

Digest of a Sunset Audit of the Foster Care Citizen Review Panels

As required by **Utah Code 78-3g-102(6)**, we have conducted a sunset review of the Foster Care Citizen Review Panel pilot project. Utah's child welfare system has been subject to much public interest and legislative reform in recent years. As part of that reform effort, the Legislature established Foster Care Citizen Review Panels (CRP) to increase program accountability by having an independent panel review the cases of children in foster care.

Citizen review panels are groups of citizen volunteers not associated with the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) that periodically review the cases of children in foster care. The reviews focus on whether the children are receiving appropriate services, whether the parents are complying with the service plan, and whether progress is being made towards achieving a permanent placement. In this audit, we compared the citizen review process with the administrative review process (within DCFS) which also focuses on the same types of issues.

Our office conducted a previous audit of the CRP pilot project in 1994 (**Foster Care Citizens Review Board, Report #94-08**) where we tried to assess its effectiveness compared to administrative reviews. In the first audit, we could not make this evaluation because the CRP process was too new, but in this audit we found that review type does not impact the amount of time children spend in foster care or the number of foster home placements. However, citizen review does enhance caseworker accountability and promotes positive case outcomes. We also found that a more timely reporting process is necessary for citizen review recommendations to be of value.

The following summary identifies the main findings of this audit:

Review Type Does not Affect Time in Care or Number of Placements. An analysis of 140 citizen review cases and 317 administrative review cases shows there is little difference between the two in terms of the time children spend in foster care or in the number of foster homes placements. In fact, other factors such as "case closure reason," "age of child," and "district" are more related to these outcomes. In addition, the limited research available is inconclusive about whether one review type is superior to another in achieving foster care outcomes.

Citizen Review Panels Enhance Caseworker Accountability and Promote Positive Case Outcomes. Citizen review panels encourage compliance with child welfare laws and promote caseworker accountability. From observing case reviews and citizen review reports, we believe that the reviews are covering the criteria mandated by law and that caseworkers are held accountable to these criteria because of the structure of the review process. Also,

participants in the citizen review process generally feel the panels are helpful because they provide useful recommendations based on an independent perspective of the case. For instance, in our caseworker survey, we found that 70 percent of the recommendations made by a citizen review panel in particular cases were implemented by the caseworker.

Citizen Review Reporting Process Needs to be More Timely. Several judges and DCFS caseworkers told us they do not receive the citizen review panel reports and recommendations (a formal record of the panel’s observations and concerns for each case) in a reasonable time frame. Three of six judges we talked to were concerned about delays in getting panel reports, and at least eight caseworkers mentioned the same concern. The judges said sometimes reports are received after a judicial review has already taken place so the report is of little value. This has been caused by the amount of citizen review staff time that has gone into recruiting and training new panel members lately for the expansion of the citizen review process, which has left a backlog of uncompleted reports. Part of the problem also seems to be that reports are not always routed to judges in an efficient manner by the court clerks. We believe the citizen review staff needs to take whatever steps necessary to see that reports are completed and issued within the 30-day time period required by law.