



Onondaga County Department of Children and Family Services - Foster Care Program

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Report Index

Report Section	Section Name	Page Number
I	Background & Executive Summary	2
II	Scope and Methodology	3
III	Findings and Recommendations	4
IV	Management Response	7

SECTION I

BACKGROUND & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Onondaga County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is dedicated to the protection of children from violence and neglect by their caretakers, the preservation of families, the provision of alternative care and the achievement of permanence for children to help them become productive adults in our community. The Children's Division Unit of DCFS is responsible for oversight of the Foster Care and Adoption Programs as well as for the direct and indirect provision of an array of Child Protective, Family and Preventive Services.

This report focuses on the Foster Care Program, whose objective is to provide assistance on behalf of eligible children needing care away from their families who are in the placement and care of Onondaga County. Additionally, the program is to provide assistance in covering the costs of proper and efficient administrative and training costs related to the program. The caseworkers in the Children's Division Unit are responsible for authorizing Foster Care payments. Staff of DCFS' Financial Eligibility Unit is responsible for determining the eligibility of the children for which payments are made on behalf of.

Foster Care homes, whether an individual, family or institution are reimbursed for a portion of the covered costs associated with a Title IV-E eligible child. Title IV-E children must meet specified federal requirements in order to be deemed eligible. The covered costs include foster care maintenance, clothing, transportation, administration and supervision and related administrative costs. The Foster Care Program incurred in excess of \$8.3 million in Federal Title IV-E reimbursable expenditures in 2024 and was selected as part of Onondaga County's annual Single Audit.

Executive Summary

Over the course of the audit, we noted the following issues:

- Eligibility and Redetermination forms were filled out incorrectly.
- Supporting documentation for Eligibility and Redetermination forms contained errors/omissions.
- Redetermination checklists were either not completed and/or not signed.

Our Recommendations include:

- *We recommend DCFS caseworkers more closely review all Eligibility and Redetermination documents for completeness and accuracy.*
- *We recommend DCFS administrators institute procedures to assure all case forms are completed correctly, all required forms are on file and any/all applicable checklists are filled out correctly and include signatures and dates.*

SECTION II

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope and Objectives:

The purpose of this report is to provide Onondaga County's Department of Children and Family Services management with information and recommendations on the internal controls and operating effectiveness as it pertains to allowable and eligible payments for Foster Care. In order to gain an understanding of their current process we analyzed a variety of data during the audit period of **January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2024.**

The objective of the audit was to:

- Determine if expenditures associated with Foster Care were made on behalf of eligible individuals and for allowable activities and costs.

Methodology:

In order to complete our objectives we:

- Reviewed applicable laws, policies, procedures and regulations to attain an understanding of the Foster Care Program.
- Interviewed staff and management responsible for oversight and implementation of the aforementioned laws, policies, procedures and regulations.
- Selected and tested a sample of expenditures in order to determine if internal controls are operating effectively and all payments were allowable and made to a Foster Care Home on behalf of an eligible child.
- Discussed draft findings and recommendations with Foster Care administrators for their input and evaluation.
- Finalized our findings and recommendations and included them in this report.

SECTION III

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the course of the audit, we tested 40 cases and noted the following:

1. According to the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (NYS OCFS) Eligibility Manual for Child Welfare Programs, the required steps in determining eligibility come from completing the Initial Foster Child Eligibility Checklist, LDSS-4809. A Foster Child must meet all requirements for Title IV-E eligibility and if any of the responses to questions 1-8 on LDSS-4809 are “NO”, the child should be deemed ineligible for Title IV-E. For each eligibility requirement, there must also be appropriate documentation. After each question on the checklist, there is space to provide the source of the information provided.

We noted the following issues with the LDSS-4809 forms in the Foster Care case files:

- In 2 of 40 cases Requirement 7 on the **LDSS-4809** form Initial Foster Child Eligibility Checklist – (**LDSS-4809** Checklist) Parental Deprivation requires the Court Order Part I – Criteria for Temporary Removal of Child, Sections A, B and C must all be completed to properly document eligibility, however Section A was not completed.
- In 1 of 40 cases Requirement 7 on the **LDSS-4809** Checklist - Parental Deprivation requires the Court Order Part I –Criteria for Temporary Removal of Child, Sections A, B, and C must all be met for eligibility however Section B was not completed. It must be indicated “The children appear to suffer from abuse or neglect by either the parent(s) or the person legally responsible for the children’s care. Neither was checked off on the Court Order.
- In 1 of 40 cases Requirement 4 on the **LDSS-4809** Checklist – Contrary to the Welfare /Best Interests of the child – Part II – Criteria for Temporary Removal of Child, Section A, the improper box was checked for the “Best Interest” clause for removal of child. As checked, the court order states that continuation in, or return to the home “would not” be contrary to the best interest of the child, thereby indicating the child should be removed from Foster Care and returned to their home. For continued eligibility the clause must read “would” be contrary to the best interest of the child.
- In 1 of 40 cases Requirement 3 on the **LDSS-4809** Checklist– Legal Authority – There were inconsistencies in court document related to who the child’s custody should be placed. Section III, Part A states that “There is no non-Respondent parent, relative or suitable person with whom said child may appropriately reside.” However in section III, Part B it was ordered by the court the child be placed with a “non-Respondent parent”.., not Onondaga County Department of Children and Family Services, hence the inconsistencies.

Recommendation: We recommend when court orders are obtained for a file, they are reviewed for completeness and accuracy and when errors are noted contact the Legal Department in order to obtain an updated version of the court order or to gather a response which explains the omission. Doing so will ensure the eligibility checklist is filled out accurately and has the appropriate supporting documentation.

- In 1 of 40 cases the **LDSS-4809** Checklist was signed off by caseworker and supervisor, however in Section I the Case number listed was incorrect.
- In 1 of 40 cases the **LDSS-4809** Checklist was signed off by the case worker and supervisor, however in Sections 3 and 5 the court date is listed incorrectly as 3/28/23. The correct court date is 3/29/23.

Recommendation: Department provide a written explanation be attached to the original LDSS-4809 eligibility checklist with a description of the change(s) needed to be made. There should be no edits made to the original checklist in order to maintain transparency moving forward. The written explanation should be signed and dated by the caseworker and supervisor.

- In 6 of 40 cases the Foster Parent(s) do not appear to be authorized to care for their Foster Child based on comparing the age and/or biological gender of child (as listed on their birth certificate) to the detail on their Certificate to Board Children license.

Recommendation: We recommend the department establish a procedure to verify that when the Certificate to Board Children is issued/re-issued that it properly reflects the ages/gender that the Foster Parent(s) is licensed to provide care.

2. At the Federal level, redetermination of Title IV-E foster care eligibility must occur every 12 months. The required steps in re-determining eligibility come from completing the Redetermination of Title IV-E Eligibility Checklist (Foster Care) (DSS-4810). For each eligibility requirement, there must also be appropriate documentation. After each question on the checklist, there is space to provide the source of the information provided.

We noted the following issues with the LDSS-4810 forms in the Foster Care case files:

- In 2 of 40 cases the LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist was signed by the case worker, but was not signed by a supervisor.

Recommendation: The Department needs to make sure all information on the form is accurate and the caseworker and supervisor need to confirm all forms are completed by signing and dating each one.

- In 5 of 40 cases the LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist was not completed and signed by caseworker and supervisor at every 12 month interval as required to be Title IV-E eligible. In these 5 cases LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist completed and signed by case worker and supervisor 5 to 24 months after re-determination required.

Recommendation: We recommend department completion of LDSS-4810 re-determination checklist at 12 month interval, as required, to verify all information on the form is accurate and the child continues to be Title IV-E eligible. Caseworker and supervisor need to confirm all forms are completed by signing and dating each one.

- In 4 of 40 cases the LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist in the selected case file was completed and signed off by case worker and supervisor, however the determination was based on using an incorrect Permanency Hearing Order (PHO).

Recommendation: We recommend department completion of LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist at 12 month interval, as required. This will minimize the chance of using the incorrect documents in the re-determination process and to ensure all information on the form is accurate and the child continues to be Title IV-E eligible. Caseworker and supervisor need to confirm all forms are completed by signing and dating each one.

- In 1 of 40 cases the Department failed to adhere to the Foster Care – Title IV-E guidelines requiring a re-determination be performed every 12 months for continued eligibility as the LDSS-4810 re-determination checklist in the file was completed and signed off by case worker and supervisor using a Permanency Hearing Order dated 17 months after the previous year's re-determination was completed

Recommendation: We recommend department completion of LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist at 12 month interval, as required. This will minimize the chance of using the incorrect documents in the re-determination process and to ensure all information on the form is accurate and the child continues to be Title IV-E eligible. Caseworker and supervisor need to confirm all forms are completed by signing and dating each one.

- In 1 in 40 cases LDSS-4810 Re-determination Checklist was completed and signed off by caseworker and supervisor, however in Section II, Part 2 the court date was listed incorrectly.

Recommendation: Department provide a written explanation be attached to the original LDSS 4810 re-determination checklist with a description of the change(s) needed to be made. There should be no edits made to the original checklist in order to maintain transparency moving forward. The written explanation should be signed and dated by the caseworker and supervisor.

SECTION IV MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Received from department management:

The Department of Children and Family Services management agrees with the findings and will reinforce existing policies and procedures within the Department to ensure that all documents are properly retained and signed.

The Department will continue to review the administrative process for obtaining the Certificate to Board Children forms from outside agencies.

The Department will work with Legal to ensure court orders are obtained timely and reviewed for accuracy.