resulted in high staff turnover, which was a consistent theme throughout reports to the committee. Staff turnover is averaging around 24% statewide,ⁱⁱ but that number is actually worse in several regions. Swift and sweeping measures to address this issue would provide immediate relief and capacity to the department.
- d. *****Employee Satisfaction:** Trust and morale among staff appears to be very low, especially among field staff. Current and former employees described feeling a lack of appreciation, high pressure to meet unrealistic “success” metrics and that their concerns were often ignored. The work climate was even described by one veteran employee as increasingly antagonistic toward employees.
- e. *****Staff Training:** There are reportedly only four staff trainers in DCFS.ⁱⁱ With tremendously high staff turnover, trainers cannot keep up with training new hires or continued training for veteran employees. Additionally, it costs over \$5,000ⁱⁱ to train each new worker. Current and former DCFS employees reported wanting more training to better execute their jobs. With limited mentoring due to high staff turnover, training is paramount.
- f. **Discontinue Freezing Positions Related to Child Welfare:** Freezing child welfare positions makes it impossible to fully staff critical child welfare functions and is forcing the wrong people into management positions in order to keep positions unfrozen.
- g. *****Management Concerns:** Management hires and placement have resulted in inefficient management, staff turnover, low employee satisfaction, etc. Multiple sources independently confirmed that placing more efficient managers with experience in the areas they oversee into the right roles is critical to revitalizing functionality and addressing staff morale problems. The need for new and qualified management was a consistent theme throughout the information presented to the committee. Managers must have a better grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of each staff member in order to place the right employees in the right roles. Many new hires have not had backgrounds in economic stability or child welfare and patterns seem to have emphasized hiring attorneys instead.
- h. **Dynamic Legal Team:** DCFS needs a legal team that is focused on how DCFS can accomplish its mission under the law rather than why it can’t be accomplished.
- i. **Staff Authority:** Casework with DCFS can be a “high risk, but low reward” job, especially when workers are not empowered to exercise the reasonable decision- making authority needed to do their jobs well and in a timely fashion. Caseworkers are professionals and should be granted the necessary authority to act in that capacity.
- j. *****Implement Legislative Auditor Staffing Recommendations:** The 2014 Legislative Auditor report on DCFS (see appendix) includes staffing recommendations that should be considered moving forward. It appears as though few corrective measures have been taken despite repeated audit findings. High staff turnover makes this even more difficult.

7. **Funding Crisis:** DCFS is underfunded and understaffed. DCFS cannot possibly do more than it is doing under current funding circumstances. Until DCFS is adequately funded, the department will struggle to carry out its mission in providing care for our children and families.

- a. **Fully Fund DCFS:** The department is sorely underfunded and cannot do any more than it does under current funding restraints. Funding follows values, and if we truly value the safety and well-being of our children, we must find a way to fully fund the work of DCFS. Identifying creative funding sources, flexible pockets of departmental funds and grant writing should all be on the table.
- b. **Explore All Federal Funding Options:** This committee supports the maximum draw down of available federal funding streams. Specifically, we recommend a review of the funding sources and the use of TANF dollars to ensure that the core functions of DCFS are funded, especially child welfare. We suggest studying Kentucky as a potential example for ways that Medicaid dollars can be used to fund the child welfare work of the department.
- c. **Explore All Nonprofit Funding Partnerships:** In this budget climate, nonprofit partnerships that increase funding opportunities are more critical than ever. Organizations like the United Way may have the means to draw down federal match dollars to fund services typically provided by DCFS.
- d. **Assess Targeted Case Management:** Assess the department's 2015 plan to use targeted case management as a means of financing child welfare, the status of the case management system for child welfare and the impact on staff time to adequately use this system. If found not to be effective, TANF and state general funds should be returned to the department to support this core purpose.
- e. **Budget Appropriately for Paid Overtime:** Caseworkers are working many overtime hours to keep up with unrealistically high caseloads, but because there is no money appropriately budgeted to compensate for overtime hours, workers are being asked to take involuntary time off to compensate them for those hours. This leaves them further behind in their work, driving up burnout, low morale and high turnover.
- f. *****Implement Legislative Auditor Funding Recommendations:** The 2014 Legislative Auditor report on DCFS (attached) includes funding observations and recommendations that should be adopted moving forward.

8. **Functions Out-sourced and Transferred:** FMLASource assumed the role of third-party administrator for FMLA administration services within Governmental Efficiencies Management Support (GEMS) Office of Human Capital Management (HCM) agencies effective August 1, 2015. Management at the local and state level was more cost efficient for the state Human Resources, and IT Tech Support was reassigned from DCFS and transferred to DOA.

Communications Recommendations

A. External Communications (Short-term Recommendations)

1. **Strengthen Public Relations:** The DCFS brand perception must be studied and likely restored. Recent news articles have drawn attention to instances in which the department has failed to fully provide services to the public, protect children or where employee misconduct has been highlighted. External communication must be strengthened based on new leadership and strong performance.
2. **Reexamine the Role of Confidentiality:** Study the confidentiality laws in child welfare operations and communications by engaging the expertise of the Children's Code Committee of the Louisiana State Law Institute, the judiciary and other child advocates. Concern over the use of confidentiality to obstruct communications and transparency has grown due to recent high profile incidences of child abuse and neglect.
3. **Two-Way Communication:** The department would benefit from an increase in two-way communication with the communities they serve. Not only would this improve the quality of care, but it would also increase much needed prevention efforts.

B. Internal Communications

1. **Review Communication across Organizational Levels:** Specifically, review the frequency, mechanisms, and manner by which management communicates with field staff.
2. *****Fix the Grievance Process:** The current worker comment submission system is inoperable. Fieldworkers have no meaningful access to the secretary. The secretary of DCFS should conduct regional visits during which the secretary has occasion to listen to employees in the field who deliver DCFS services and consider their comments.

Short-term Programmatic Policy and Practice Recommendations

There is a disconnect among policy, procedure and practice in the department. The following recommendations stem from an assessment of practice before policy and aim to improve the quality of services provided to children and families by the department.

A. Child Welfare

1. **Reduce Caseloads:** The current average caseload exceeds national and state standards,ⁱⁱⁱ which adversely affects both capacity and the quality of services. Caseloads have reportedly increased by 18%. Combined with a 20% staff reduction, caseworkers are overwhelmed. High staff turnover is further compounding the caseload problem because new hires have protected caseload numbers, which pushes more and more caseloads to seasoned staff. As expected, this drives up burnout and turnover of veteran workers. Unrealistic expectations are placed on workers with high caseloads. When those expectations are not met, the consequences are punitive. Consistent with the Legislative Auditor's report, hiring more caseworkers would provide some immediate relief but not an entire solution. Ultimately, child safety is at risk.
2. *****Increase Services Offered:** The Legislative Auditor found that caseworkers did not have access to a complete array of services needed by their clients because they are not offered by DCFS. Consideration of new program options should include the re-instatement of effective and efficient community-based program contracting to support access to a complete array of community services to all children in all regions of the state. In the meantime, nonprofit resources may expand current services.
3. *****Fund the YAP Program:** The Young Adult Program provided transitional care to youth who "aged out" of foster care at 18. Funding for YAP was eliminated in the 2013 budget and has not been restored. HCR 168 of the 2015 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature (found in the appendix) formed a Task Force on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care to study public policy and financing options for youth aging out of foster care. A report of initial findings is due by February 1.
4. *****Improve Services Provided to Families:** Explore ways to improve services to families as DCFS sometimes struggles to provide such services. The Casey Foundation has done a great deal of work in this area and can be a great source of information on this matter.
5. *****Foster Care Home Turnover Rate:** Explore new options for generating new foster homes because the department is currently churning through new foster homes at a high rate. In fact, our committee heard reported instances of children being forced to sleep in local offices due to a lack of placement resources. Caseworkers should be granted the authority to make reasonable exceptions to the foster/home capacity rules and authority to make recommendations of guardianship should be made at the regional level.
6. **Adoption:** The permanency policy for adoptions does not work, and the state office has not listened to employees on the ground telling them it would not work. It is simply impractical in the field. Clear policy is needed to guide staff decision-making, but policy should be flexible as to allow for commonsense decisions in unusual circumstances such as the adoption of siblings. DCFS was doing a great job in this area before this policy was changed.
7. *****Review the Guardianship Policy:** Consider removing the rule that guardianship may be recommended only for children ages 12 and up. Routinely, for example, grandparents request guardianship of their grandchildren under 12 but are denied. In some cases granting guardianship is the appropriate and timely path to permanency. Additionally, caseworkers should be granted the authority to make recommendations of guardianship at the regional level.
8. *****Review Child Welfare Metrics:** As emphasis on numerical performance indicators increased, more and more importance was placed on closing cases as quickly as possible. The negative effects of this practice are clear. DCFS must shift its focus back to providing quality services to our children and families in keeping with its primary mission.

9. **Expand Travel Regulation Exemptions for Child Welfare Workers:** Expand the current waiver of travel restrictions as soon as possible for DCFS employees who are conducting child welfare case-related activities. For more information, please see the attached memo.

10. ****Explore Effective Case Management Software:** The current case management software configuration works well enough for economic stability services, but it does not offer child welfare staff the systems needed to accurately and efficiently capture data on child abuse and neglect. All systems and programs (CAFÉ, VIBE, ACCESS, FATS, SDM, TIPS, PSI Fusion, Lases, Lases Web, Document Imaging, On-Base, etc.) within DCFS should be evaluated for effectiveness and duplication of information.

11. **Child Support Enforcement Authority:** Various components of the Child Support Program are now structurally divided, which is contrary to a long-standing federal requirement (45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 302.12) for a “single and separate organizational unit,” though the Federal Office of Children Support Enforcement has not disapproved of our state plan. Each of the newly separate divisions (program, field operations and general counsel) fall under different management now. The only position with oversight over all three is the secretary. State office staff and contractors answer directly to the child support director, though he or she has no management responsibility over the field staff. Many managers of the program have little knowledge of the program. Only one regional child support manager has experience in the area of child support. DCFS should realign the organizational structure so that accountability and responsibility for daily operations and resource management are within a single and separate structure.

B. Economic Stability

1. **Reduce Caseloads:** As previously outlined, the current average caseload exceeds national and state standards, which adversely affects both capacity and quality of services. Some caseloads exceed 40 cases per worker, resulting in an unrealistic expectation of employees and a liability to the department. The department was unprepared for a large spike in cases that came from the implementation of the online CAFÉ system, as well as from high staff turnover rates.
2. **Review SNAP Metrics:** The emphasis on speedy service delivery in SNAP success metrics skew the importance of the quality, completeness and accuracy of services delivered.
3. **Apply for Federal “Able-bodied” SNAP Waiver:** Louisiana has accepted this waiver, which has been offered to states with high unemployment rates for the past 19 years and should continue to do so under the current unemployment rate. There are many reasons why this is both morally and fiscally the right thing to do. For more, see our attached memo submitted to the governor-elect and transition team.

C. Restore Critical Programs:

1. **The Youth Aging Out of Care** discussed above, offered support to youth 18 and older aging out of foster care. Reinstatement of this program is imperative for these youth, as research shows that they have the highest likelihood of becoming homeless and facing other tragic outcomes.
2. **Early Childhood Support and Services (ECSS)** an innovative program serving the developmental needs of very young children from birth to age 5, loss operating funds of approximately \$5 million in 2012. ECSS targeted the most vulnerable families in Louisiana and used evidence-based services to promote positive parenting and decrease the likelihood that children would enter foster care. Reinstatement of this program would provide screening, referral services and treatment for high-risk families and their young children.
3. **The Child Care Development Fund (CCDF)** transferred from DCFS to the Department of Education in July 2015, as required in Act 3 of the 2012 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature. This transfer included licensing of all childcare facilities and administration of CCDF, the federal programs subsidizing childcare for low-income working families. Legislative oversight of both the Senate and House Education and Health & Welfare Committees should continue in order to ensure that the changes do not duplicate agency systems and to ensure that families have greater access to quality child care. Changes in licensing should provide safe quality care for all children, not only those in publicly-funded programs. The childcare assistance subsidy program for working families served almost 40,000 children in 2009, and dropped to approximately 15,000 in 2015.

D. Domestic Violence: Adopt the forthcoming recommendations of the Domestic Violence Prevention Commission that are scheduled for release in January 2016.

E. Contract Awards, Review, and Reimbursements

1. *****Reduce the Delay in Contracts:** New contracts began July 1, 2015, though some external agencies report an extreme delay in receiving signed contracts and first payments with some reporting receipt as late as November. That is five months' worth of expenses. In some cases, the late management required an increase in borrowing on line of credit, which increased interest costs, which are not allowable or reimbursable costs. This discourages external partnerships and places nonprofit service providers and partners at risk of providing services which may not be reimbursed.
2. *****Stabilize Reimbursement Rules and Expectations:** The rules of reimbursement change from month to month with no notice. Additionally, it is reported that none of the rules for billing are in writing and, thus, change on a whim without notifying program managers. All budgeting forms are created in Microsoft Word rather than in budgeting software that would make calculations accurate. Some budget revisions, for example, require contract amendments if the costs do not match the budgets, but there is nothing in writing about when a budget revision requires a contract amendment.
3. *****Train Contract and Billing Staff Adequately:** The staff members working with contracting partners do not appear to have strong financial or accounting experience or training.
4. *****Provide Contactors with More Budget Flexibility:** Most federal grants and state agencies allow for a reasonable amount of variance (increase/decrease) on budget line items without requiring a budget revision. DCFS does not allow more than a 30% variance per line item before triggering a budget revision, which can be difficult for a nonprofit to project.

Long-term Recommendations

A. *****Increase Focus on Prevention:** The most successful way of protecting children is preventing bad things from happening in the first place. The department should refocus resources to expand evidence-based prevention programs that support at-risk and first-time parents, such as the Nurse Family Partnership in Oklahoma. DCFS should continue the prevention work and funding of the Louisiana Children's Trust Fund.

B. *****Revitalize the Children's Cabinet:** The Children's Cabinet (La. R.S. 46:2600-2605) provides the perfect vehicle to promote the well-being of children as a top priority in the governor's agenda and to chart a path forward to realize that agenda across all agencies through cross-agency integration and a full-system-of-care approach. Utilize an executive order (see attached draft) to implement the revitalization of the Children's Cabinet. See, for example, similar executive orders issued in Virginia, Washington, Tennessee and New York.

1. The current cabinet has fallen largely inactive due to lack of interest and effectiveness. Moreover, the cabinet lacks a specific charge, direction and set of long-term goals.

2. To wield necessary authority, the cabinet, as defined by law, comprises only secretary-level appointments, not staff level designees.

3. The participation of the Governor and First Lady would provide the clout and tone necessary to bring secretaries to the table to revitalize the cabinet.

4. The Children's Cabinet Advisory Board should continue to meet and will benefit from the direction of a full-time director in order to meet the activities required by law.