

Division of Family Services – Foster Care Diversion Study

In the fall of 2009 the Outcome Based Reporting and Analysis (OBRA) within the Division of Family Services (DFS) designed a study to investigate the number of children diverted from foster care and placed with relatives. As a part of the Children's Services System Transformation (Transformation) increasing foster care placements with relatives is a critical performance outcome. Virginia ranks last in the nation at children placed with relative foster care providers. Local departments of social services (LDSS) acknowledge this outcome but have also pushed for recognition of work done placing children with relatives to divert children from entering the foster care system. This study seeks to investigate these activities and report on what foster care diversion looks like in Virginia.

Methodology

In order to examine a statistically significant portion of the referral population, OBRA chose to sample referrals from the month of August 2009. OBRA sampled all referrals open 1-45 days and removed only those referrals with no disposition recorded from the sample. This left the referral population at 2,168. In order to achieve statistical significance, OBRA chose a Confidence Level of 95% and a Confidence Interval of 5%. This made the required sample size 326. OBRA stratified the sample by percentage of referrals across region and added sixty referrals to the sample to account for lack of response by local workers. OBRA then assigned random numbers to the total referral population and then randomly selected the first 406. These sampled referrals were then separated into Excel spreadsheets by locality and then sent to each local department of social services (LDSS) with the following questions asked of local workers:

- Did the child come into DSS custody?
- Was this child placed in another home on an informal basis?
- What was the caregiver's relationship to the child?
- Was the placement expressly arranged as an alternative to placing the child into foster care?
- Did (or does) the child receive any ongoing monitoring from DSS?
- Did (or does) the child receive any ongoing services from DSS?

After answering the questions above, local workers were to return the spreadsheets to OBRA. As of December 21, OBRA received **361** responses (88.9% response rate).

Findings

After reviewing the 361 responses (from 49 LDSS) received from local workers OBRA has observed the following findings:

- 11 of the 361 children referred came into DSS custody (3%).
 - 42 of the 361 referrals were placed in another home on an informal basis (11.6%).
 - Of the 42 referrals that were placed in another home on an informal basis at least 30 were placed with blood relatives (71.4%). The other 12 were placed in a category of “other” which could potentially be fictive kin.
 - As a result OBRA will operate with the assumption that the percent of children diverted to relatives ranges from 8.3% - 11.6%.
- **If this percentage is applied to the total population of referrals for the month of August then somewhere between 179 and 251 children were diverted from foster care and placed with kin. If applied over 12 months then LDSS could potentially be diverting anywhere between 2,148 and 3,012 children from foster care via informal kinship placement.**
- Of the 42 referrals what were diverted from foster care and placed in another home on an informal basis, the majority were placed expressly as an alternative to placing the child into foster care (78.6%).
 - Of the 42 referrals what were diverted from foster care and placed in another home on an informal basis 61.9% were or are still being monitored by the LDSS and 57.1% are still or were receiving ongoing services from the LDSS.

Best Practices Related to Diversion

While the findings of the this study allow us to better understand what diversion looks like in Virginia as a whole, it does not allow us to make specific inferences as to how individual agencies perform. That said qualitative data was gathered from those agencies with the highest percentages of children diverted from foster care with the hopes of documenting best practices around diversion. Those agencies were Washington County DSS, Wise County DSS, and Virginia Beach DSS. After interviewing staff from those agencies the items below have been cited as best practices.

- In all three departments there is a **family first philosophy**. It is believed from top to bottom in these organizations that relative placements are best for children. These departments train a family first curriculum with their workers.
- In one department cases are staffed with CPS and Foster Care staff if there is a risk of a child leaving the home. CPS staff then work with their supervisor in placing the children out of the home with biological parent's permission.
- CPS and court checks are conducted on relatives before the child is removed from their home and placed with relatives.
- If a diversionary placement with relatives is in jeopardy for financial reasons the local department will approve the relative placement as a foster parent and bring the child into care so a maintenance payment may be provided. Approval often takes place before training.
- Ongoing workers maintain and update a family contact sheet for each child with all known relatives in case diversionary placements become in jeopardy.
- One department cited using DCSE to help locate fathers for potential relative placements.
- None of the three localities use special software/technology for family finding. They all cite engaging the biological families as the best method of obtaining information about potential relative placements.
- Family Partnership Meetings were cited as the primary reason for two department's success at diversion from foster care. They noted that treatment team meetings were not effective as they did not involve families. The FPM facilitator in this locality works directly with biological parents to determine appropriate relative placements, a practice that has prevented many kids from coming into foster care.

Raw Data

Question 1: Did the child come into DSS custody?

Service Location	NO	YES	Grand Total
Accomack	2		2
Albemarle	11		11
Alexandria	4		4
Arlington	6		6
Augusta	12		12
Bedford County	2		2
Botetourt	2		2
Buckingham	4		4
Campbell	2		2
Carroll	8		8
Charlotte	1	1	2
Chesapeake	13	1	14
Chesterfield	25	1	26
Colonial Heights	2		2
Fairfax County	18	1	19
Grayson	1		1
Hampton	11		11
Hanover	12		12
Harrisonburg	9		9
Isle Of Wight	5		5
King George	2		2
Lee	7		7
Loudoun		1	1
Lynchburg	9		9
Madison	2		2
Mathews	1		1
Mecklenburg	1		1
Montgomery	1		1
Newport News	6		6
Norfolk	9		9
Petersburg		1	1
Pittsylvania	1		1
Portsmouth	4		4
Prince Edward		1	1
Prince William	7		7
Pulaski	6		6
Roanoke City	14		14
Roanoke County	5		5
Rockingham	26		26
Scott	2		2
Smyth	5		5
Stafford	1		1

Staunton	3		3
Suffolk	4		4
Sussex	2		2
Tazewell	3		3
Virginia Beach	36		36
Washington	15		15
Waynesboro	5		5
Westmoreland	2		2
Wise	20	4	24
Wythe	5		5
York	7		7
Grand Total	361	11	372

- *Only 2.9% of children sampled entered the foster care system.*

Question 2: Was this child placed in another home on an informal basis?

Service Location	NO	YES	Grand Total
Accomack	2		2
Albemarle	10	1	11
Alexandria	4		4
Arlington	6		6
Augusta	12		12
Bedford County	1	1	2
Botetourt	2		2
Buckingham	4		4
Campbell	2		2
Carroll	7	1	8
Charlotte	1		1
Chesapeake	11	2	13
Chesterfield	24	1	25
Colonial Heights	1	1	2
Fairfax County	17	1	18
Grayson	1		1
Hampton	10	1	11
Hanover	11	1	12
Harrisonburg	8	1	9
Isle Of Wight	5		5
King George	2		2
Lee	7		7
Lynchburg	8	1	9
Madison	2		2
Mathews	1		1
Mecklenburg	1		1
Montgomery	1		1
Newport News	6		6
Norfolk	9		9
Pittsylvania	1		1

Portsmouth	4		4
Prince William	5	2	7
Pulaski	4	2	6
Roanoke City	12	2	14
Roanoke County	5		5
Rockingham	25	1	26
Scott	2		2
Smyth	4	1	5
Stafford		1	1
Staunton	3		3
Suffolk	4		4
Sussex	2		2
Tazewell	3		3
Virginia Beach	28	8	36
Washington	10	5	15
Waynesboro	4	1	5
Westmoreland	2		2
Wise	16	4	20
Wythe	5		5
York	4	3	7
Grand Total	319	42	361

- *Of the 361 children that entered care 42 were placed in informal placements (11.6%)*

Question 3: What was the caregiver's relationship to the child?

Service Location	aunt	Aunt/Uncle	grandmother	Grandparent	Other	Other Parent	Parents	parent's paramour	(blank)	Grand Total
Albemarle		1								1
Bedford County		1								1
Carroll				1						1
Chesapeake							1	1		2
Chesterfield									1	1
Colonial Heights						1				1
Fairfax County						1				1
Hampton									1	1
Hanover									1	1
Harrisonburg				1						1
Lynchburg		1								1
Prince William						2				2
Pulaski		2								2
Roanoke City					2					2
Rockingham				1						1
Smyth						1				1
Stafford				1						1
Virginia Beach		2		2	3	1				8
Washington				3	1	1				5
Waynesboro						1				1

Wise	1		3							4
York				2	1					3
Grand Total	1	7	3	9	8	9	1	1	3	42

- ***Of the 42 children placed informally 30 were placed with blood relatives while 12 were placed with non relatives or fictive kin.***

Question 4: Was the placement expressly arranged as an alternative to placing the child into foster care?

Service Location	NO	YES	(blank)	Grand Total
Albemarle		1		1
Bedford County		1		1
Carroll		1		1
Chesapeake	1	1		2
Chesterfield			1	1
Colonial Heights	1			1
Fairfax County		1		1
Hampton		1		1
Hanover	1			1
Harrisonburg		1		1
Lynchburg		1		1
Prince William		2		2
Pulaski		2		2
Roanoke City		2		2
Rockingham		1		1
Smyth	1			1
Stafford		1		1
Virginia Beach	2	6		8
Washington		5		5
Waynesboro	1			1
Wise		4		4
York	1	2		3
Grand Total	8	33	1	42

- ***33 of the 42 children informally placed were arranged as an alternative to foster care (78.5%).***

Question 5: Did (or does) the child receive any ongoing monitoring from DSS?

Service Location	NO	YES	(blank)	Grand Total
Albemarle		1		1
Bedford County		1		1
Carroll	1			1
Chesapeake	1	1		2
Chesterfield		1		1
Colonial Heights	1			1
Fairfax County	1			1

Hampton		1		1
Hanover			1	1
Harrisonburg		1		1
Lynchburg	1			1
Prince William	1	1		2
Pulaski		2		2
Roanoke City	2			2
Rockingham	1			1
Smyth			1	1
Stafford		1		1
Virginia Beach	1	7		8
Washington		5		5
Waynesboro	1			1
Wise		4		4
York	3			3
Grand Total	14	26	2	42

- *26 of the diverted placements are still being monitored by local departments (61.9%).*

Question 6: Did (or does) the child receive any ongoing services from DSS?

Service Location	NO	YES	Grand Total
Albemarle	1		1
Bedford County		1	1
Carroll	1		1
Chesapeake	1	1	2
Chesterfield		1	1
Colonial Heights	1		1
Fairfax County	1		1
Hampton		1	1
Hanover	1		1
Harrisonburg		1	1
Lynchburg	1		1
Prince William		2	2
Pulaski		2	2
Roanoke City	2		2
Rockingham	1		1
Smyth	1		1
Stafford		1	1
Virginia Beach	1	7	8
Washington	2	3	5
Waynesboro	1		1
Wise		4	4
York	3		3
Grand Total	18	24	42

- *57.1% of these placements had ongoing services provided by LDSS.*

Next Steps

Until diversion cases can be tracked in OASIS, OBRA is proposing that the Diversion Study become an ongoing process. OBRA will sample referrals on a six month basis (August and February). Selected cases will be sent to each sampled agency every November and May. In addition, OBRA will examine the previous sample's referrals to track how many of these placements led to a child coming into foster care.