Department of Family Services: Adoption program evaluation

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Adoption Program Evaluation
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Grateful acknowledgment to the Clark County's Policy & Analytical Services and the Department of Family Services for their support. We would also like to thank our participants and the public administration faculty for the encouragement and help they gave us to complete our program evaluation.

We dedicate this paper to our parents for their unconditional love, support and encouragement, enabling us to enjoy a prosperous and loving life.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Persons contemplating adoption in Clark County face many legal boundaries and lengthy delays. Since adoption is a creature of Clark County, the answers usually can be found in state statutes, agency regulations, and court opinions. Federal statutory and constitutional laws also play a huge part in such areas as adoption subsidies, adoption of children with special needs, and training of all adoption workers.

While the overall adoption program is similar in all states, the fine points frequently differ. This research outlines the legal foundation of adoption, describing the adoption legal process, and the workings of the Department of Family Services (DFS). A flowchart has been created to illustrate the inner-workings of the department, and all possible courses of action that prospective adoptive parents may undertake. In addition, it discusses a range of recommendations, which we deem a necessity to repair the system.

Interviews with adoptive parents, as well as with current and former agency staff members document a range of frustrating issues and barriers that prevent efficiency. These include difficulty in accessing the DFS, unpleasant initial contacts and ongoing frustration with the agency or aspects of the process.

This study is the first analysis of the adoption program in Clark County based on information collected from thirty files that were provided by a DFS supervisor. It provides the County with something it never had before - a picture of the internal procedures of the adoption department.
The purpose of this evaluation was to define Clark County, Nevada’s Department of Family Services’ (DFS) adoption finalization problem, create evaluation goals and develop an appropriate program evaluation to expedite adoption finalization. This paper first examines the background of the DFS and the adoption process under the assumption that it contributes to better performance in adoption finalization. Second, the research methodology covering adoption case files, interviews and observations are described. Third, the quantitative and qualitative results are presented. Lastly, a discussion of recommendations and challenges will be discussed.

Permanency planning is defined as the process through which planned and systematic efforts are made to ensure that children are in safe and nurturing family relationships expected to last a lifetime, according to the Child Welfare League of America (2006). The DFS’ adoption program was evaluated to identify the barriers in achieving permanency within the appropriate length of time, as prescribed by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). For purposes of this evaluation, we focused our efforts only on those cases where a prospective parent(s) has been identified. We identified barriers to these adoptions and suggested ways to overcome them, thus decreasing the time required.

Adoption Sections Researched

The DFS adoption manager, Renee Swain (2006) distinguished the following process components in a timeframe handout. Therefore, the following sections were analyzed to identify barriers to the adoption process:
Social Summary

The social summary is a written summary of a child’s history and is provided to the prospective adoptive parent(s). The social summary should be completed within sixty days from date of referral for adoption, and within fourteen days of the scheduling of the termination of parental rights (TPR) court date.

Case Assignment

The adoption supervisor should assign each case to an adoption worker within five days after the referral for adoption is received.

Adoption Application

The process of delivering and receiving a complete application can be the toughest and most time consuming part of the process. The adoption workers should make contact with adoptive families, including mailing or delivering the adoption application, within fourteen days from the referral for adoption date. The application, which includes reference and background checks, should be processed and completed within forty-five days from the date the application is mailed or delivered.

Adoptive Home Study and Approval

This component involves assessing the residence of a prospective adoptive parent(s). The assessment evaluates the residence using regulations, which determines if the home is safe and permanent for the adoptive child. Home studies should be completed within sixty days from the case assignment date for approval from the DFS administration.
Adoption Subsidy

This is a financial supplement to remove barriers for adoption of children with special needs. Adoption subsidy application packets should be given to the adoptive parent(s) within sixty days of the initial referral to adoption. Adoption subsidy agreements should be finalized within thirty days from application completion.

Background of the Department of Family Services, Adoption

During the past five years, the adoption organization has reorganized with a new integrated child welfare service delivery module. The agency was formed on July 1, 2002 in response to the merger of the State of Nevada and Clark County child welfare services. In 2001, Assembly Bill 1 (AB1) passed the Nevada Legislature’s 17th Special Session. With the passage of AB1, Nevada adopted a new integrated child welfare service delivery model. Under this model (Nevada Legislature, 2001), case management functions for foster care and adoptions, family preservation, centralized intake, family foster care and emergency care, foster care/group home licensing, eligibility, and foster care recruitment transferred from the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services to counties whose population is 100,000 or more. As a result, the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services was transferred to Clark County with two strategies in mind: to increase efficiency within the department and to reduce the size of caseloads. The Nevada Legislature approved funding to achieve these goals.

Outcome and Performance Measures

Outcome and performance measures are evaluated by timeframes for case files. This is also evident in ASFA. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services,
Administration for Children & Families records statistics on time between TPR and Finalization. We will compare our case file findings against this study.

In our initial meeting, the DFS adoption manager provided a graph (Appendix 1) of the number of adoptions finalized by month. The data ranged from nine to fifty-three adoptions finalized per month. It was clear this chart provided the DFS adoption manager with performance measure for her organization.

Process Flowchart

A process flowchart visually displays the ideal adoption timeline. In Appendix 2, the ASFA was used to address significant time periods and national standards. Based on our knowledge, we captured the process at a high level to include key data studied in our adoption program evaluation.

Flowchart Symbols

In this diagram, the two rounded boxes are used to indicate the start and end points to the adoption finalization process. Diamond boxes are used to indicate a “yes” or “no” decision, while square boxes represent process steps. In addition, letters starting from A through I are used with light blue circles and ovals to symbolize data points captured. These items are located in the legend with the corresponding letters. We specifically plotted both process steps (boxes) and decisions (diamonds) with data items (circles and ovals) to signify at what timeframe the data point occurs in the process.

Initial Step

The first step depicted with a rounded box states child taken into care. This is the point of entry into the adoption system, not including foster care. Next, data items A and E occur prior to the reunification decision. The letter A represents TPR Referral Date or Date of
Relinquishment. E stands for Social Summary Date. E is placed directly after A because our research found that social summaries were not always occurring after the TPR. Social summaries are now occurring sooner as a result of hiring private consultants to complete them. Gracie Burton, Adoption Case Files Supervisor, stated she does not accept children into the adoption process without a social summary (2006). The consultants are hired on an ongoing grant specifically for social summaries. This has provided DFS considerable timesavings in shifting the social summary responsibility to consultants.

Decision for Reunification Effort

The reunification effort is a key decision point in the process flowchart. The decision objective is to determine if the biological parent(s) will pursue reunification. The basic definition of reunification is “the returning of children to the custody of their biological parent(s), after they have been involved in a period of foster care (Adoption.com, 2006). The DFS strives to keep children with their biological parents whenever feasible. This is handled with a concurrent plan and TPR. Otherwise, parental rights are relinquished resulting in a date of relinquishment. In other words, the biological parents are voluntarily relinquishing their parental rights. Naturally, the TPR and legal process are routed quicker with less obstacles illustrated in the bottom half of the flowchart. Data point B occurs earlier after voluntary relinquishment is established. Also, this is illustrated in the flowchart with the permanency planning hearing occurring without review hearings. Each review hearing is set six months after the last hearing, which would delay permanency by at least a year. In general, TPR is sought by either a date of relinquishment or TPR date, not both.

The biological parent that intends on pursing reunification is routed in the top half of our flowchart. This course of action is represented by “yes” after the decision for reunification
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effort. DFS works with the parent to meet their case by attending review hearings and continuing to engage in permanency planning hearings.

Data Captured

The remaining data captured falls within the permanency planning hearing and termination hearing. During this timeframe, five data points occur: referral to adoption, case assignment date by supervisor, adoption application completed, home study date and adoption subsidy date. These events occur prior to the post-TPR review hearing then adoption is finalized, which is notated by the letter I.

Flowchart Analysis

At our preliminary presentation on May 8, 2006 the public administration faculty recommended a Program Evaluation Review Technique/Critical Path Method (PERT/CPM) charting technique. It was also suggested that a process flowchart might already exist. We could not locate an existing flowchart from the DFS, UNLV’s Center for Urban Partnerships or any other entity interviewed. Thus, we created the flowchart to the best of our understanding with key ASFA dates with data points. This flowchart was finalized and verified by a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) trainer in the UNLV Center for Urban Partnerships.
METHODOLOGY

To answer our evaluation goals in achieving permanent adoptions in Clark County within the timeframes identified by ASFA, quantitative data was initially collected in a case file review. In addition, interviews and training observations furthered our analysis to fill gaps in areas of our program evaluation.

Adoption Case Files

Thirty active case files were used for our adoption data collection. The adoption manager determined that an audit was needed to pinpoint barriers in achieving adoption permanency. These files were selected by the DFS. We conducted the file review on April 22, 2006 and June 16, 2006 at a DFS facility on 333 N. Rancho Drive. A worker was present while we reviewed case files. The review covered the following data points: case number, case worker/social worker, TPR Referral Date or Date of Relinquishment*, TPR Granted Date*, Referral to Adoption Date*, Case Assignment Date, Social Summary Date*, Date Adoption Application Received*, Home Study Date*, Adoption Subsidy Date*, and Date of Placement and Completion Date*.

The data collection was recorded on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (Appendix 3). Nine of the twelve data points were identified as key steps in the ASFA process. These nine items are denoted with an asterisk (*) in the prior paragraph. In the case files, all data points were collected using interval data types or level of measurement. By using dates or interval data, it allowed us to calculate number of days between key steps.

Interviews and Training Observation

The initial DFS interview covered viewpoints from the adoption manager, Renee Swain in January 2006. Shortly thereafter, interviews were conducted outside of DFS and training
observations in May and June 2006. The interviews and observations outside of DFS occurred to
grasp a better understanding of persons involved with DFS.
RESULTS

The adoption of a child in the child welfare system follows the TPR and requires the completion of core components. The core components and the average length of time to complete each were sampled. A selected sample set of 297 case files were obtained for evaluation from the DFS. This represents approximately 10% of the current active cases referred to adoption.

The core components were evaluated on a "complete" or "incomplete" status, as well as compared to the guidelines as set fourth in the DFS Timeframes for Cases R&D through Permanency handout (2006). The sample data set was tabulated using simple descriptive statistics to draw a conclusion about the possible barriers to completion. The data records for approximately thirty case files were then quantified. The total time for the core components of each case record was also identified and the core components exceeding the timeframe were flagged for further review. The overall time between TPR and finalization results was compared to the study "Time between TPR and Finalization Statistics & Research" for Nevada (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). The data was collected from October 1, 2002 through September 30, 2003.

Qualitative data included a variety of interviews and observations: initial DFS meetings with management and staff, interviews with child welfare trainers, previous adoptive parent(s) and an interview with a former DFS employee. Training observations were also achieved by attending the Child Welfare PIP Training.

Two initial DFS meetings were conducted in a standard sit-down question and answer format. One informal group meeting was conducted with the former adoptive parent, which included the parent's perspective of the adoption process and an opportunity to ask many
questions. One meeting was conducted with the child welfare trainer in a standard sit-down question and answer format. One meeting was conducted with a former DFS employee in a standard sit-down question and answer format. Two separate sit-in observations were made at the formal PIP training sessions. The UNLV School of Social Work housed these observations. The results of the interviews and training observations provided a unique opportunity to acquire a broad amount of relevant data from varying perspectives in an efficient amount of time.

Limitations of Evaluation

We acknowledge that limitations exist to this evaluation. Pressure from the local media concerning the investigation of seventy-nine suspicious child deaths in Clark County between 2001 and 2004 was borne by the DFS director (McCarthy, 2006). This resulted in the sudden and unexpected resignation and departure of the DFS director creating an aura of uncertainty in our dealings with DFS staff. Subsequently, the media also criticized current county manager for not conducting a national search for the former director’s position (Hansel, 2006).

Presented with a limited data set to review, one caveat must be made known that the sample set evaluated was not randomized as described in Tools for Decision Making by David Ammons (2002, 18-19). DFS staff selected the cases by choosing active cases on hand. This could be argued as a biased and unrepresentative sample, as the ideal method involves collecting random samples. The lack of consistency among case files contributed to the difficulty in locating the dates of areas researched, multiple variations in file layout were routinely noticed. In addition, the overwhelming amount of documents in each case file may have added to the lack of consistency among files. Furthermore, when dates could not be found in case files, staff could not always confirm missing dates electronically in the UNITY database.
INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Initial results from the sample set indicated that the average time between TPR and finalization has decreased to 13.97 months, with a standard deviation of 14.22. In comparison to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Review (2005), the average for Nevada was 21.54 months for the 295 cases. The data was collected for the period of October 2002 to September 2003.

For our data collection, we used a sample set of thirty case files for the period July 2001 to January 2006. The same measures were used to analyze the time between TPR and finalization. The distribution of adoption case files in comparison to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Review are as follows: 4% of cases were completed in less than one month, as compared to 1% in DHHS stud; 29% of cases were completed in 1 to 5 months as compared to 7%; 11% of cases were completed in 6 to 11 months, as compared to 24%; 21% of cases were completed in 12 to 17 months, as compared to 16%; 7% of cases were completed in 18 to 23 months, as compared to 19%; 0% of cases were completed in 24 to 29 months, as compared to 12%; 0% of cases were completed in 30 to 35 months, as compared to 6%; 11% of cases were completed in 3 to 4 years, as compared to 12%; and 0% of cases were completed in 5 or more years, as compared to 3%. 18% or five cases were in incomplete status. (See table below.)
Review of Interviews

As mentioned earlier, the methodology involved a series of interviews of persons who have involvement with the DFS. Renee Swain, DFS Manager; Constance Brooks and Kevy Malone, Child Welfare Trainers; an anonymous adoptive parent, an anonymous former DFS employee, and Marti Shannon, Adoption Manager for the State of Utah were interviewed. The results of these interviews are as follows.

DFS Manager

Mrs. Swain and the team agreed at the initial meeting that the team would perform an audit of the case files. She expressed her understanding that her caseworkers process an average of 25.9 cases at any given time.

Child Welfare Trainers

Being that no member of our team had prior formal training, education, or experience with adoption programs, we attended two PIP training sessions conducted by Constance Brooks and Kevy Malone for the DFS employees. This training was critical in familiarizing us with key concepts, terms, and processes used daily by the DFS caseworkers. Brooks and Malone (2006) expressed that in reality, the average caseworker processes approximately forty cases at any given time. We also heard from the trainees a sense of frustration that they were instructed not to discuss the adoption subsidies with prospective parents prior to finalization.

Adoptive Parent

We interviewed an adoptive parent who requested that his/her name be withheld. Overall, the parent was frustrated with the obstacles he/she encountered during the adoption process of their child. They stressed that in his/her opinion, “Adoption is not broken. Foster care is broken (Anonymous, 2006).” The parent also hypothesized that the average caseload is
well over 25.9 cases, although he/she was not able to provide substantial evidence of such. Despite it all, he/she reported that they are extremely happy with the child they adopted through the DFS.

Former DFS Employee

The former DFS employee, whose name is withheld (2006), offered suggestions for improving the adoption process at the DFS. Among his/her suggestions are creating a certification program for licensed caseworkers and hiring a clerical worker to input files into the UNITY system.

Adoption Manager, State of Utah

As part of benchmarking, we interviewed Marti Shannon, Adoption Manager for the State of Utah, to compare the processes of her program with that of Clark County. Ms. Shannon explained (2006) that unlike Clark County, the adoption and foster care departments are located organizationally in the same division, and the average caseworker processes only thirteen cases at any one time. One caseworker processes a case from start to finish. Ms. Shannon conceded that she is unsure whether Utah’s model is the most efficient. While having these departments in the same division eliminates the communication deficiencies observed in the DFS, the Utah caseworker is tasked with absorbing an enormous amount of knowledge in order to perform duties, which would be split between two or more workers in Clark County. Last, Utah caseworkers meet with foster care/adoptive parents at least monthly.

Review of Training Observations

The PIP training served to acquaint our team with basic terminology used by the DFS. In our conversations with the trainees, we learned that the DFS experiences a high rate of employee turnover, though not substantially higher than that of the Utah counties. Also, the
direction that they are not to discuss the adoption subsidy added to their frustrations. Further we
learned that Clark County has not developed an adequate system for documenting the number of
relinquishments. The trainers gave an account of how they placed a random call to Washoe and
Clark Counties to request the number of relinquishments. Washoe County was able to provide
the information in 2 business days, while the same request to Clark County took over a month to
complete. We acknowledge that this survey method is not scientific, but anecdotal in nature.
Recommendations

As a result of our data reviews and observations, we have arrived at the following recommendations to overcome the challenges the DFS faces in achieving permanent adoptions in Clark County, Nevada within specified timeframes.

Support Staff

The DFS should explore hiring data entry clerks to update its UNITY records by evaluating the successes of Washoe County. As mentioned earlier, the random call placed to Clark and Washoe Counties while not scientific, could be an indicator to the success of hiring the clerks.

Decrease Caseload

During the interviews, we were presented with a wide discrepancy in the average number of cases processed per worker. This number ranged from 25.9 to 55 depending on the interviewee. The lowest figure is still approximately twice that of the Utah counties, whose program is regarded as one of the most efficient in the nation. The DFS must find avenues to decrease its average caseload. Their number of cases has remained consistent or increased over the last ten years, and that trend is expected to continue. Therefore one viable solution is for Clark County to allocate more funding to the DFS to increase staffing levels.

Flex Scheduling

As a result of its 24 hour per day nature, Clark County is a location where a higher proportion of its residents work non-traditional hours, sometimes making it difficult for the DFS case workers to conduct monthly meetings with foster/adoptive parents during scheduled work hours. The DFS should explore the possibility of instituting a flex scheduling system where employees (for example) could conduct interviews on Saturdays while more parents are
available, and take Mondays off. This scenario is currently not an option for DFS employees, reportedly as a result of contract negotiations. The DFS should devise a plan to make flex scheduling an option.

**Further Research**

Our research collected is available on our project website. The research is sorted by AFSA, national, state and local information. The URL to access this website is as follows: https://complabs.nevada.edu/~amasakik/adopt/research.htm.

The team acknowledges that the research presented is limited in scope. The aforementioned recommendations alone are not likely to solve all of the problems and obstacles faced by the DFS. In order to truly enhance the DFS' performance, a subsequent case file audit should be performed using recognized randomization methods not conducted by this study. This audit should be performed by a third-party consultant with experience in performing such audits using recognized standards.


Department of Family Services. 2006. "DFS Timeframes for Cases R&D (research & development) through Permanency" Handout received on 27 February 2006 from Department of Family Services.


http://www.leg.state.nv.us/17thSpecial/Reports/history.cfm?ID=4819.

Swain, Renee. 2006. *In-person Interview: Clark County, Adoption Manager*. 2 March 2006.


DATE: August 7, 2006

TO: E. Lee Bernick, PhD, Chair, Department of Public Administration
    Christopher Stream, PhD, Professor, Dept. of Public Administration

CC: Thom Reilly, PhD, Manager, Clark County, Nevada
    Jennifer Lances, Manager, Policy and Analytical Services

FROM: UNLV Adoption Project Team:
    Bonnie Abramson, Kristy Amasaki, Michael Johnson and James Padgett

SUBJECT: Department of Family Services, Client Evaluation

Introduction
Our Adoption Program Evaluation was a two-semester project conducted in courses PUA 726 and PUA 791. The information on this document is a client evaluation based on our meetings and responses from the Department of Family Services (DFS), Adoption Division. In addition, we will provide the usefulness of our feedback from our final presentation on 07/17/2006.

At our initial meeting we discussed forming a policy analysis or program evaluation for Adoption. Caregiver Services (Adoption) Manager assisted in defining our requirements for a program evaluation in auditing adoption case files.

The purpose of our client evaluation will be to provide a short summary of our working relationship with the Department of Family Services and the usefulness of presentation feedback. Dr. Lee Bernick requested this on 07/25/2006.

Project Meetings
During our initial meeting, we felt comfortable with our Adoptions manager since she has a master’s degree and past experience as a college advisor. Our initial feeling changed as the project progressed. There were some barriers within DFS with the director’s resignation and pressure from local media.

In general, we felt DFS was skeptical of our project and wanted minimal disturbance to their business processes. This was articulated when our group suggested benchmarking and we were told statements similar to “that’s not the nature of adoptions.” Lack of enthusiasm to our presence was evident in non-verbal communication and cancellation of two meetings with little notice. The next paragraph will detail the meetings rescheduled by DFS.

Responses
Meetings with DFS were cancelled on two weeks in a row. The original meeting was scheduled on 05/01/2006, cancelled and rescheduled for 05/08/2006 and again rescheduled for 05/15/2006. At this meeting Gracie Burton (Adoption Files Supervisor) filled in for Renee Swain (Adoptions Manager).
In addition, during this timeframe Gracie Burton agreed to meet with us. However, she did not return three voicemails left by Michael Johnson. These voicemails were left on 04/25/2006 to 04/26/2006. According to Gracie, at our meeting on 05/15/2006 she told us she did not return the phone calls left by Michael because Renee told her it was resolved. This was not the case since Kristy was directed by Renee to contact Gracie. Our group lacked response from DFS from 04/25/2006 to 05/15/2006.

On May 15th, we re-established our goals with Gracie and firmly advised her Renee Swain and Thom Reilly confirmed our project. We selected another all day meeting for case file review on 06/16/2005. From this point forward, we reestablished our working relationship with DFS and were advised by Dr. Stream to document our communication and meetings. It is important to note that the meeting with the DFS on 06/16/2005 was very pleasant in nature and very useful in our research.

Thus, a website with a schedule was created to collaborate deliverables for our program evaluation. Meeting minutes, documentation and research are available on the following website: http://complabs.nevada.edu/~amasakik/adopt/

Feedback from Final Presentation
We had two formal presentations for our adoption program evaluation.
- Preliminary Presentation/Proposal: 05/08/2006 (spring semester)
- Final Presentation with Recommendations: 06/17/2006 (summer semester)

Clark County upper management was not present on 05/08/2006. However, all the MPA professors were present at this presentation. It was clear that the evaluation and feedback was stronger and more helpful on 05/08/2006. The feedback on 06/17/2006 seemed mild from upper management. The new manager seemed receptive to our findings and recommendations. Overall, the group presentations were improved and refined on 06/17/2006. Perhaps, they should be informed that constructive criticism would assist us in our final written paper.