



NEW JERSEY  
CHILD

# WELFARE CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

ANNUAL REPORT  
JUNE 2008



## NEW JERSEY CHILD WELFARE CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

## Membership

### Chairperson

Linda Porcaro.....Somerset County Youth Services

### Vice-Chairperson

Shyra Bland, MS.....CASA of Camden County, Inc.

### Membership

Mary Coogan, Esq.....Association for the Children of New Jersey

Victoria De Almeida, Esq.....Division of Law, Office of the Attorney General

John M. Doran, Esq.....Office of the Law Guardian, Office of the Public Defender

Lynn Forbes.....Advocate

Shantel Garner.....Foster & Adoptive Family Services/NJ Foster Care Scholars Program

Keeva Kase, M.Div.....CASA of New Jersey, Inc.

Jody Layton, M.S.....Certified Trauma and Loss Specialist

Catherine Lindenbaum.....Advocate

Randi Mandlebaum, Esq.....Rutgers School of Law

Maria McGowan.....New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate

Mary McManus-Smith, Esq.....Legal Services of New Jersey

Gary Mitchell, Esq.....Office of Parental Representation

Barbara Price.....New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women

Jackie Ramirez, MCC.....Parents Anonymous of NJ, Inc.

Kathleen Roe, MA.....Parents Anonymous of NJ, Inc.

Jonathan Sabin, LSW.....NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

Robert Sabreen.....NJ Division of Youth and Family Services

Sharon Surrette, MSW, LSW.....NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

Jennifer Rosen Valverde, Esq. MSW.....Rutgers School of Law

### NJCWCRP Coordinator

Michele Safrin, MSW.....NJ Department of Children and Families

# Mission

*The mission of the New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel (NJCWCRP) is to improve the safety, well being and permanency of NJ children by examining the practices, policies and procedures of State and local agencies; and to evaluate the extent to which they are effectively meeting their child protection responsibilities.*

The mission is accomplished through building a constituency for child welfare and soliciting public comments to assess the impact of the policies and practices of the State child welfare system upon children and families. The Panel shall issue an annual report of its findings and recommendations to the State for improvements in the NJ child welfare system.



# Membership Composition

The New Jersey Comprehensive Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CCAPTA), the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), and its subsequent amendments require that each State establish a minimum of three Citizen Review Panels to evaluate the extent to which the State is effectively fulfilling its child protection responsibilities. The NJCWCRP serves as one of New Jersey's three Citizen Review Panels. Operational since 1999 under the auspices of the NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Panel became independent in 2006. The Federal and State laws mandate that the Citizen Review Panels be composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the community, as well as members with expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

The NJCWCRP's membership is sensitive to cultural, ethnic and economic diversity and strives to broadly represent the community at-large, which includes concerned citizens and experts in child protection and prevention, advocacy, foster care, the court system, and children services. While receiving financial and administrative support from the Department of Children and Families (DCF); the NJCWCRP operates independently of DCF. The panel maintains autonomy in selecting membership and leadership, determining investigative direction, and monitoring DCF without interference. The NJCWCRP encourages individuals who are dedicated to improving New Jersey's child protection system to apply by calling 609-777-4536.

Each year the NJCWCRP identifies elements of the child protection system that may impede the delivery of necessary services for the children and families served by the DCF and its agencies. The aim is to ultimately affect positive outcomes for those children and families. Through survey, public testimony, individual and collaborative research by panel members, the NJCWCRP has focused on child abuse reporting and screening policies and procedures, the needs of children in foster home placement, the educational needs of children under DYFS supervision, adolescents exiting state supported living arrangements, and kinship care (relatives caring for children).





## Summary of Panel Activities

During SFY 2008 the panel developed by-laws governing its procedures; established subcommittees to focus on aging out services, the State Central Registry (SCR) for reporting child abuse and neglect, the Differential Response Initiative, kinship legal guardianship and visitation between children and their families; arranged for strategic planning consultation through the National Resource Center on Child Protective Services to assist panel members in developing long term goals and objectives; and conducted ongoing recruitment activities which resulted in the addition of representatives including, but not limited to, a certified trauma and loss specialist, the New Jersey Parent Teacher Organization, Office of the Child Advocate, Rutgers School of Law, and the Office of Parental Representation.

Below are the panel's activities emanating from last year's recommendations and future direction:

- ▶ *Monitored the preparation of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF).*
- ▶ *Initiated discussion with the DYFS Adolescent Services Unit regarding current training initiatives and supportive housing projects for aging out youth.*
- ▶ *Conducted a follow up visit to the State Central Registry to assess progress achieved since SCR was created in 2004.*
- ▶ *Discussion with Robins Nest Inc. management regarding their experience with the Differential Response Initiative.*

## Monitoring the DOE and DCF Memorandum of Understanding

The NJCWCRP continued its monitoring of the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Education and the Department of Children and Families. This MOU would improve inter-systems communication regarding child abuse/neglect reporting and response procedures for both Departments; develop a standardized training curriculum for all school personnel; and promote academic success of children under DYFS supervision in out-of-home care by raising awareness of the children's emotional and educational needs. The MOU is expected to be delivered in October 2008.

The multidisciplinary workgroup that was established in April 2007 in response to the NJCWCRP concerns has created a staff development training instrument (a PowerPoint presentation) for all school personnel. The workgroup also has called for liaisons to be identified in every school district. These liaisons will be available to DYFS staff to discuss the specific needs of individual students who are served by both DOE and DCF. The training will be implemented through a "train the trainer" format where the initial session will be provided to school district leadership by DOE and DCF (from both DYFS and the Office of Education) representatives. The training will also be made available to school personnel and the general public on the DOE website.

In addition to the training, the workgroup is completing a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding which will identify benchmarks and best practices on a model that was created by Casey Family Programs and the American Bar Association and incorporating New Jersey statutes and regulations.

*The New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel's goal was to continue to examine gaps in aging-out services for adolescents and young adults under DYFS supervision. The Panel aimed to explore the services available to the adolescents with behavioral and mental health needs served by the Division of Child Behavioral Health Services (DCBHS).*

The Aging Out subcommittee drafted two satisfaction surveys for dissemination to aging out youth and the professionals and volunteers that work with them in order to ascertain perceived service needs. The objective of the surveys is to assess whether the existing services and resources are meeting the youth's needs. The subcommittee is now seeking an individual with expertise in surveying and statistical experience to ensure that the surveys are reliable and valid before they are disseminated at statewide youth conferences in the Fall 2008. Results will be used both to target future panel activities of the Aging Out subcommittee and to develop future recommendations.



# State Central Registry

*The New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel continued to monitor the policies and practices of the State Central Registry that have occurred since the establishment of the Department of Children and Families in July 2006. This monitoring was especially important in light of revised practices required to implement the Differential Response Initiative.*

In FY 2008, the New Jersey Child Welfare Citizen Review Panel continued to monitor the policies and practices of the State Central Registry (SCR) - the central hotline (877-NJABUSE) for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect. Since SCR was created in 2004, the panel has monitored operational issues of staffing, quality assurance, report coding, and call volume. On April 2, 2008, the SCR subcommittee met with the SCR Administrator and her administrative leadership to revisit past issues and to address new ones. During this visit, the SCR subcommittee ascertained that many of the panel's concerns have been alleviated; however, staff safety and training and insufficient office space remain problematic.

SCR screeners, particularly those working the early morning shifts and shifts after 5 p.m. feel unsafe when arriving and departing due to the call center's location in a neighborhood stricken by increasing crime. In order to address this safety concern, arrangements are made for a SCR employee to transport their co-worker(s) to and from the parking lot.

During the panel's first visit to SCR in 2005, office space for SCR staff appeared insufficient. This concern had still not been addressed when the panel returned for their second visit in April 2008. Currently, SCR staff can be found in three different, overcrowded sections of two floors of 50 East State Street. The current office space allocation does not facilitate adequate oversight, promote staff morale, or provide for sufficient training and meeting space. If safety and space are not addressed, it may eventually impact quality of screening services.

New hires at SCR are not trained for their job functions through the Child Welfare Training Academy. Rather, the SCR leadership has developed its own, in-house training for new hires. While we applaud SCR leadership for their initiative and creativity with limited resources, the Child Welfare Training Academy was established to create a quality training program for all personnel in the State's child protective services system. The panel stresses that sufficient training in such a fast paced environment is as challenging as it is unnecessarily burdensome to SCR leadership.

The panel remains a strong supporter of SCR and firmly believes in the philosophy of centralized screening. Moreover, the panel is continually impressed by SCR's adaptability and consistency in an ever-changing Department. The leadership and staff of the SCR should be applauded for their creativity with limited resources, and dedication to serving New Jersey's children despite the overwhelming reality of an average of 15,232 reports of child welfare concerns, or suspected abuse/ neglect per month since May 2007.

## **It is recommended that:**

- ▶ DCF leadership provide relevant training to SCR staff through the Child Welfare Training Academy.
- ▶ SCR leadership continue intensive monitoring and on-site coaching of new staff.
- ▶ SCR explore options to ensure the safety of their staff and to consider utilization of space that affords continuity of operation.



## Differential Response (DR)

The DR Initiative was launched in State Fiscal Year 2007 to address reports of child welfare concerns. These are calls to SCR that are typically from families, or on behalf of families, experiencing a range of challenges or stressful conditions that affect family stability, and may be positively addressed through a well-coordinated community-based support system. These are calls that do not allege child abuse or neglect, and there are no reported child safety concerns.

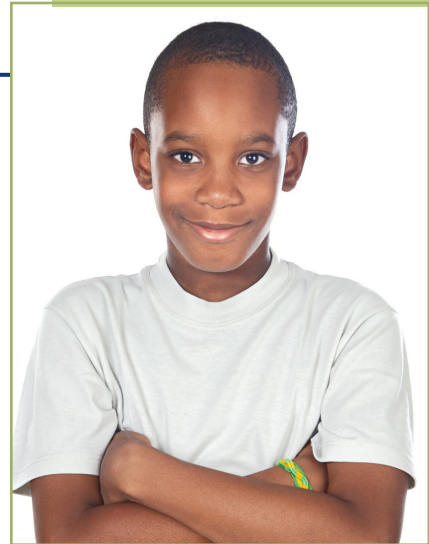
Currently, four counties offer Differential Response services to families in Camden, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem counties. The next target area for expansion includes Middlesex and Union counties.

To explore and assist in determining what possible aspects of the Differential Response program to examine, the panel invited the Executive Director and Program Manager of Robin's Nest Inc. to the panel's May 7, 2008 meeting to discuss the program's experience with the Differential Response Initiative in Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem counties. Between September 2007 and December 31, 2007, 124 reports were referred to the Differential Response sites of Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem Counties. The panel's next step will be to review the available data and meet with the Director of the Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships who oversees the initiative. This meeting is scheduled for the early fall of 2008.

## Recruitment and Outreach

*As required by Federal and state statute, the Panel will continue efforts to gain public input in identifying areas of the child protection system to examine. Strategies that may be utilized include public testimony, surveys, and increased distribution of the PANEL Annual Report.*

The panel's recruitment efforts were successful in expanding membership to include representatives with diverse expertise in the child welfare arena. The membership continues to consist of members who have demonstrated their passion and commitment to children. New members include a certified trauma and loss specialist and others who are associated with the New Jersey Parent Teacher Association, the Child Advocacy and Special Education clinics at Rutgers Law School, and the Office of Parental Support. The recruitment of racially and culturally diverse membership continues to be a challenge. The NJCWCRP will continue outreach to enhance ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of its membership.





## Future Direction

- ▶ Disseminate aging out surveys, gather and analyze the data in order to identify service gaps for aging out youth
- ▶ Develop strategic plan
- ▶ Continue to gather relevant data regarding Aging Out services, Kinship Legal Guardianship, and Visitation with discussions around additional areas that may warrant further review
- ▶ Work in collaboration with the Differential Response Steering Committee in looking at the progress of the Differential Response initiatives
- ▶ Continue to monitor the activities of the DOE-DCF work groups in the development of their Memorandum of Understanding and training of school personnel
- ▶ Begin to review the information and data that is included in Appendix C of the Federal Monitor's reports to identify focus areas for the coming year
- ▶ Engage in technical assistance from the National Resource Center on Child Protective Services

## NJCWCRP Meeting Dates 2008-2009

**September 3, 2008**

**October 1, 2008**

**November 5, 2008**

**December 3, 2008**

**January 7, 2009**

**February 4, 2009**

**March 4, 2009**

**April 1, 2009**

**May 6, 2009**

**June 3, 2009**

New Jersey Capital Complex  
Statehouse Annex, West State Street  
Trenton, NJ

For further information please refer to:  
<http://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/commissions/citizens/reports.html>



