Natrona Department of Family Services

Wyoming Citizen Review Panel (WYCRP) partnered with the State of Wyoming Department of Family Services (DFS) to review the Natrona County DFS office on October 20-22, 2014. WYCRP conducted staff, family and stakeholder interviews to compile information about the state of the child welfare system in Natrona County. We conducted interviews with a total of 20 stakeholders including the county attorney, GAL, mental health professionals and others as well as 27 case workers and supervisors from the local office. We also conducted a community meeting with participation from some of the mental health professionals in the area, Wyoming Kids First, and Natrona County Department of Family Services.

Natrona County has many variables which makes coordination of efforts challenging for services to children and families. Natrona County has a wide array of services targeted at children and families but services are not always coordinated. Another challenge is that agencies, including DFS have turn over which compromises the services to children and families. Due to the recent increase in oil field activity, Natrona County has experienced an affordable housing shortage and a transient workforce. There are 45 schools listed in the Natrona County School District, these include the learning centers, special academy, elementary schools, junior high and high schools which can make coordination a challenge as well. Overall Natrona County has many more available resources than other areas of Wyoming therefore it is easier to provide services to families in need from this local office.

The following information is reflective of input from the staff of the Natrona County DFS offices, and community stakeholders. In our efforts to retain confidentiality of the participants, no identifying information will be used in this report, including job titles or names. It is essential that individuals have an opportunity to speak freely with the team of interviewers so that accurate and relevant information is shared to assist in promoting system changes and uplifting current efforts. This report is broken down into three areas: strengths, opportunities for improvement and recommendations. The case file reviews will address priority areas including safety, permanency and well-being in order to coincide with federal language requirements for systemic reviews. Safety addresses issues that are related to placement of children in care and who are remaining in their homes with an active case plan. Permanency addresses children who are moving towards stability and permanency in their living environments and focusing on maintaining family connections. Well-being addresses the need to ensure that families have the capacity to provide for their children and ensure that their educational, physical and mental health needs are met. The information that is collected through the interview process will reflect systemic issues that relate to the federal priority areas.

The local DFS office is divided into five different units including investigations, assessments, reunification and probation. These units work together to meet the needs of families who become involved in the child welfare system for all of Natrona County.

**Strengths:**

1. The reunification unit meets with the supervisor every day to discuss any issues with the current cases and answer any questions about upcoming activities on cases.
2. Law enforcement is very supportive for the DFS staff when removal of children is necessary. Law enforcement is also available to assist with cases as necessary throughout the case plan, whether it involves reunification or termination of parental rights.
3. The child protection team is active in Natrona County. The local DFS office facilitates the team meetings and ensures that all referrals are addressed. The team is thorough in its efforts to investigate all possible options for families outside of the child welfare system unless that is necessary.
4. The staff of the Natrona County DFS office are respected and are considered “caring and compassionate” per several community stakeholders.
5. The judges handling juvenile cases are committed, and attempt to ensure equitable treatment of juveniles in Natrona County. He focuses on what is best for the children and attempts to ensure that they are in the best possible living situation to meet their needs.
6. MDT’s are facilitated by Life Net. DFS caseworkers ensure that essential individuals involved in the case are also invited, however. The MDT focuses on providing opportunities for all parties to have equal opportunity to participate in the discussion.
7. Children under the age of six who have gone into placement are being referred to the child development centers for mandatory screenings. Caseworkers provide the information to foster parents so that they can schedule at their convenience. It is reported that these screenings are being conducted within a 30-day time period.
8. Signs of Safety is beginning to be implemented in this office. Training is ongoing and each unit is participating in the efforts to ensure consistency across the agency.
9. Caseworkers report that, overall, they are able to complete their face-to-face visits on a monthly basis.
10. Overall, communication at the local office is reported to be strong with specific emphasis on strong leadership from the manager.

**Opportunities for Growth:**

1. Natrona County is experiencing a lack of foster families. It is reported that as a result of this, children have been placed back into unstable environments. This has a potential to increase re-entry and decrease the likelihood of long term permanency.
2. It was also reported that the judicial system timelines for reunification do not always match the case plan, so there is potential for children to be reunified prior to all safety issues being addressed in the case plan.
3. It was reported that transitioning youth are having difficulty acquiring the skills needed for independent living prior to leaving protective custody. Some of the areas which are lacking are transitions for continued mental health services and skills for financial independence.
4. The local office is familiar with the Drug Endangered Children program but due to recent changes in local law enforcement, this has not been a primary focus. The local DFS office supports this effort and plans to work with the new law enforcement administration once it is in place.
5. There is a lack of specialized counseling for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder in Natrona County.

**Recommendation (local and state):**

1. Ongoing training around WYCAPS, especially when updates are made. It was also recommended to create a “cheat sheet” for general data entry steps into WYCAPS that could be distributed upon hiring of new staff. Staff could then update this information after CORE training and after WYCAPS updates.
2. Further training with law enforcement and staff regarding procedures around the Drug Endangered Children program.
3. Services for juveniles who are on probation could be improved by use of ankle monitors that screen for alcohol use, to ensure that juveniles are not using outside of UA testing periods.
4. A support group for foster parents would be helpful to keep them connected and offer assistance and training to those who need additional resources.
5. A statewide foster parent recruitment effort would be beneficial to have more options for placement, especially regarding older youth and children with disabilities.
6. Although the office has state vehicles for use, it would be beneficial for the office to have a four-wheel drive vehicle available, due to adverse weather conditions and remote travel locations.
7. Continued communication with local stakeholders, including law enforcement and the court staff, regarding roles of each entity and making decisions together that are in the best interest of the child and family, so that there is no confusion moving the case forward.
8. Discuss transitional services with the local ILP program to ensure that services are being delivered to meet the needs of youth that are leaving the system.

**Summary:**

Natrona County is working together to improve the lives of children and families. It is beneficial that the Casper area has adequate resources to meet most of the needs of families. Because Wyoming is a rural state, it is still necessary to utilize some resources out of the area to meet the needs of children and families. When necessary, it appears that there is adequate communication to meet the needs of the family, as well as the other involved parties in these cases. This office prides itself on internal communication, which is evident in the abundance of compliments that were heard about this effort. It is essential that this same level of commitment flows over into the work with the community, currently perceived to be moving in that direction. Ongoing training for staff and foster parents would help in continuing the quality work that is evident in this office. Overall, Natrona County is making strong efforts to ensure that children and families are successful by offering quality services that will positively impact their future.