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APHSA and AAICPC Launch Transformation Pilot with Federal Support

By Mical Peterson and Anita Light

In October 2013, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and its affiliate, the Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (AAICPC), received a Partnership Fund for Program Integrity Innovation¹ grant to develop and implement a national electronic web-based system to improve efficiency in the administration of the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC).² The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF), Children's Bureau (CB), is administering this grant through a cooperative agreement. The project will develop and implement the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE), which will be based on a modified version of the electronic web-based Interstate Compact System (ICS) developed by the state of Florida under the leadership of Stephen Pennypacker, who, was serving as AAICPC president and deputy compact administrator at that time; and Laura Kirksey, the ICPC administrator for Florida.

Need for an Innovative Solution to a Decades-Old Problem

Public, private, and tribal child welfare agencies and stakeholders nationwide have long recognized that we must shorten the time it takes for a child to achieve permanency. When the ICPC is invoked to determine whether a placement is safe and suitable for a child in the child welfare system, the time it takes to achieve permanency can be extended even longer.

Additionally, many states currently use paper-based processes to share and exchange case files, information, and evaluations, as well as collect, track, synthesize, and report comprehensive data regarding the placement of children across state lines. The AAICPC identified these processes as another cause for the excessive delays in placements that ultimately are determined to be safe and appropriate. Anecdotally, a child can wait three to nine months in foster care for an interstate placement.

The AAICPC has worked for many years to address these issues and improve its administrative processes; and most recently, by adopting and amending new regulations, rewriting the ICPC, and

1. The 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act authorized \$32.5 million in appropriations through FY 2013 for the Partnership Fund for Program Integrity and Innovation to fund pilot projects and evaluations that test ideas for improving federal assistance programs. <http://fundedpilots.community.collaborativeforumonline.com/supporting-permanent-placements-of-foster-care-children-through-electronic-records-exchange>

2. The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) provides for the movement and safe placement of children between states when the children are in the custody of a state, being placed for private/independent adoption, or under certain circumstances, being placed by a parent or guardian in a residential treatment facility. ICPC has been enacted by all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. More information about the ICPC is available at <http://www.aphsa.org/content/AAICPC/en/home.html>

collaborating with various public and private national organizations. While these activities have been essential to the operation of the ICPC, they have not been sufficient.

Now, through the innovative initiative of the state of Florida, an ICPC compact member, financing from the Partnership Fund and support from APHSA and ACF, the AAICPC can usher the ICPC administrative process into the 21st century. The electronic system to be developed under the grant will securely exchange case files and other materials needed in real time, enabling timely communications and placement decisions regarding interstate placements of children. In addition, the system will collect, track, and report uniform interstate data to provide: (1) a comparison of the state's cost savings for postal charges and other paper-based expenses pre- and post-pilot; (2) evidence-based information about best practices when placing children interstate; and (3) ways to increase organizational efficiencies and drive decision-making.

Florida's experience with their electronic web-based system has resulted in reducing the time it takes to complete the child placement process across state borders and a reduction in the costs of the program due to fewer mailings and less staff time. It is hoped that this project will realize the same efficiencies and cost savings as those experienced in Florida.

Who Is On the NEICE Team?

The NEICE project will be implemented in six states over the course of 17 months, from October 2013 through February 2015 and is scheduled to go live for the real-time exchange of files and tracking information for reports by June 2014. Through an open application process, APHSA solicited the participation of states willing to help refine and test the application with their ICPC caseload. The six pilot sites are: the District of Columbia, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. These sites demonstrated commitment and support from their child welfare leadership, buy-in of their ICPC and Information Technology (IT) management staff, and a sufficient number of cases sent or received between the selected states to ensure a sufficient evaluation.

The Evaluation Team comes from Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc. (WRMA). Since the firm's founding in 1980, WRMA has conducted hundreds of projects ranging from short-term, customized projects to large-scale national efforts of five years or more. These projects have been primarily focused on outcome measurements to evaluate the quality of services delivered, along with the efficiency, productivity, and the costs of providing those services. WRMA will assess the efficiency and effectiveness of NEICE by measuring timeliness of communication, expeditious exchange of case documentation, utilization, and adherence to streamlined ICPC processes, as well as overall project management and implementation. Additional questions, such as those related to the permanency of child placements and associated savings, may be addressed if it is feasible to do so within the 17-month project period. Results will be included in a final public report.

Tetrus Corporation has been selected through a competitive bid procurement process as the technical vendor to build the system. Tetrus will modify the Florida ICS to develop the NEICE pilot and implement the system among the six sites. Tetrus will also provide assistance to the pilot locations in overcoming technical hurdles to implementation. Their extensive experience in developing secure, cross-domain, information-sharing systems across local, state, and national settings will contribute to the success of this project.

A *National Advisory Group* will be convened to inform the development of learning opportunities to enhance data literacy and provide guidance on improvements related to data validity, reliability, and exchange.

Looking Forward

The effective development and execution of the NEICE will revolutionize the ICPC as we know it. Beyond the pilot period, the goal of NEICE is for the system to be adopted for use by all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, ultimately serving and benefiting children, families, the public, private and tribal child welfare agencies nationwide, and other multidisciplinary groups that work in support of and throughout the child placement continuum.

However, our vision is not only to create a platform that transforms the interstate administrative process for potential expansion to all states, but to demonstrate that the attributes of NEICE can be transferable when developing interconnected systems and programs across all health and human services.

As state leaders from Nevada said in a letter of commitment to participate, “We view every piece of paper or electronic communication received as a child waiting to find a home and we take our commitment to the children, caregivers and our state partners very seriously....We have witnessed firsthand the gains that can be achieved for children by maximizing our use of technology, data and streamlining processes that move children to forever families quicker. We are excited about participating in anything that is part of that mission.”³

This grant opportunity will improve the processes of the ICPC and ultimately improve outcomes for these children and their families.

The primary point of contact is Marci Roth, APHSA’s project director. If you have any questions, please contact her at mroth@aphsa.org.

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3. *Letter of Commitment for Participation in the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE) pilot*. Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child and Family Services. December 16, 2013