



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

November 18, 2021

Sent Electronically

Nicole Poulin

Family and Children's Trust Fund of Virginia

801 East Main Street, 15th Floor

Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Ms. Poulin:

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) commends the Child Abuse and Neglect Advisory Committee of the Family and Children's Trust Fund of Virginia for their continued work as a Citizen Review Panel (CRP) as part of Virginia's Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) Plan. The feedback of our Child Protective Service Program by our CRPs is critical to the improvement of our program for the children of the Commonwealth.

Child Protective Services (CPS) in Virginia is a continuum of specialized services designed to assist families who are unable to safely care for their children. CPS is child-centered, family-focused, and based on the belief that the primary responsibility for the care of children rests within their families. CPS encompasses the identification, assessment, investigation, and treatment of abused or neglected children. Virginia's specialized services are designed to:

- Protect children and their siblings;
- Prevent future abuse or neglect;
- Enhance parental capacity to provide adequate care; and
- Provide substitute care when the family of origin cannot remedy the safety concerns.

CPS will respond to valid child abuse or neglect reports by conducting a family assessment response or an investigation response, also known as Differential response. The goals of both responses are to: assess child safety, strengthen and support families, and to prevent future child maltreatment. The track decisions are guided by state statute and local policy. In SFY 2020, there were 52,554 children reported as possible victims of child abuse or neglect in 33,880 completed reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. Of those children, 5,792 were involved in founded investigations, 7,777 were involved in unfounded investigations, and 38,985 in family assessments (differential response). In SFY 2020, family assessments accounted for nearly 72% of all CPS reports accepted by local departments of social services, and 34 children died as a result of abuse or neglect. There were 23 children involved in 19 Human Trafficking Assessments which are required when a report alleges a child is a victim of human trafficking, sex or labor, and does not meet the validity criteria for an investigation or family assessment.

Over the last year, VDSS continues to prioritize working towards meeting our federal outcomes related to child protection including responding to reports of abuse with a timely consistent response, providing ongoing services to for children who are at high or very high risk (In-Home services) and ensuring timely case closure. Additionally, VDSS is prioritizing family engagement through the use of Family Partnership Meetings, and Child and Family Team Meetings.

VDSS has been closely monitoring two key protection safety measures—timeliness of first completed face-to-face contact with the victim and referral time open. The first safety measure, Child Family Service Review (CFSR) Item 1, outcome 1- is the federal measure for the timeliness of initial response and the completion of face-to-face contact with the alleged victim within the determined response priority. Each Regional Protection Practice Consultant has closely monitored data to identify the agencies with the lowest performance on this federal measure. They have worked diligently with their agencies by having individual calls, reviewing the data, and strategizing ways to improve their practice in this area. VDSS has seen improvement on this measure as we started at 68 percent and now are at 86.9 percent for the entire state. Between April and June 2020, 16 LDSS had performance at or above the federal goal of 95 percent for this measure. A year later, 40 LDSS had performance at this level, which was a 150% increase in number of agencies compared to the 2020 quarter.

The second safety measure, referral time open, measures the completion of family assessments and investigations within the required time frames. The Regional Practice Consultants have identified and been working with the agencies in their respective regions with the highest number of overdue referrals. Overdue referrals means valid referrals that have been open beyond the 45 to 60 day time frame. Each Regional Practice Consultant has been working closely with the identified agencies in their respective regions to discuss the circumstances contributing to the high number of overdue referrals. They have identified both technical (ie., OASIS system issues, time management, etc.) and adaptive (ie., supervision, agency culture, etc.) challenges with their agencies. They are providing ongoing technical assistance and monitored of this measure.

We have reviewed your recommendations for our CPS program and thank you for your input. VDSS offers the following responses to your recommendations:

Child Protective Services Programs and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Governor declared a state of emergency on March 12, 2020 and issued a Stay at Home order on March 30, 2020 in response to the COVID – 19 pandemic. VDSS and local departments moved quickly to ensure continuation of services. During the initial COVID-19 crisis phase, it was critical to effectively prioritize and streamline efforts and energy in order to address emergency tasks. VDSS has worked to alleviate the burden falling on LDSS that provide critical services in local communities. VDSS prioritized efforts to provide critical guidance, resources and supports to the field and utilize collaborative efforts and partnerships to address the unique risks and challenges of the time. VDSS produced tools on how to conduct home visits during a pandemic; procured and provided a HIPAA compliant virtual visit platform doxy.me; and created resources to guide the field on conducting virtual visits. Waivers for several administrative regulatory requirements were granted to alleviate LDSS burden and ensure staff were primarily focused on responding to the safety needs of children. VDSS created resources on supporting children, families and workers in navigating crisis and worked with partners to ensure prevention messaging was disseminated and made available to community members and professionals.

VDSS focused on process-oriented priority responses, including: recalibrating staffing to address fluctuating flow and needs of the state hotline to ensure abuse and neglect referrals are received

and responded to appropriately; addressing protocol regarding exposure and potential exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace; and, moving to 100% teleworking for home office and regional staff, while support teleworking efforts of LDSS. VDSS built workforce capacity through creating and offering web-based trainings for staff on how to conduct virtual meetings and webinars. VDSS strengthened existing partnerships in targeted and intentional ways during this crisis, including leveraging relationships and collaborative opportunities with multiple other state agencies, advocate partner organizations, LDSS stakeholders, and non-profit providers and partners. In this way, resources, guidance and tools for the field were able to be directly responsive to the rapidly changing needs of the workforce and communities during the crisis.

In calendar year 2021, VDSS continued to prioritize process-oriented priority responses while continuing to provide technical assistance to LDSS when COVID specific concerns arose. VDSS continued to monitor the fluctuating flow and needs of CPS referrals, and saw an increase in CPS referrals across the state. VDSS saw a 15% increase in the total number of referrals in Q1 SFY22 (20,978) from the number of referrals in the same quarter last year Q1 SFY21 (18,186). VDSS will continue to provide updates to the CAN committee in 2022.

A priority of VDSS is to ensure that there is a well-trained and equipped workforce to provide CPS services across the commonwealth. One of the strengths of the VDSS during the pandemic was the access to Compass Mobile which allowed family services specialists to have access to portions of the child welfare information system outside of the physical office space. An ongoing challenge will be to continue to ensure that Compass Mobile is functional to fully perform child welfare tasks or to prioritize the replacement of the current child welfare information system, OASIS, with a modern and up-to-date technology solution that can be accessed outside of physical office walls.

As mentioned above, VDSS quickly transitioned mandatory training for all family services specialists to a virtual format which ensured that training was still available. VDSS learned that many local agency staff members preferred virtual training as it reduced time away from the office, reduced the cost of travel, and was more accessible for family services specialists. Not all reactions to virtual training has been positive, but VDSS will continue to holistically assess the training needs, particularly of CPS workers to ensure that mandatory training is available.

As the pandemic continued in 2021, VDSS has been tracking CPS vacancy rates particularly as national conversations occur about the “great recession”. VDSS must ensure that there is staff available to ensure the safety of children in every community. Through the budget process, VDSS requested funding for over 600 new CPS workers and supervisors to ensure there are adequate staff in every community.

Child-on-Child Sexual Abuse

VDSS recognizes that child-on-child Sexual Abuse is a priority for the CAN committee while recognizing the complexity of these cases and the lack of information available to understand the full scope of the issue in the Commonwealth. VDSS does not gather any data related to child-on-child sexual abuse cases due to the limited role of CPS. VDSS will continue to support CAN on their efforts to explore this issue in the future.

Systemic Racism in the Child Welfare System and Equity

“When we lead with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in our day-to-day work, we cultivate a culture of engagement, thinking outside of silos, questioning the status quo, and challenging our own assumptions. DEI helps direct our energy towards access, collaboration, opportunities for

improvement, and building relationships with each other and with those we serve. This is ultimately how we accelerate the pace at which we successfully achieve our goals and objectives.” Duke Storen, Commissioner, VDSS

VDSS and DFS have begun working towards a culture of DEI as part of the larger “[ONE Virginia Plan](#)” put forth by Governor Ralph Northam, the Governor’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and the Department of Human Resource Management. The ONE Virginia Plan builds a statewide strategy to advance DEI through changes in services, systems, and operations. The intent behind the ONE Virginia Plan is to use the Inclusive Excellence framework to disrupt long standing injustice and inequity, and create sustainable change, innovation, and productivity across state government and other sectors of the state.

In order to prioritize this work within VDSS, DEI has become one of the agency’s top priorities within our [VDSS strategic framework](#) as work moves forward to *Cultivate an Increasingly Diverse, Engaged, and High-Performing Workforce* (Goal 4) and establish a cross-functional DEI Council to develop frameworks, promote activation, and monitor progress of employee and customer-driven DEI initiatives. The Council will help develop and implement DEI strategies across the social services system that will ultimately improve outcomes for employees, stakeholders, partners, and the communities served (Strategy 4.1.2).

The Division of Family Services (DFS) has begun to examine ways to recognize and address areas of disparity and disproportionality in child welfare. DFS leadership took the time to assess staff emotions, reflections, and reactions and committed to challenge racial injustices. DFS recognizes the importance of bringing attention to this disparity, discussing it, and developing strategies to make meaningful change. At all levels of DFS, staff are engaged in activities and conversations to work toward creating a more equitable workplace and community. A sampling of the activities and conversations conducted during 2020 are discussed in greater detail below.

During a DFS semi-annual state team meeting, Dr. Robert Vinson, professor in the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia, was invited to share his research around Virginia’s history and how that history effects life today; highlighting the effects of discrimination based on race, gender, age, and sexual orientation and identity. Dr. Vinson brought a unique perspective to staff at a critical and pivotal time. His conversation was both honest and uplifting, sharing a truly eye-opening lesson on race and the origins of disparity. Staff was asked to consider questions like “From a reparative justice standpoint, what is one action that we as an agency could perform to move towards justice and trustworthiness?” and “What are the disadvantages and advantages of Racial Tracking?”

A list of racial equity resources have been compiled and shared with staff in an effort for individuals to begin the process of self-reflection and understanding of internal bias, prejudice, and to encourage conversations. CQI staff provided an introduction to disparity and disproportionality during an all DFS staff meeting. A concerted effort has been made to include data in each meeting, both internally and with LDSS, around racial inequalities.

DFS hosts monthly Lunch & Learn events that focus on a variety of topics, including for example Child Abuse Prevention Month, Foster Care Awareness Month, and Black History Month, just to name a few. During each of these events, a team of subject matter experts present to their colleagues, always including topic relevant disparity and disproportionality data. There are frequent opportunities during these monthly events to engage in discussion about the data and discuss areas for growth.

Through the Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipend Program (CWSP), a workforce development program of DFS, Bachelors and Masters of Social Work students have the opportunity to receive specialized training, coursework, and field placements that prepare them for a career in public child welfare. As future public child welfare workers, these exceptional students engage in many specialized events, including events focused on DEI. Virginia Commonwealth University hosted a racial justice webinar titled “Systemic Racism, Disproportionality and Equity in Child Welfare: Our History and Where to Focus Our Change Efforts”. The webinar featured staff from DFS, local departments, and community partners and was moderated by two CWSP students. DFS is participating in a two year-long project, the Underserved Population Learning Collaborative (UPLC), in partnership with the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance. The UPLC is designed to build agency capacity to apply a social justice framework to intervention and prevention services and programs for survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence. Some of the common barriers to services identified in a statewide needs assessment from 2014-2015 included personal or historical experience of racism, ageism, anti-immigration policies/attitudes, sexism, and/or homophobia on the part of service providers and systems, and the lack of culturally representative service providers.

DFS developed a Parent Advisory Council in partnership with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance (CTFA) and Casey Family Programs. Development of the Parent Council is part of the effort to ensure equity in policies and guidance through input from parents with lived experience.

DFS collaborated with the Virginia Department of Health, the Family and Children’s Trust Fund (FACT), and Families Forward (Virginia’s Prevent Child Abuse chapter) to submit a proposal for federal technical assistance to test comprehensive prevention model based on strategic partnerships and shared responsibility to achieve greater equity in families’ access to prevention services to enhance well-being. Virginia was selected as one of 12 jurisdictions to participate in this Round Two of the Thriving Families, Safer Children opportunity hosted by the Children’s Bureau, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Prevent Child Abuse America. The technical assistance received through this opportunity will further work towards greater equity in access and service provision to all families, utilizing the voices of lived experience, collaborating with partners who can be most responsive to the unique needs within distinct communities, and address disparities in service access.

DFS is committed to continuing conversations and examining legislation, regulation, guidance, and practice to determine ways to improve the work we do and attempt to remove discriminatory practices and attitudes. Activities have been added to the strategic plan to examine data related to prevention, protection, permanency, and the workforce and determine action steps for addressing critical issues.

VDSS will provide CAN with child welfare data which includes data about disparity and disproportionality in Virginia’s CPS response and will include updates on action steps taken within the child welfare system.

Alternate Living Arrangements

The In-Home services practice effort aligns our previous CPS ongoing practice, Prevention practice, and Family First legislation, with an intentional focus on supporting families to help children remain with their family in their communities. VDSS provides prevention based services to citizens of the Commonwealth through the provision of In-Home Services for children who are at high or very high risk of recurrent child maltreatment and out home

placements. In-Home services is a tertiary prevention services program. In April 2021, the Prevention Services Program within VDSS launched an aligned In-Home Services program which targets resources and services that prevent foster care placements and help children remain safely in their homes. The In-Home service alignment also includes clear guidance on working with families when parents arrange for temporary care of their child with a relative or fictive kin. Specifically, programmatic efforts have focused on the following: developing the In-Home services workflow including In-Home services planning, case management process, and practice guidance and training; improving ease of access to evidence based prevention services; and ensuring quality of programs and services through implementation of the VDSS Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process.

VDSS required all In-Home Services Family Services Specialists (FSS) to complete a six-part training series for the In-Home Services practice changes and trained an average of 300 FSS each month. In calendar year 2022, VDSS will align the six-part training series with the existing “New Worker Training” as a mandated training course for all new staff who provide In-Home Services.

In addition to the In-Home services guidance alignment, VDSS also made critical changes to the child welfare information system in order to better capture data about the families we serve. One of those changes includes the ability for family services specialists to document when a child is temporarily residing with a relative in the CPS and In-Home services case. VDSS will regularly share this information with CAN.

The VDSS CQI process takes form in actionable ways at first the state level, then the regional level, and finally the local level which facilitates analysis and examination of individual-level performance when helpful. The child welfare data review process is broken down across levels within the system. Regular data review meetings occur at the state level on a biweekly basis, wrapping in home office teams including program, policy, data and leadership representation; and, regional teams, including Regional Directors and Practice Consultants. These meetings review overall state and regional trends, and have been occurring since early 2020 and set the stage for an organizational culture which understands and embraces data-driven decision making and practice informed data analyses. In January 2022, VDSS will launch a monthly CQI Review process with the “Core Team” from every LDSS. VDSS is also launching monthly Communities of Practice on specific topics and overall progress towards goals where there will be a more in depth discussion among LDSS about the strengths and areas for improvement of our child welfare practice. The recent alignment of the In-Home Services model will be a focus of the CQI meetings and Communities of Practice over the next year.

State Hotline

VDSS continues to explore the role of the state hotline for receiving calls of child abuse and neglect, the partnership with LDSS who validate and respond to calls, and the resources needed to respond timely on referrals in order to assess and ensure safety. VDSS regularly analyzes hotline data to include, wait times, abandoned/dropped calls, peak and non-peak times. This information is used to address call volume, wait times, scheduling and staffing needs.

In collaboration with the LDSS, protocols and practices continue to be assessed and streamlined to address call volume and wait times. VDSS is also actively and strategically soliciting feedback from Hotline Specialists to ensure perspectives from all levels are considered to address and determine the underlying contributing factors affecting the functionality of the

Hotline. Since the State hiring freeze was uplifted, VDSS has vigorously worked to fill positions that were vacated during the pandemic.

During SFY21, the State Hotline completed 25,032 CPS referrals, which is 33.59% of the 74,653 referrals received statewide. Additionally, during the same period, the State Hotline completed 10,941 APS referrals.

VDSS continues to promote the use of the Mandated Report Portal (MRP) which can be utilized by mandated reporters 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to make referrals for child abuse. Between November 2020 and November 2021, the MRP received 3,605 reports of alleged child abuse or neglect submitted by Mandated Reporters. Mandated Reporters in the Northern Region are using the portal at about twice the rate (36%) of the rest of the state. The Western Region has the lowest utilization rate (8%). Of the 3,605 reports submitted in the portal, 2,495 were screened out by local departments, which is a 69% screen out rate and is higher than our statewide screen out rate of 57%. Of the valid reports submitted in the portal, 72% were assigned to the family assessment track, which is slightly higher than the 70% statewide family assessment track rate. VDSS looks forward to conversations with CAN about opportunities to continue to promote the MRP to reduce the number of calls that are needed to be answered at the hotline or an LDSS.

We look forward to continuing to work together. We are available to answer any additional questions. Again, we thank you for serving as one of our Citizen Review Panels.

Sincerely,

Shannon Hartung/als

Shannon Hartung
CPS Program Manager

Cc: Kimberly Huhn Murphy, Children's Bureau