

The September 2023 Arizona Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) performance audit and sunset review found that FCRB reviewed cases of children in out-of-home care within required time frames and judges reported some information in FCRB’s local board reports provided for child dependency case reviews is useful, but report content and timeliness could be improved to help better advise judges on children’s progress toward permanent placement and ensure efficient and effective use of staff and volunteers’ time. We made 14 recommendations to the Board, and its status in implementing the recommendations is as follows:

Status of 14 recommendations

Implemented	3
In process	10
In process in a different manner	1

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

Finding 1: Most judges we interviewed reported that board reports provide some useful information for child dependency reviews but identified multiple shortcomings that can impact reports’ usefulness.

FCRB should:

1. Improve the usefulness of information it provides to judges in board reports by:
 - a. Establishing and coordinating the efforts of a workgroup to determine what changes should be made to board reports and the frequency for holding local board reviews to help ensure that local boards provide judges with timely and useful information to make child dependency case decisions. The workgroup should, at a minimum, comprise judges who hear child dependency cases, local board members, and AOC staff.
Implementation in process—FCRB formed a workgroup composed of juvenile court judges, local foster care review board (local board) members, and AOC staff that held initial meetings in February and April 2024.¹ Topics the workgroup discussed during these meetings included:
 - Format of and information found in other states’ citizen review board reports.²
 - Information that judges who hear child dependency cases find most valuable that could be included in local board reports.
 - Juvenile court judges’ preferred timeline for receiving local board reports after local board reviews.
 - Suggested frequency of local board reviews as recommended by juvenile court judges and based on a review of other states’ citizen review board practices.

¹ This workgroup is composed of 26 members, including 11 juvenile court judges who hear child dependency cases, 4 State and local board members, 4 AOC supervisors, 3 AOC program specialists, AOC’s Dependent Children’s Services Division Director, an AOC regional manager, an AOC program manager, and an AOC administrative assistant. The workgroup includes juvenile court judges who hear child dependency cases in Apache, Coconino, Gila, Maricopa, Navajo, Pima, Pinal, Yavapai, and Yuma Counties.

² The workgroup reviewed reports produced by citizen review boards in Iowa, Oregon, Kentucky, and South Carolina.

- Proposed changes to local board reports' format.

This workgroup met again on August 30, 2024, to finalize proposed form and content changes to and develop a draft for local board reports that are intended to ensure all juvenile court judges receive information that is important for them to consider during dependency hearings, such as information from case plans reviewed by local boards and statements made by parties who attend local board reviews. The workgroup also developed various recommendations regarding processes for informing the juvenile court of local board reviews, regularly soliciting and implementing feedback from juvenile court judges, and the timeline for submitting local board reports to the juvenile court but did not recommend any changes to the frequency of local board reviews. FCRB reported that as of September 2024, the workgroup has drafted its recommendations and FCRB expects to fully implement them by the end of January 2025. We will further assess FCRB's efforts to implement this recommendation during our 18-month followup.

- b. Working with the workgroup to consider other state practices and assess and make recommendations regarding:
- The most valuable information that local boards can provide judges.
 - The format for providing information to judges.
 - The frequency with which local boards should conduct case reviews, such as reviewing certain children's cases every 3 months instead of every 6 months or taking other steps to better align the timing of court hearings and local board reviews, including pursuing statutory changes, as necessary.
 - The timeline for submitting board reports to judges after local board reviews.

Implementation in process—See explanation for Recommendation 1a.

- c. Implementing the workgroup's recommendations to help ensure that local boards provide judges with timely and useful information to make child dependency case decisions.

Implementation in process—As discussed earlier, as of September 2024, the workgroup had drafted its recommendations, and FCRB reported it plans to implement the workgroup's recommendations by the end of January 2025 (see explanation for Recommendation 1a for additional information on the workgroup's progress). We will assess FCRB's efforts to implement the workgroup's recommendations during our 18-month followup.

2. Establish a process for regularly soliciting and implementing feedback from judges who hear dependency cases, including input on board report usefulness in assisting judges with their reviews of child dependency cases.

Implementation in process—The previously discussed workgroup FCRB established (see explanation for Recommendation 1a) also began to develop a process for FCRB to use to regularly solicit and implement feedback from juvenile court judges, including judges who did not participate in the workgroup, during its August 30, 2024, meeting. We will further assess FCRB's efforts to establish a process for regularly soliciting and implementing judges' feedback during our 18-month followup.

3. Continue to work with DCS to provide feedback on automated information exchange issues and to ensure that the address information for parents and foster parents it receives from DCS for local board reviews is accurate and complete.

Implementation in process in a different manner—As of October 2023, FCRB began holding monthly meetings with DCS staff to provide feedback on automated information exchange and parent and foster parent address information issues. Additionally, legislation enacted in the 2023 legislative session that became effective after our audit requires DCS to provide case information for local board reviews through direct, remote access. As a result, in January 2024, on behalf of FCRB, AOC signed a memorandum of understanding with DCS that provides AOC staff with remote access to DCS' case management system—Guardian. FCRB reported that since this change, AOC staff now primarily use their access to Guardian to obtain documents needed for local board reviews. Further, FCRB reported that DCS developed and began implementing an automated process for providing FCRB with accurate and complete parent and foster parent information in July 2024 and that the accuracy of address information they receive through this process has improved. We will further assess if these changes to processes

for providing information and feedback have helped to ensure local boards receive the information needed for their reviews during our 18-month followup.

4. Develop and implement a written plan for improving parent and foster parent attendance at local board reviews, including establishing a baseline rate and conducting additional analysis to determine if its efforts are improving attendance.

Implementation in process—As of November 2023, FCRB developed and began implementing a written plan for improving parent and foster parent attendance at local board reviews. The plan includes obtaining accurate mailing addresses from DCS for parents, foster parents, and caregivers; mailing brochures to these individuals prior to local board reviews with information on the purpose of local board reviews to encourage attendance; and developing a separate flyer on the importance of local board reviews for DCS staff to share with parents, youths, and caregivers.

In addition, FCRB's written plan indicated it would develop a tool for tracking interested party attendance at local board reviews, and our review of FCRB's use of the tool between January and April 2024 found that FCRB tracked interested party attendance by county for these months. However, although FCRB tracks interested parties that attend local board reviews in each county, its attendance counts do not specifically identify the number of parents or foster parents who attend these reviews. As a result, FCRB lacks the information it needs to establish a baseline attendance rate for parents and foster parents or determine the effectiveness of its plan in improving attendance. FCRB reported it plans to develop a process to specifically track parent and foster parent attendance at local board reviews by the end of fiscal year 2025. We will further assess FCRB's implementation of this recommendation during our 18-month followup.

5. Develop and implement written procedures or guidance for supervisors to monitor whether AOC staff are tracking information about and timely submitting board reports to the courts that need to be submitted sooner than 30 days after a local board review.

Implementation in process—FCRB has developed a draft written policy that will require AOC staff supervisors to monitor whether AOC staff are tracking information about and timely submitting local board reports that need to be submitted to the courts sooner than 30 days after a local board review. Specifically, the draft policy indicates that AOC staff should highlight for their supervisors dependency hearings that are scheduled for sooner than 30 days after a local board review and requires supervisory staff to regularly review upcoming deadlines for submitting local board reports to the juvenile court to help ensure they are submitted timely. Additionally, the draft policy instructs AOC staff to send an email to their supervisors indicating which local board reports need to be delivered to the juvenile court sooner than 30 days after a local board review. Finally, FCRB reported that AOC's IT division is developing a new database for tracking and monitoring local board report timeliness, and it will implement its draft policy once the new database is functional. However, FCRB did not provide an estimated date for completing the database and implementing the draft policy. We will further assess FCRB's efforts to develop a written policy and procedures for monitoring and tracking the timely submission of local board reports that need to be submitted sooner than 30 days after a local board review during our 18-month followup.

Sunset Factor 2: The extent to which FCRB has met its statutory objective and purpose and the efficiency with which it has operated.

FCRB should:

6. Develop and implement a plan to prioritize recruiting new members for local boards with 1 and 2 members.

Implementation in process—FCRB revised its policies and procedures to include a process for prioritizing the recruitment of new members for local boards with 1 and 2 members. The process requires AOC staff to generate monthly reports indicating which local boards have fewer than 3 active board members, and based on this information, AOC management will direct its recruitment staff to prioritize recruitment for those specific boards. Additionally, FCRB developed a guide with suggested recruiting activities, such as recruiters posting regular updates regarding FCRB's community impact to social media, inviting local news stations to cover FCRB events,

and communicating with local chambers of commerce across the State to identify community events that could provide opportunities for recruiting new local board members. According to FCRB's May and June 2024 vacancy reports for all 107 local boards in the State, 7 and 6 local boards respectively, had 1 or 2 members. We will further assess FCRB's efforts to recruit new members for local boards with 1 and 2 members during our 18-month followup.

7. Continue to implement its new attendance sheet tracking policy, including written guidance, to help ensure staff consistently and accurately track board meeting attendance.

Implemented at 12 months—In January 2024, FCRB implemented a new attendance sheet to track board member attendance at local board meetings. Our review of attendance sheets for 6 local board meetings held between January and June 2024 found that for all 6 meetings, AOC staff tracked board member attendance in accordance with its policy and written guidance.

8. Develop and implement a process to compile State-wide information on and review DCS' planned implementation of all its local boards' recommendations to identify common reasons why DCS does not plan to implement the recommendations and assess the impact and usefulness of and improve its recommendations to DCS.

Implementation in process—AOC staff have met 3 times with DCS leadership and staff between February and May 2024 to discuss collecting data on whether DCS plans to implement local board recommendations. During one of these meetings, DCS reported to AOC that it was working on methods to notify AOC management when its staff disagree with local board recommendations. Additionally, FCRB reported it plans to develop an email notification template for DCS' use to provide its response to local board recommendations and identify recommendations that DCS staff disagree with and do not plan to implement. FCRB also reported it continues to work with AOC's IT division to compile and track data on whether DCS plans to implement local board recommendations and if not, noting the reason for the disagreement to help identify common reasons DCS cites for not implementing local board recommendations. Finally, FCRB is developing a process for reviewing common reasons why DCS does not plan to implement local board recommendations and using this information to improve the recommendations that the local boards make to DCS. We will further assess FCRB's efforts to implement this recommendation during our 18-month followup.

Sunset Factor 3: The extent to which FCRB serves the entire State rather than specific interests.

FCRB should:

9. Implement its new conflict-of-interest form for local board members, including developing a process to help ensure all local board members sign the new conflict-of-interest form, including upon appointment.

Implemented at 12 months—FCRB has developed and implemented 2 new conflict-of-interest disclosure forms for its local board members to complete—1 that requires the disclosure of relationships that may influence decision making during a local board review and 1 that requires the disclosure of financial interests. FCRB has also established a policy requiring local board members to complete its conflict-of-interest disclosure forms upon appointment and reappointment. Our review of a random sample of 20 of 449 local board members as of June 2024 found all 20 had completed both conflict-of-interest disclosure forms, including 7 new board members who completed the forms during the process of their appointment to a local board and 13 board members who completed the disclosure forms upon reappointment to a local board.

10. Store all substantial interest disclosures, including disclosure forms and meeting minutes, in a special file available for public inspection.

Implementation in process—FCRB has established a special file for storing all substantial interest disclosures, including disclosure forms and meeting minutes, that is available for public inspection. As of September 2024, FCRB reported that it has not received any substantial interest disclosures that should be included in its special file. FCRB provided 20 disclosure forms completed by local board members who indicated a potential substantial interest for our review, but it reported that its review of these forms found that the disclosures did not constitute

a substantial interest and thus did not need to be included in its special file. However, FCRB has not established a documented process that directs the review of conflict-of-interest disclosure forms to determine whether a disclosed financial interest constitutes a substantial interest that should be placed in its special file. Absent such a process, FCRB may be at risk for inconsistently determining whether disclosures constitute a substantial interest and need to be included in its special file. Additionally, our review of State board meeting minutes for meetings held in February and May 2024 did not identify any substantial interest disclosures that should have been included in FCRB's special file. Therefore, we will further assess FCRB's implementation of this recommendation during our 18-month followup.

Sunset Factor 5: The extent to which FCRB has encouraged input from the public before adopting its rules and the extent to which it has informed the public as to its actions and their expected impact on the public.

11. FCRB should revise its process for preparing State board meeting minutes to include the location of the board meeting.

Implemented at 12 months—FCRB has updated its State board meeting minutes template to include the location of the meeting. Our review of meeting minutes for 3 State board meetings held in June 2023, February 2024, and May 2024 found the minutes included the applicable location for each State board meeting.

Sunset Factor 6: The extent to which FCRB has been able to investigate and resolve complaints that are within its jurisdiction and the ability of FCRB to timely investigate and resolve complaints within its jurisdiction.

12. FCRB should provide information on its website about how the public can submit complaints and develop and implement policies and procedures for receiving, tracking, and resolving any complaints it receives from the public.

Implementation in process—FCRB updated its website to include instructions for how members of the public can submit a complaint, such as information on the types of complaints the public can submit and how members of the public can submit a complaint through an online survey. Additionally, FCRB has developed a complaint-handling policy that includes procedures for receiving and tracking complaints. For example, according to its policy, AOC staff should review any submitted complaint and follow up with the complainant to discuss and attempt to resolve the complaint. The policy further specifies that AOC staff must initially contact the complainant within 2 business days. Our review of all 8 complaints FCRB received between November 2023 and June 2024 found that FCRB initially contacted 6 complainants within 2 business days of receiving the complaint, in compliance with FCRB's policy. However, for the remaining 2 complaints, FCRB contacted the complainants between 3 and 16 business days after receiving the complaints. Although FCRB's policy does not include a time frame requirement or goal for resolving complaints, it resolved the 8 complaints within 5 to 16 business days. We will continue to assess FCRB's implementation of its complaint-handling policy during our 18-month followup.