

The July 2023 Arizona Department of Child Safety (Department)—Information Provided to Local Foster Care Review Boards and State Ombudsman performance audit was the first of 3 audit reports of the Department we issued as part of the Department’s sunset review. The second performance audit found that Department problems related to investigating, taking enforcement action against, and monitoring licensed out-of-home care providers could result in risky or unhealthy environments for children in out-of-home care. The third audit found that the Department has processes for key responsibilities, such as assessing child safety in response to abuse/neglect reports, but did not consistently provide timely and quality court reports or ensure some licensed applicants met licensing requirements and has not fully implemented most recommendations from 6 prior special audits. We will issue separate follow-up reports for the second and third audits.

Our July 2023 performance audit on information the Department provides to local foster care review boards and the State Ombudsman found that the Department did not provide some documents for local board case reviews because of Arizona Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and Department issues, and some caseworkers did not attend case reviews, impacting boards’ ability to review children’s cases; and the Department provided the State Ombudsman access to Guardian, with some exceptions. We made 9 recommendations to the Department, and its status in implementing the recommendations is as follows:

Status of 9 recommendations

In process	7
In process in a different manner	2

We will conduct an 18-month followup with the Department on the status of the recommendations that have not yet been implemented.

Finding 1: Department’s automated information exchange did not provide some case documents to AOC because of various issues including Department and AOC actions, impacting local boards’ ability to review children’s cases

1. The Department should ensure it provides court reports, case plans, TDM meeting summaries, and other case documents, as applicable, to AOC on behalf of local boards, consistent with statute.

Implementation in process—In March 2024, the Department revised its policies and procedures to require Department staff to ensure case documents, such as court reports, case plans, and TDM meeting summaries, as applicable, are provided to AOC at least 2 weeks prior to scheduled local board hearings to ensure case documents are available to the local boards’ members. Further, in May 2023, during our performance audit, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed legislation that requires the Department to provide case information for local foster care review boards’ (local boards) reviews through direct, remote access to the Department’s case management system—Guardian. In January 2024, the Department and AOC entered a Memorandum of Understanding in which the Department agreed to provide usernames and passwords to approved AOC staff for direct access to Guardian to retrieve documents. According to AOC, as of August 2024, all AOC staff who required Guardian access either had access to Guardian or were in the process of obtaining access because they were newly hired. AOC also reported that, although its staff continue to use the automated information exchange to obtain case documents for local board reviews, most AOC staff obtain these case documents, including court reports, case plans, and TDM meeting summaries, directly from Guardian. Further, AOC reported that it has seen

improvements in obtaining documents for local board reviews, including improvements in the completeness of the documents, prior to local board hearings. We will assess the Department's implementation of its revised policies and procedures during our 18-month followup.

2. The Department should ensure Department supervisors hold and document monthly supervision meetings with caseworkers as required by Department policy.

Implementation in process—The Department has established a goal that supervisors hold and document monthly supervision meetings with caseworkers for at least 95 percent of children's cases. The Department tracks this goal using supervision documents uploaded in Guardian that generates the percentage of completed supervisor meetings for each region. For example, between July 2023 and January 2024, the Department's Maricopa East Region had a completion rate for its monthly supervision meetings that ranged from 79 to 93 percent, indicating the Department is not yet meeting its 95 percent compliance goal. The Department indicated that Department program managers and program administrators review regions' status in meeting this goal during weekly accountability calls to assess whether supervisors provide and document monthly supervision meetings with caseworkers and address barriers faced when supervisors are unable to complete their monthly supervision meetings. According to the Department, supervisor vacancies or when supervisors are out on benefit leave can impact their ability to complete supervision meetings within required time frames. The Department further explained that if a caseworker needs to reschedule their supervision meeting due to a court hearing, the rescheduled session may extend to the following month. Finally, the Department reported initiating training for all field supervisors regarding its enhanced clinical supervision process, including conducting monthly supervision meetings, which it anticipates completing in October 2024. We will further assess the Department's implementation of this recommendation and whether it is ensuring supervisors are consistently meeting with caseworkers, during our 18-month followup.

3. The Department should revise and implement policies and procedures to require caseworkers to store court reports in Guardian and supervisors to verify that caseworkers have completed court reports in Guardian, when applicable.

Implementation in process—In March 2024, the Department revised policies to require caseworkers to complete, store, and sign all court reports in Guardian, and for supervisors to also review and sign all completed court reports in Guardian. In April 2024, the Department notified its staff about the policy revisions. We will assess the Department's implementation of the revised policies during our 18-month followup.

4. The Department should develop and implement guidance for what corrective actions supervisors should take in response to caseworkers' noncompliance with Department policies, such as failing to maintain case documents in Guardian as required by Department policy or not complying with the local board case review attendance policy.

Implementation in process—The Department developed guidance for progressive discipline supervisors should take in response to caseworkers' noncompliance with any Department policies such as failing to maintain case documents in Guardian or not complying with the local board case review attendance policy. For example, supervisors may initially take informal actions such as verbal or written communication to address minor performance deficiencies to correct a first-time rule or policy violation. Conversely, supervisors may take more formal action to address major or repetitive misconduct or performance deficiencies such as a letter of reprimand, suspension, involuntary demotion, or dismissal from employment. The Department reported that it distributed the new guidance to all supervisors to begin implementing in July 2024. Additionally, the Department developed a performance improvement plan template that supervisors can use to address areas of concern related to staff noncompliance with Department policies and procedures that includes action steps to assist the staff member in meeting performance expectations. We will assess the Department's implementation of its guidance and performance improvement plan template during our 18-month followup.

5. The Department should continue to develop and implement its process to solicit feedback from AOC about automated information exchange issues, including by developing written procedures governing this process.

Implementation in process in a different manner—The Department has continued to hold recurring, monthly meetings to solicit feedback from AOC and provide updates related to processes for ensuring AOC staff are

obtaining case documents for local board hearings. Both the Department and AOC reported that AOC has not communicated any new issues specifically with the automated information exchange, and AOC reported that the monthly meetings have contributed to improvements related to its staff receiving case documents for local board reviews. As a result, the Department reported it does not see a need for formal written procedures governing the process of soliciting AOC's feedback at this time. We will assess the Department's continued solicitation of feedback from AOC during our 18-month followup.

6. The Department should, based on feedback the Department receives from AOC, take steps to address any continuing or newly identified issues that result in documents not being provided through the automated information exchange, including but not limited to:
 - Developing and implementing additional policies and procedures.
 - Providing staff training.
 - Holding caseworkers accountable for following policy requirements for storing case documents in Guardian.
 - Developing processes for communicating to AOC why certain case documents are not provided through the automated information exchange.

Implementation in process in a different manner—As discussed in Recommendation 5, the Department has continued to solicit feedback from AOC, and both the Department and AOC reported that there have not been new issues with the automated information exchange. Additionally, as discussed in Recommendation 1, in March 2024, the Department developed policies and procedures specifying which documents caseworkers should provide to the local boards, including requiring caseworkers to store all case documents in Guardian. Further, as discussed in Recommendation 2, the Department also established expectations for supervisors to meet with staff monthly to discuss compliance with Department policies and procedures. The Department reported it does not plan to develop a separate process for communicating to AOC why certain case documents are not provided through the automated information exchange and instead will continue to communicate issues with the automated information exchange during its monthly meetings with AOC. We will further assess the Department's implementation of this recommendation during the 18-month followup.

Finding 2: Some caseworkers did not comply with Department's local board case review attendance policy, preventing some local boards from conducting complete case reviews for children in out-of-home care

7. The Department should ensure caseworkers comply with Department policy requirements for local board case review attendance, including by developing and implementing policies and procedures for tracking caseworker attendance at local board case reviews.

Implementation in process—As of July 2024, the Department relies on the local boards to track and report caseworker case review attendance to the Department. The Department then develops monthly reports that regional management use to identify reasons for nonattendance and implement corrective actions, as needed. The Department reported it is developing a process for caseworkers to document, in Guardian, their attendance at local board case reviews, which will allow the Department to centrally monitor case review attendance and not rely on the reports provided by the local boards. The Department anticipates completing this process by December 2024. We will assess the Department's implementation of this process during our 18-month followup.

8. The Department should revise and implement its policy to require Department staff to provide case updates when they or their supervisor are unable to attend a case review, including time frames for doing so.

Implementation in process—In March 2024, the Department revised its policy to require assigned Department staff to attend a case review or to notify the program manager as soon as possible when it is determined that an assigned staff member is not able to attend a case review. In place of an assigned staff member's attendance, the program manager can approve the submission of a written statement or assign another staff member to attend the case review. If a written statement is approved for submission, Department staff are required to submit

the statement to AOC at least 5 days prior to the scheduled hearing date. We will assess the Department's implementation of this policy during our 18-month followup.

9. The Department should work with AOC to determine the information that should be included in updates caseworkers provide to AOC when caseworkers cannot attend case reviews and develop and implement written guidance for caseworkers to prepare these case updates.

Implementation in process—The Department and AOC met at the beginning of 2024 and discussed information that should be included in written statements that caseworkers provide to AOC when caseworkers cannot attend local board reviews. The Department has also developed a draft template that provides guidance to caseworkers on how to complete written statements provided to local boards when caseworkers are unable to attend case reviews. The template indicates caseworkers should include detailed responses to the topics listed on the template, such as information about the child's placement history, education and development, and behavior; parental compliance with the child's case plan; and the child's permanency goals. The Department anticipates fully implementing the template by December 2024. We will assess the Department's implementation of its process during our 18-month followup.